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Who is Responsible for the Protection of Children?
Implicit and Explicit Interpretations of Marketing Messages

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine ethical issues related to advertising to children in light of evidence that people can hold ‘implicit’ as well as ‘explicit’ consumer attitudes. From a review of the important features of implicit versus explicit attitudes, we hypothesise three important features of implicit consumer attitudes in children. First, we suggest they are likely to be acquired automatically from, in part, exposure to marketing messages. Second, we predict that these attitudes will be resistant to change through reflection or reason by the child or other person. Third, we hypothesise that children’s implicit consumer attitudes will be powerful predictors of their consumer choices in many situations. We discuss the implications for the ethics of marketing to children, and propose a research framework to begin investigating this important issue.

Introduction

Debate about the effects of advertising to children tends to centre on their understanding of the persuasive intent of adverts, and their capacity to employ analytic skills to bear on the content of the marketing message (Chan, 2000; Preston, 2004). What has been neglected in these discussions is acknowledgement that advertising can also influence children’s implicit attitudes towards products. We begin by briefly describing dual-process models of human cognition that suppose that both implicit and explicit attitudes develop and guide behaviour, and note some important differences between them. Next, we relate these general empirical findings specifically to the domain of consumer psychology, and hypothesise that repeated marketing to children will have psychological and behavioural effects that are beyond the control of children and parents alike. If our hypothesis is correct, then, we argue that three popular corporate defences – parental responsibility, cognitive understanding, and consumer socialisation – become much harder to defend. In the final section, therefore, we put forward four research propositions as a preliminary test of our hypothesis regarding the effects of marketing on children’s implicit attitudes.

Implicit and Explicit Attitudes

The past few decades of research in social cognition has established and explored the importance and ubiquity of implicit (or automatic or unconscious) cognitive processes (e.g., Greenwald and Banaji, 1995). With regard to attitudes (that is, the positive or negative evaluation of an attitude-object), the presentation of most attitude-objects triggers an implicit attitude and this occurs involuntarily, rapidly and preconsciously (e.g., Fazio, 2001). We may not have introspective access to the implicit attitude itself. It’s hypothesised that implicit attitudes are underpinned by the preconscious and automatic strengthening of associations between concepts, over the course of many experiences, in a way that “reflects correlations
between aspects of the environment and cognitive, affective, or motor reactions” (Strack and Deutsch, 2004, 223). The implicit attitude thus reflects that objects’ correlation with positive and/or negative affective experiences over time, regardless of the individual’s explicit view on the validity of those associations.

Implicit attitudes are gauged indirectly. For example, the Implicit Association Task (IAT) – the most common measure of implicit attitudes – is a computerised task in which volunteers have to use the same computer key to categorise either emotionally ‘congruent’ (e.g., African American names with unpleasant words, and Caucasian names with pleasant words) or emotionally ‘incongruent’ categories (e.g., African American names with pleasant words, and Caucasian names with unpleasant words). That people taking the test tend to be slower on the ‘incongruent trials’ is taken as evidence for an implicit negative attitude towards African American names, relative to Caucasian ones (see Greenwald and Krieger, 2006). Implicit attitudes, generated by an automatic associative system, are contrasted with explicit attitudes, that arise from a deliberative, propositional, attention-demanding processing system. It has been suggested that implicit and explicit attitudes are subserved by two at least partially distinct memory systems (e.g., Smith and DeCoster, 2000; Strack and Deutsch, 2004; Wilson et al., 2000; although see Fazio, 1990), and it has become clear that implicit and explicit attitudes can dissociate (e.g., Gawronski and Bodenhausen, 2006; Greenwald and Krieger, 2006; Wilson et al., 2000).

Important Features of Implicit Attitudes

There are four important differences between implicit and explicit attitudes. First, because an explicit belief is consciously accessible and represented propositionally, we can reflect on it and evaluate its truth. By contrast, we cannot access and evaluate the associations on which our implicit attitudes are based, as they are represented preconsciously in non-propositional form. Second, the propositional nature of explicit beliefs also means that we can reject those that we no longer believe to be true. By contrast, while there are both theoretical and empirical suggestions that explicit beliefs can influence implicit attitudes (e.g., Gawronski and Bodenhausen, 2006; De Houwer, 2006; Smith and DeCoster, 2000), other researchers have noted that implicit attitudes can dissociate from explicit attitudes, and can remain resistant to change (e.g., Gregg, Banaji and Seibt, 2006; Haidt and Hersh, 2001; Wilson et al., 2000), or only be overcome with great cognitive effort, practice and motivation (e.g., Fine, 2006; Monteith, Ashburn-Nardo, Voils and Czopp, 2002).

Third, because implicit attitudes do not require attentional resources it is they, not explicit attitudes, that have most influence over judgment when attentional resources are low and/or the individual is not motivated to bring them to bear on the object (e.g., Fazio, 1990; Strack and Deutsch, 2004; Wilson et al., 2000). Finally, it is becoming clear that implicit attitudes make an important contribution to behavioural choices, even when those attitudes conflict with explicit attitudes. In particular, it has been suggested that implicit attitudes may best predict spontaneous or non-reflective behaviour, while explicit beliefs may be more predictive of deliberative, reasoned choices (e.g., Dovidio, Kawakami et al., 1997; Fazio, 1990; Wilson et al., 2000; see also Perugini, 2005, for discussion of this issue.) Since many of the empirical demonstrations of this are relevant to the domain of consumer psychology, this is discussed further in the following section.
Implicit Consumer Attitudes and Behaviour

The importance of implicit attitudes for consumer psychology has not gone unnoticed, and researchers have begun to measure implicit consumer attitudes and their contribution to consumer behaviour. This research falls into three categories. First, several studies now show that implicit attitudes often correlate with explicit consumer preferences and ratings. For example, Maison, Greenwald, and Bruin (2004) measured people’s implicit attitudes towards two leading yoghurt brands, two fast-food restaurants, and two brands of soft drink, using the IAT. In all three cases, they found that implicit attitudes had significant predictive value. Further, they found that implicit attitudes also significantly correlated with the consumers’ explicit ratings of each of the product category brands. Maison, Greenwald, and Bruin (2001) similarly found that relative implicit attitudes towards juice versus soda positively related to the more ‘personal’ explicit ratings (that is, excluding more ‘objective’ beliefs about the products) and consumption. Brunel, Tietje, and Greenwald (2004) found that implicit preferences on a ‘Mac versus PC’ IAT positively correlated with relative explicit attitudes towards these two products. Moreover, for Mac users the strength of the implicit association between Mac products and the self correlated with loyalty to the Mac brand.

Second, as one would expect from demonstrated dissociations between implicit and explicit attitudes in other domains, research suggests that this is also possible for consumer attitudes. Brunel et al. (2004) measured implicit and explicit attitudes towards black versus white ad spokespeople, and found a negative bias only in implicit attitudes. Moreover, implicit and explicit attitudes did not correlate. Friese, Wänke and Plessner (2006) found a dissociation between implicit and explicit attitudes to brand versus generic brands. There is also research suggesting that advertising can differentially affect implicit and explicit attitudes. Cyzewska and Ginsburg (2007) found that anti-marijuana ads had the intended effect on implicit attitudes (that is, made them more negative), but an effect opposite to that intended on explicit attitudes.

Finally, a growing body of work is demonstrating the important contribution that implicit attitudes have on consumer behaviour. Maison et al., (2004), in a meta-analysis of their reported implicit and explicit attitudes to yoghurt, fast food restaurants and soft drinks, found that implicit attitudes made a contribution to the prediction of consumer behaviour over-and-above that provided by explicit attitudes. Further research suggests that – as predicted by dual-process models – this contribution is greater for behaviour that takes place without the benefit of attentional resources. Perugini (2005) found that implicit attitudes towards fruit versus sweet snacks predicted the fast, spontaneous choice of whether to take a piece of fruit or a sweet snack at the end of the experiment, but did not predict more deliberative, self-reported snacking behaviour. Conversely, explicit attitudes predicted self-reported behaviour, but not the spontaneous choice of snack.

Friese et al. (2006) exploited the dissociation between implicit and explicit attitudes towards brand versus generic products to investigate which attitude would best predict product choice. Their research found that under stressful conditions, people were significantly less likely to choose in line with their explicit preferences. Instead, they were more likely to act in line with their implicit preferences. Similarly, Hofmann, Rauch and Gawronski (2007) recently found that when people are cognitively well-resourced, their consumption of candy falls in line with their explicit standards for dietary restraint. However, when their cognitive resources are depleted, it is their implicit attitudes towards candy that predict candy
consumption. While some research indicates that implicit and explicit attitudes can sometimes contribute and interact in more complex ways (e.g., Perugini, 2005), overall the research supports the proposal that implicit attitudes are often the most powerful predictors of consumer choices under spontaneous, time-pressured, or cognitively depleted conditions.

The Development of Children’s Implicit Consumer Attitudes

There is currently very little work looking at children’s implicit attitudes (although this is likely to be a burgeoning research field, thanks to the development of a children’s version of the IAT). So far, none (to our knowledge) has explored children’s implicit consumer attitudes, although Pine and Veasey (2003) present preliminary findings of a study that examined children’s understanding of positive bias in marketing measures. It seems clear that advertising targeted at children (and also that which is not) will influence children’s implicit attitudes towards advertised products, and consumption, in general. Rudman (2004, p. 79) has suggested that “[t]he hypothesized causal influences on attitudes include early (even preverbal) experiences, affective experiences, cultural biases, and cognitive consistency principles. Each may influence implicit attitudes more than explicit attitudes, underscoring their conceptual distinction.” Children will be exposed to advertising, whether targeted to them or not, and as such are likely to form implicit attitudes about consumption. In particular, the effect of advertising on children’s attitudes and behaviour is likely to emerge gradually, and the ability of children to articulate their understanding of marketing and consumption messages is unlikely to be revealed in an explicit, or immediate, manner.

Implications for the Ethics of Advertising to Children

“The conceptions of childhood will long remain latent in the mind, to reappear in every hour of weakness, when the tension of reason is relaxed, and the power of old associations is supreme.” (Lecky, 1891; cited in Wilson et al., 2000).

Advertising to children, then, seems likely to result in the development of implicit consumer attitudes that are: uncontrollable in their formation; highly resistant to change through reflection or reason by the self or others; and powerful contributors to consumer choice, particularly in “hour[s] of weakness”. If confirmed through empirical investigation, what are the implications for the ethics of advertising to children?

One popular corporate (and government) defence of advertising to children is that parents must take responsibility for imparting sensible attitudes towards, and consumption of, advertised products (e.g., Abbott, 2005; McNeal, 1992). However, the account we propose suggests that where the values of parents and marketers diverge, for example, in the portrayal of fast food (Parents Jury, 2007), parents can certainly make children’s explicit attitudes towards these products less positive through education and discussion, but this may have little effect on positive implicit attitudes formed via marketing messages. And, we have argued, it is the child’s implicit attitudes that will often influence the child’s consumer choices once he or she is able to make them herself. We argue that while parents can restrict their children’s exposure to advertising, this is becoming more difficult, given the ubiquity and access to multiple media platforms. Further, this becomes a particularly onerous responsibility to place squarely, and solely, upon parents, particularly in the absence of any corresponding and equitable responsibility placed upon the advertising industry.
A second corporate defence is that of cognitive understanding. This defence is made in response to concern over the inherent unfairness in marketing to children who are too cognitively immature to understand the persuasive intent of such messages (e.g., Kunkel, Wilcox et al., 2004). By the age of seven or eight years of age, children become aware of the intent of advertising and can distinguish between advertising messages and reality (Chan, 2000; John, 1999). Children of this age and older then, it is argued, are fair targets for marketing messages (e.g., Preston, 2004). However, this argument is only valid if one ignores the non-propositional ‘truth blind’ nature of implicit attitudes. While in adults explicit beliefs can probably bring about change in implicit attitudes, the extent to which this is possible or likely in children (with their more limited reflective capacities) is unclear. An understanding of the persuasive intent of advertising will, we predict, have little effect on advertising’s influence on implicit consumer attitudes (Livingstone and Helsper, 2006).

Finally, we suggest that taking implicit consumer attitudes into account suggests a counterargument to the consumer socialisation defence of advertising to children. According to this corporate defence, early consumer experience—which includes being the target of marketing messages—provides an important role in development. Without this exposure from an early age the child will, the argument goes, be disadvantaged by his or her consumer naivety (e.g., Furnham, 2002). In response, we would argue that if the child’s consumer experience involves the uncontrollable development of implicit attitudes—that may contradict the child and parent’s own beliefs, and trigger unwanted consumer behaviour—then this is not a socialisation experience that could reasonably be argued to be desirable.

**Research Propositions**

Despite the absence of developmental research from the existing literature with adults, it is arguable that children’s implicit consumer attitudes will share the same important features. First, implicit attitudes will not necessarily be accessible to introspection or conscious report. Where a child’s implicit attitude diverges from her explicit one, the conflicting implicit attitude will likely be inaccessible to the child, parents, teachers or marketing researchers via introspection or traditional self-report measures. Second, a child generally will not be able to reflect on, and reject or change, an implicit attitude that is not endorsed by her explicit values. Third, under conditions of low cognitive resources or time pressure, it is her implicit attitudes that will best predict her consumer preferences. It is worth noting that many social cognitive researchers suggest that the vast majority of our behaviour is triggered and guided by implicit processes (e.g., Bargh and Chartrand, 1999). Indeed, given that children’s attentional and reflective resources are likely both to be more easily depleted and less likely to be deployed than adults (e.g., John, 1999), it could even be predicted that implicit attitudes may predict consumer preferences even in cognitively ideal choice environments.

Further research, therefore, is warranted to:

1. Ascertain whether there is dissociation between implicit and explicit consumer attitudes in children (c.f., Baron and Banaji, 2006, who demonstrated the development of an asymmetry in implicit and explicit racial attitudes in children).
2. Examine children’s capacity to modify their implicit attitudes following information that changes their explicit attitudes
3. Test the hypothesis that implicit consumer beliefs better predict children’s consumer behaviour in a variety of choice environments.
4. Assess implicit and explicit attitudes for specific categories of brands (e.g., the fast food industry), in specific purchase situations (e.g., attitudes toward retail shopping), or in specific media delivery modes, in which dissociations between implicit and explicit attitudes are plausibly more likely to be seen.

At present, each of these propositions poses some difficulties, predominantly because the marketing paradigm is predisposed toward self-report measures. In addition, there are ethical obstacles to examining and manipulating children’s attitudes that need to be overcome. However, we argue for the importance of this area of research since, because of the societal obligation for the protection of children, it has the potential to influence consumer policy and regulation in a significant manner.
References


