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New Research Finds Adolescents More Likely Not to Smoke When Cigarette Ads Feature Older Adults

Irvine, Calif. – (September 4, 2015) - For decades, the tobacco and alcohol industries have been accused of advertising their products to kids. Tremendous public pressure has prompted the implementation of strict guidelines. Today, tobacco and alcohol advertising are among the most highly regulated forms of marketing in existence. But, are all of the rules having any effect on the adolescents we seek to protect?

In a recent study, published in the Journal of Consumer Psychology, researchers found that regulators may want to rethink the guidelines they apply to the alcohol and tobacco industries. The study titled, “The effects of advertising models for age-restricted products and self-concept discrepancy on advertising outcomes among young adolescents,” was written by Cornelia Pechmann, a marketing professor at UC Irvine’s Paul Merage School of Business, and two Merage School PhDs, Todd Pezzuti, PhD ’12, who now teaches in the Industrial Engineering Department at the University of Chile, and Dante Pirouz, PhD ’10, who teaches at the Ivey Business School at Western University in London, Canada.

“Advertising policy is based on the assumption that certain similarities between the models used in alcohol and tobacco ads, and the consumers who view the ads, are what drive persuasion, especially similarity in age. On the surface, psychological research and theory seems to support this view,” said Pechmann. “However, our study indicates that adolescents respond differently when the advertised product is age-restricted. This is an important finding, as it may signify a need to change the way we approach advertising guidelines for certain products to protect young
people from predatory advertising practices. Cigarette and alcohol industry guidelines state they will use young adult ad models who are 25 years of age or older to protect adolescents, which seems reasonable, but in fact 14-15 year old adolescents are most persuaded to smoke and drink by those 25 year old models that they use.”

The Research and Results
During the study, Pechmann and her colleagues conducted a series of experiments which involved giving a group of adolescents professionally produced mock magazines, then having them answer questions about the magazine’s content. The line of questioning included personal inquiries about the subjects’ intent to smoke in the future. The magazines included different advertisements to test the research hypotheses.

Results of the first experiment showed that advertisements featuring young (17-year-old) cigarette models actually decreased the adolescents’ intent to smoke. When the ads featured young adult models (25 years old), the adolescents’ intent to smoke increased. Interestingly enough, when mid-aged adult models (45 years old) were used, the advertisements had no effect on the subject group’s intent to smoke.

“What we found in the second experiment illustrates how adolescents diverge from other adolescents and follow young adults when ads are selling age-restricted products, like cigarettes,” said Pechmann. “This same result was not true for unrestricted products, like clothing. In fact, when the product was unrestricted, adolescents conformed to the behavior of other adolescents rather than young adults.”

“The significance of our findings is that, while the cigarette and alcohol industries have agreed to use models that appear to be 25 years of age or older to protect adolescents, their efforts may be having the exact opposite effect,” said Pechmann. “Advertisements for age-restricted products may prompt adolescents to respond to dissatisfaction with their age by behaving like young adults. In the case of tobacco advertisements, more young people may be choosing to smoke as a result.”
In a third experiment, the researchers found that the level to which adolescents conformed to young adults and diverged from other adolescents, after exposure to cigarette advertisements, depended on the level of dissatisfaction the adolescents felt towards their age.

**Reasons Why Current Practices May be Harming Adolescents**

One reason adolescents might respond differently than expected is that they are facing unique life challenges such as understanding and attaining the freedom and independence that comes with young adulthood. The limitations and restrictions adolescents face may be the cause of the dissatisfaction with their age. It’s important to note that much research has been done surrounding how consumers respond to personal dissatisfaction. Cueing dissatisfaction leads to tension, which consumers can try to avoid or reduce.

“For example, adolescents can reduce the tension resulting from dissatisfaction with age limitations by behaving more like and identifying more with young adults,” said Pechmann. “Cigarette advertisements may elicit tension by reminding adolescents of their age limitations and prompting them to follow the actions of the young adults they see.”

**What’s it all mean?**

Contrary to the logic guiding the advertising practices of the manufacturers of cigarettes and other age-restricted products, like alcohol, adolescent desire for such products seems to increase when the model is a young adult rather than a similar adolescent. Based on the findings of these three experiments, the best policy for protecting adolescents from the advertising of age-restricted products is to use models that appear to be 45 years of age or older.

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Editor’s Note: To obtain a full copy of the research paper, please contact Professor Connie Pechmann directly at cpechman@uci.edu or call 310.892.0619.