

**Conceptualising the Mediating Role of Inferences of Manipulative Intent between
Consumer Skepticism and Product Judgment**

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a research framework on the antecedents of consumers' skepticism toward advertising and its related outcome variables; including inferences of manipulative intent, attitudes toward the advertisement and product judgment. The scope of the study will be limited to the industry of beauty products, due to the myriad of dubious beauty ad claims. Consumer involvement and risk are also discussed as possible background variables for the framework. The paper will attempt to bridge a number of gaps inherent to consumer skepticism toward advertising, including validating the consumer susceptibility toward interpersonal influences scale and marketplace knowledge scale, in the context of mature target audiences and their degree of ad skepticism and empirically verify Obermiller and Spangenberg's (1998) suggestion of high skeptics infer high inferences of manipulative intent. The framework is built on the persuasion knowledge model and a conceptual model is used to explain the various relationships, leading to a series of hypotheses. This research provides implications for policy makers, strategists, advertisers and planners.

BACKGROUND

Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) define consumers' skepticism toward advertising (CSA) as the tendency toward disbelief of advertising claim. Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) established that CSA is a separate construct from skepticism toward other sources of product information. The tendency to not believe any form of communications is generally a stable, learnt marketplace belief. Earlier researchers (e.g. Ford et al. 1990) argued that consumers tend to value information that is perceived to be useful and valid. However, as advertising is associated with selling and it often leans toward exaggeration, and as, claims become increasingly complicated and difficult to substantiate, consumers are socializing to be skeptical (Obermiller et al. 2005). Consumers' extent of skepticism is the decisive factor of their responses toward advertising. Hence, CSA is influential and not likely to be resolutely steadfast. Consequently, a highly skeptical consumer may not disbelieve every ad claim, and a

less skeptical consumer may not necessarily believe every ad claim. Instead, the highly skeptical consumer will be more likely to disbelieve and the less skeptical consumer more likely to believe (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998). Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) have also verified several personality traits (cynicism, self-esteem) and social traits (marketplace knowledge) as antecedents to CSA.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

There are several gaps in the literature that would be addressed by this study. These include revalidating the scale of consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influences (CSII) and marketplace knowledge of mature target audiences in the CSA context. Also, this research will empirically define the relationship between inferences of manipulative intent (IMI) and skepticism. CSII has only been tested with the adolescent segment. It was found to be negatively related to advertising skepticism (Boush et al. 1994). However, studies reported that older consumers may have greater consumer affairs knowledge, are able to better analyse the information in advertisements, and have less favourable attitudes toward advertising than younger consumers (Moschis and Churchill 1978; Moschis and Moore 1979). In addition to that, it is also established that skills and beliefs (Moschis 1985), knowledge, and understanding about advertisers as persuaders and advertising tactics (Boush et al. 1994) gradually develops into a more complex structure as consumers learn more, over time. In reference to this fact, this research will contribute toward understanding the influence of CSII toward advertising skepticism amongst mature target audiences whom have more complex knowledge structures of the marketplace. Building from the preceding discussion, marketplace knowledge is also expected to increase as older consumers gather more market experiences. Marketplace knowledge is defined by Mangleburg and Bristol (1998) in their study of adolescents in the area of CSA (Clark et al. 2001). A more mature target audience may not hold a similar construct to adolescents. This study will show further validation on the market knowledge scale as well as potentially extending the scale, if, the result is similar for mature consumers as it is to adolescents. Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) purported that some advertising structure may invite more skepticism than others, engaging more inferred manipulative intent. Campbell's (1995) research on inferences of manipulative intent (IMI)

implies that perceptions of manipulative intent of advertisements may result in increased counter-arguing, resistance to persuasion, or decreased attitudes toward the advertiser or brand. Although Campbell did not explore the outcome of suspected manipulative intent on belief in advertising claims, it appears from her theory that consumers' 'decreased attitudes' and 'resistance to persuasion' may result in skepticism (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998). Though inferred by Campbell (1995) and Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998), this gap was never proven. This study may provide empirical evidence that high skeptics are more likely to infer manipulative intent. As displayed in the interpretation above, the proposed conceptual framework of this study on CSA draws on and integrates key ideas from established theories.

It has also been proposed that, product risk could influence the relationship between CSA and IMI. Risk is the perceived importance of avoiding negative purchase consequences and a consumer's subjective feeling of uncertainty about purchase consequences (Bauer 1960; Cox 1967). Bauer also stated that "consumer behaviour involves risk in the sense that any action of a consumer will produce consequences which he cannot anticipate with anything approximating certainty, and some of which at least are likely to be unpleasant." To test the risk as a mediator, between CSA and IMI, a comparison would be done between an established brand and a fictitious brand, among different product categories within the beauty product industry.

The main objectives are: (1) to provide a framework to investigate how personal and social influences affect CSA for mature consumers (2) to investigate the influence of CSA on IMI and (3) to investigate the mediating role of attitudes toward the ad (Aad) between IMI and product judgment. (4) to examine if risk are mediating factors to CSA and IMI.

APPLYING CSA IN AN INDUSTRY OF BEAUTY PRODUCTS CONTEXT

This paper intends to execute research focusing specifically in the beauty products industry. The beauty products industry provides the perfect environment for the study of skepticism as there is strong motivation to purchase. This particular sense of motivation stems from the general theory of possessions and the extended self. Part of a man's sense of self-fulfillment is derived through the items that he uses and he possesses (Belk 1988). And because consumers had rated that their body parts (which includes the skin), as their most important element of self (**Prelinger 1959**),

consumers of beauty products will regard those possessions as an important aspect of their self-extension. Therefore, purchasers of beauty products tend to expect the product to provide them with results, as claimed in the ads.

On the other hand, the challenge of consumer skepticism coexists, as the claims may induce cynical suspicions. This research aims to discover how CSA affects consumers' judgement of beauty product claims which are questionable. The preference for youthfulness does exist in the real world. Studies reported that altering facial features in the direction of youth results in higher ratings of attractiveness (Jones 1996; MacKenzie and Lutz 1989). Therefore, looking young is more important than being young. As an implication, there is a need that induces consumers to regularly search for solutions to stay young; but to what extent, is what this paper would like to discover.

RELEVANT LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESES

There is consensus in the literature (e.g. Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998) that the PKM is an encompassing construct of CSA. The relationships of the antecedent and outcome variables in this proposal are rooted in the persuasion knowledge model (PKM) by Friestad and Wright (1994). Persuasion knowledge is defined as the learning that consumers use to interpret, evaluate, and respond to attempts from advertisers and salespeople. The model is rationalised through both consumers and marketing agents having access to three categories of knowledge. From the consumers perspective, they have knowledge of the topic (or product), knowledge of persuasion (beliefs about how persuasion occurs and what tactics are used or are effective), and knowledge of the agent (advertiser or manufacturer). The marketing agent in turn has knowledge of the topic, knowledge of persuasion, and knowledge of the target (the consumer segment). The marketing agent relies on their knowledge bases to develop a persuasion attempt, whereas, the consumer, relying on their set of knowledge, counteracts with a persuasion-coping response. Friestad and Wright (1994) puts across that, a person's knowledge of persuasion strategies will influence the individual's responses to persuasive attempts. Although the relationship between marketer and consumer is not always conflicting, it is suspected that simple disbelief may be the frequent response that consumers use to

cope with persuasive attempts of advertising (Obermiller et al. 2005). Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) propose that the sources of persuasion knowledge identified by Friestad and Wright (1994) are the same factors that shape skepticism. This is because both skepticism and the persuasion knowledge are 'culturally supplied folk wisdom' which are beliefs. These beliefs were result of marketplace experiences and social interactions which steer consumers' attitudes and responses. Additionally, there are many antecedents to CSA that can be further explored, and also several outcome variables leading from it that have yet to be probed. The focus of this research is on the beauty product industry; thus, the selected antecedents are considered and are delineated in the following paragraphs:

Cynicism is defined as the suspicion of other people's motives, faithfulness, and goodwill (Kanter and Wortzel 1985). This dimension relates directly to the believability of advertising claims, in terms of both their source and their content. Scholars have found evidence of considerable CSA claims (Koslow 2000), which relates to the disbelief component of cynicism but it does not encompass the perception of deliberate manipulation or the negative effect of cynicism (Helm 2004). However, the cynical non-user may question claims closely and interpret it even more negatively than the cynical user (Kanter and Wortzel 1985). Based on this, it is argued that the more cynical a consumer is, the more skeptical the consumer will be toward advertising. Hence, the following hypothesis is presented:

H₁ : Cynicism is positively related to CSA

Rosenberg (1965) defines self-esteem as people's feelings about their worth or value of themselves. According to Korman (1970), an individual's self-esteem is a basis of the outcome they will seek to attain. When there are no external influences, individuals are motivated to act upon a situation in the behaviour consistent with their self-esteem. Corresponding to this, Leary and Baumeister (2000) state in their study that the self-esteem motive is to avoid loss of self-esteem and people act to maintain their current level of self-esteem. In addition to that, Brockner (1988) believes that low self-esteem people are more adaptive in their behaviour and responsive to external cues in situations, while high self-esteem people are steadfast and least responsive to external cues. Based on the arguments of self-esteem, this research supports the claims (e.g. Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998; Rhodes and Wood 1992) in the belief that the higher a consumer's self esteem the less adaptive

they are to external situational factors, subsequently, leading them to be more skeptical toward advertising. Hence, the following hypothesis is presented:

H₂ : Self-esteem is positively related to CSA

Consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influences (CSII) explains how inclined consumers are to peer pressure. Consumers expect others to evaluate their decisions, which might lead them to make choices different from the ones they would have made in the absence of public scrutiny (Belk 1988; Ratner and Khan 2002). For instance, Ratner and Khan (2002) found that consumers incorporate more variety seeking in their public versus private decisions (Mourali et al. 2005). Consumers who have staunch values are least susceptible to CSII and tend to be more skeptical about advertising (Kropp et al. 2005). Basing on Boush's, Friedstad's and Rose's (1994) claim, higher susceptibility to interpersonal influences will lead to lower skepticism toward advertising. Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

H₃ : Consumers susceptibility to interpersonal influence is negatively related to CSA

Marketplace knowledge is defined by Mangleburg and Bristol (1998) as the consumer's level of knowledge of consumer related factors such as prices, stores, and shopping. They further state that this knowledge helps consumers to adapt to their role as buyers. This knowledge is gained through the socialization process whereby, young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to them functioning as consumers in the marketplace (Ward 1974). CSA may aid consumers in critically evaluating advertising Mangleburg and Bristol (1998). To the extent that one is skeptical, one is more likely to examine the claims in ads in a critical way, which may help consumers make wiser or more informed purchase decisions. Based on this, a consumer with more marketplace knowledge is expected to be more skeptical toward advertising

H₄ : Marketplace knowledge is positively related to consumers' skepticism toward advertising

Inferences of manipulative intent (IMI) are defined as consumer inferences that the advertiser is attempting to persuade by inappropriate, unfair or manipulative means (Campbell 1995). Campbell (1995) focuses on advertising tactics rather than on the attitudes of consumers and argues that perceptions of manipulation by consumers results from structural characteristics of the ad (e.g., delayed identification of the sponsor). Although Campbell did not investigate the

effect of perceived manipulative intent on belief in advertiser claims, it appears from her logic that some counter arguing may result in advertising skepticism (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998). According to Solomon (2009), the theory of the standard learning hierarchy purports that a consumer first forms beliefs about an ad, product, brand or advertiser, and later evaluates their beliefs based on attributes; Consequently they form a feeling, which is known as an affect. Hence, as skepticism was established as a belief, a consumer's IMI are the affect toward the disbelief of advertising. Based on Campbell's (1995) claims, the more skeptical a consumer is toward advertising, the higher the IMI. Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

H₅ : CSA is positively related toward inferences of manipulative intent

Attitude toward the advertisement (Aad) is defined as an inclination to respond in a favorable or unfavorable manner to an advertising stimulus during an exposure occurrence (MacKenzie and Lutz 1989). This conceptual definition of Aad is consistent with Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) definition of attitude, where they view attitude toward advertisement as comprising solely an evaluative or affective response to the commercial stimulus and do not refer to cognitive or behavioral responses. MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) further articulate that it is important to understand the ad response pertains to an individual's exposure to a specific ad and not to consumers' attitudes toward advertising in general or even their Aad stimulus of interest at another point in time (e.g. after repeated exposure to the ad). Hence, Aad is inferred as a situationally bound construct and as an attitudinal reaction to the ad generated at the time of exposure. Based on this, it is inferred that if a consumer's IMI of an ad are high, the consumer will have an unfavourable Aad. Therefore;

H₆ : Inferences of manipulative intent is negatively related to attitude toward the advertisement

Research has shown many variations to the definition of product judgment. Factors affecting product judgments will also vary. These factors are the distinctive information and situational factors of the product, (i.e. country of origin, store image, price, brand, advertisement and many more) which influences and acts as indication cues of product benefits relative to alternative offerings (Malaviya et al. 1996; de Matos and Rossi, 2007; Nguyen et al. 2008). Marketers often try to instill positive expectations of an experience with a product for consumers

(i.e., affective expectations). By doing so, consumers establish positive feelings of the product which often congruently influence judgment toward the product leading to purchase (Handley et al. 2006). Product judgment is the affect consumers have of the product after exposure to the ad. As a result, when IMI are high, the product judgment is likely to be low. Further, when a consumer dislikes or cannot relate to an ad, the product judgement will also be unfavourable. For that reason, the following two hypotheses are presented:

H₇ : Inferences of manipulative intent is negatively related to product judgement

H₈ : Attitude toward the advertisement is positively related to product judgement

The preceding discussion describing the various relationships and hypotheses development is summarized by the proposed model in Figure 1 (as displayed in page 12).

IMPLICATION AND CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The above hypotheses are proposed with the goal of closing a number of gaps inherent to the literature. Both conceptual and methodological contributions to the body of knowledge will be achieved from this study thus providing useful implications for managers and policy makers. They will be aware of CSA among consumers and understand importance of factual and honest advertising to consumers in order not to suffer the consequences of deceptive advertising. The managers and policy makers would also be educated to avoid inferring high inferences of manipulative intent in their campaigns.

It is proposed that the findings may be product specific. The beauty industry involves a wide range of offerings, from the top of the head, till the tip of the toes. Consequently, it is suggested that the study be extended to other forms of products within the beauty industry; as different forms of products induces a different degree of skepticism. As an illustration, these could include a magnetic eye mask that claims to reduce wrinkles or a heat pad that claims eliminate fats and enhance silhouettes. These are just external gadgets that consumers will apply on the surface of their self, therefore posing little to no risk. As a result, consumers may be less skeptical over products with less risk and thus likely to exercise trial. On the other end of the spectrum,

consumers may be more skeptical and less likely to try riskier products. As comparison to the beauty products with the same functions as above (wrinkles elimination and the latter, body image) a study could include products such as botox injections or slimming pills that poses a higher risk and possibly physically harm.

This study is also important for managers and advertisers with their advertising particularly with the messages. For example, varying the degree of claims in their advertising messages can avoid varying degrees of responses of skepticism.

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Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Consumers' Skepticism toward Advertising

