The Relevance of Role Models to Older Aged Generation Y Consumers

Joanna Minkiewicz, Kerrie Bridson, Deakin University

Abstract

This study assesses the relevance of role models, specifically sports role models, and the related concepts of anti-heroes and gender to Generation Y consumers in the older age group of 18-29 year olds. A qualitative study, following a post-positivist inquiry paradigm was conducted. The specific research strategy used was grounded theory, utilising deductive thought processes coupled with the process of constant comparison. A series of semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out. Results suggest that direct relevance to the subject under investigation is a key determinant of role model choice. Gender is also found to have significant effect, as is media, both in the creation of role models and anti-heroes.

Introduction

Generation Y are those ambitious and tech-savvy individuals born between 1978 and 1994 (Sheahan, 2005). The importance of Generation Y to marketers in terms of the size of the segment, their discretionary purchasing power and brand consciousness has been recognized (Anderson and Cavallaro, 2002). McCrindle (2002) identified differences in Generation Y’s self-concept and the relevance they may attribute to role models. To date, much of the research has been concentrated on the age groups of 8-13 and 13-17, with the older age group of 17-29 highlighting an evident research gap, despite the fact that this generation has great potential for marketers (Lines, 2001; Vescio, 2005).

Role models, heroes and mentors are a part of our daily lives and therefore could be considered to have a significant impact on the values, attitudes and behaviours of individuals within society (Payne, Reynolds, Brown & Fleming, 2002). Much research has been dedicated to the importance and relevance of role models (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Research surrounding role models has acknowledged gender as a factor affecting the role models chosen both in terms of who is chosen as a role model, as well as the attributes ascribed to them (Lines, 2001; Vescio, 2005). Research also highlights that role models may act as anti-heroes, or negative role models, and in this instance, motivate negatively rather than positively (Lockwood, Jordan & Kunda, 2002). Research has also questioned the significance and relevance of role models to the older aged Generation Y group (Lockwood & Kunda, 2001), highlighting the need for research which targets this under researched age segment. The objective of this research paper is to assess the relevance of role models, specifically sports role models, to older Generation Y consumers.
The Relevance of Role Models

A role model can be defined as “anyone the individual comes into contact with, either directly or indirectly, who potentially influences the individuals’ decisions and behaviours (Martin & Bush, 2000). This definition views the concept broadly and incorporates parents, friends, colleagues and business associates, celebrities and media personalities, sporting heroes and athletes as potential role models. Although literature supports the relevance of role models as inspirational figures to a younger generation (Biskup & Pfister, 1999; Vescio, 2005), their relevance to older individuals has been questioned (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997). However, little research has been conducted within the older 18-29 Generation Y age group to support such assertions.

Role models have a powerful influence on individual behaviour patterns, attitudes and values thorough the processes of socialisation and modelling (Bandura, 1977). However, the influence of role models has its boundaries. Lockwood and Kunda (1997) found that superstars were more likely to be effective when they were considered relevant and with some similarity to the observer. They also noted that relevant sports stars as role models only provoked inspiration and self-enhancement when their success seemed attainable. In a similar vein, McCrindle (2002) asserts that Generation Y look for real life role models and mentors who can show them the way and often look to peers as a source of inspiration.

The influence of role models has often been portrayed in a positive manner, with socialisation and vicarious modelling resulting in the learning of culturally and socially appropriate behaviours and attitudes and motivation towards the achievement of personal goals (Bandura, 1977, Martin et.al, 2000). Sports role models in particular can motivate young people towards participation and greater achievement in the sporting arena and encourage exemplary behaviour through demonstration of the same. However, it is important to note that role modelling should not be assumed to be solely positive (Payne et. al. 2002; Lockwood et. al., 2002). Athletes can provide both positive and negative influences, depending on the behaviours displayed to the public. Athletes can be negative role models, or anti-heroes, through inappropriate behaviour and actions, which usually receive wide media coverage. Lines (2001) offers a critical discussion of the ways in which sports stars are construed as role models for young people, capturing the notion that the media play a significant part in how a role model is perceived by highlighting the non-sporting details and damaging their reputations as positive role models.

A number of studies into the influence of role models and specifically sporting role models have identified gender differences in role model selection. Lines (2001) argues that these differences can largely be attributed to the social and cultural construction of role models through the media. This finding is supported by Anderson et.al. (2002), who noted that gender stereotyped behaviours tend to be the norm, as portrayed in the media. Biskup and Pfister (1999) found that a majority of boys identified sporting heroes as their role models whereas girls preferred movie stars and pop stars. This finding is also supported by Vescio (2005), who found that a very small percentage of girls chose a sports person as their role model, rather choosing family members or friends. Anderson et. al. (2002) support this finding with their research of seventy nine children, aged 8-13, where 67% of girls were found to name people they knew as their heroes. Moreover, they found that the children studied more often chose a same gender person as someone to look up to and admire. A lack of athlete role models for females has been suggested as a possible explanation by Anderson et. al. (2002),
attributed to a marginalisation of women's sport in the media. Vescio (2005) also suggests a further explanation in that the sporting domain may not be relevant for many females.

Methodology

The research design for this study adopted a qualitative approach, as relatively little is known about the relevance of role models and related issues to the older age group of generation Y. A grounded theory strategy was adopted, where an initial literature review provided current perspectives on role models, Generation Y and relevant other concepts. The research aims to extend the current theory, provide a greater understanding and offer increased insight into the concepts. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample generated using purposive sampling. Data was collected from 6 respondents.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Number</th>
<th>Interviewee Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female, 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female, 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Male, 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Female, 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Male, 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female, 21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All interviews were conducted according to an interview guide and transcribed with an average length of 15 minutes. Field notes were also recorded immediately after each interview. Data was analysed using coding techniques appropriate for grounded theory: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Punch, 2006). Triangulation across sources (6 respondents) and methods of data collection (interviews and interview transcripts, field notes) enhanced credibility and confirmability of the research. The safeguarding of informant identity and prior training of the researcher in basic interviewing techniques also supported the integrity of the research.

Research Findings

The results of the current study indicate that role models possess certain common attributes across Generation Y respondents. A majority of respondents, of both genders, saw role models as someone that you look up to, that your behaviour is guided by and that possesses certain admirable leadership qualities: “A role model is someone who I look up to, who has qualities that I admire…” (R6).

The achievement and leadership skills with which role models are endowed are closely related to their proficiency with their particular skill. Anderson et. al. (2002) found that skill of the role model was of key importance to children aged 8-13. Our findings further suggest that older Generation Y’s also find skill proficiency a key characteristic of role models: “…probably very important otherwise…I think the key thing is that they have to be better at it then you otherwise why would they be a role model…” (R5).
Both male and female respondents in this study found that it was important that the role model have a good, happy and charismatic personality: “..nice person, happy personality” (R2), “..good personality” (R1), “..charisma is always one of them…” (R3). Integrity and honesty were also found to be important to both males and female members of Generation Y, as was the fact that the role model was non-judgemental and tolerant of differing points of view: “very open minded, non-judgemental…very strategic and intelligent…” (R5). This finding is in line with the fact that Generation Y sees truth and integrity relative to their own background and understanding, and views tolerance of others beliefs and cultures as an integral part of culture today (McCrindle, 2002).

McCrindle (2002) also asserts that Generation Y are looking for real life models and mentors who are likely to have travelled “their road”. In many respects, this might include overcoming obstacles and hardships on their road to success. The following quotes show the value of achievement in the face of adversity to Generation Y: “...someone who has suffered obstacles and hardships and they can move beyond that..” (R6). “..good to see when she was young that she [Halle Berry] basically fought to get to where she is now...very proud to see someone who’s so successful but she’s fought for everything that she is…” (R4). Closely linked to this is the fact that, in support of Lockwood and Kunda’s findings (1997), both males and females of Generation Y overwhelmingly felt that the role model needed to be relevant to them and the current stage of their lives. In relation to sports role models, this was less likely to be the case, with most respondents finding them more relevant at a younger age: “...when I was younger…I used to look up to a lot of netball players…I used to play netball when I was younger and I admired all the players...” “...I think because I no longer play [netball] and I’ve moved on from that....they are just not relevant to me anymore…” (R6). However, older Generation Y’s are more likely to see role models in family, friends or work colleagues: “...probably my close friend like XXXX...we bounce off each other and we inspire each other to keep going further...” (R5).

Self Efficacy theory contends that similarity to models enhances the observers self-efficacy, or belief in oneself that they can achieve similar results (Bandura, 1977). The more relevant and similar the role model, the greater the self-efficacy of Generation Y. Anderson et. al. (2002) suggest that gender has an effect on choice of role model. Interestingly, females in the current study considered gender to be unimportant to their choice of role model: “...I don’t think it’s very important at all...it depends on their personality and the way they come across to other people...” (R2). “...ummm...no.....it doesn’t really matter to me...” (R1). However, males admitted to gender being a significant factor in their choice of role models: “...that all of the things that I am involved in ...drumming...all the people I tend to work with, all my bosses who would be superior and have the skills that I admire...have all been male...all my friends in the sports that I have played at a high level have all been male and all the top 10 tennis players that I’m most interested in watching and have the highest skill level are all male...the pool of choices I have to aspire from are male...” (R5).

Our results, supporting the findings of Vescio et. al. (2005), indicate that, overall, both males and females from the older Generation Y age group are far more likely to have male than female role models, particularly in the sports arena. Females will also choose males depending on their relevance, specifically to a particular interest that they might hold.: “.... I guess it depends on what they are role model for. Because I mean like Napoleon at the moment, he’s male and I still can relate well to him and see him as a role model, only because we both work in the same industry and he is well recognized and regarded in that industry” (R6).
Our data supports the pervasive influence of culture as an explanation for male and female choices of role models. In support of Lines’ findings (2001), the data in this study indicate that males in particular chose male role models based on traditional gender ideals and cultural expectations: “...you always try and be masculine in the way you dress and the way you look and the way you act, you’re always doing that...so naturally your role models would encapsulate masculine qualities...you wouldn’t have a role model...that’s female because maybe that’s against [cultural norms]...” (R5).

However, in line with cultural stereotypes, female role models, although primarily chosen by females, were chosen by males to symbolise traits stereotypically associated with females: “...yes [I do have certain female role models]...[I admire certain qualities of them]...they’re very good listeners...show good ability to relate to people and make them feel comfortable in terms of creating a good friendly family type environment...they’re very warm...” (R5).

The effect of media has also been found to be particularly pertinent for Generation Y, having lived through the age of internet, cable television and globalisation: “...I think our generation is just magazine driven...like everyone looks at the media...see what you’re supposed to look like...I think we pretty much look at images and think that that’s what we’re supposed to look like...I definitely think media have a lot to do with it...” (R4). “…I think it’s definitely important...you know so much media...and the availability of the internet and all the rest of it...” (R5). Although the media is powerful in suggestively creating role models for Generation Y, it can also have the opposite effect. Although a number of respondents had trouble articulating the construct of an anti-hero, it was one which appeared in discussions often, particularly in relation to sporting role models. Respondents in the current study considered anti-heroes to have certain common characteristics: arrogance and overall bad behaviour: “…[Sam Newman]...I think he’s degrading...in terms of the way he talks and treats people...really disrespectful...” (R4). “…half of the footballers I don’t like...they think they’re a lot better and arrogance...a lot of arrogance” (R3).

Role models, and even anti-heroes to some degree, are both aspirational and inspirational for Generation Y. Inspirational attributes for Generation Y were leadership and associated motivational qualities, as well as confidence in oneself: “...inspire and motivate people...have an energy around you that other people can feed off so that you can create a good aura, a good environment...” (R5). “…[Halle Berry] is just a naturally beautiful woman...she’s so confident and comfortable in her body...her beauty just comes from that...you look at her and you think that’s great...I want to be like her...” (R4). However, as much as Generation Y feel inspired by their chosen role models, they may not necessarily aspire to be them, being quite confident in themselves: “…I don’t think there’s anyone that I want to be like...” (R1). “…I accept who I am and it’s not that I want to look like her and be anything different...” (R4). “…Inspire me to bring out that quality in myself...I don’t want to change myself to be them...just basically emulate those qualities in my own way...” (R5).

Conclusion

As teenagers and younger adults, sporting and celebrity role models were much more prominent for Generation Y. However, the older cohort tends to see role models as less relevant to their lives, being more self-directed and motivated and choosing more self relevant role models such as friends, family and work colleagues. The difference in relevance of role
models could also be reflected in the motivations of younger versus older Generation Y members in relation to why they choose role models. This opens an exploratory research opportunity into the motivations of role modelling and role model choice, contrasted between the two age brackets of Generation Y, 13-17 years olds and 18-29 year olds. The results also suggest a relationship between a person’s personality and whether they choose a certain role model. In a similar line to that suggested by self efficacy theory, people will choose role models in particular areas that they want to develop in themselves. This may allow us to infer that people of certain personality types are more likely to refer to role models. This opens a further opportunity for exploratory research of the relationship between personality types, propensity to choose a role model and the attributes of the latter.
References


