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Celebrities in advertising: looking for congruence or for likability?

Introduction

Brands all over the world use celebrities to advertise their products. As early as 1890, actress Sarah Bernhardt appeared on posters for La Diaphane, a famous French brand of rice powder at the time (Lehu, 1993). The use of celebrities in advertising is not, therefore, a new phenomenon, but it has become increasingly widespread over the past twenty years. Brands like Pepsi have featured stars such as Michael Jackson, Madonna, or even the Spice Girls, with varying impact (Erdogan, 1999). Stars have become a vital component of advertising for certain categories of products, like perfume and cosmetics. It seems that once a celebrity becomes famous and popular, he/she immediately appears in an ad and sometimes several ones at the same moment.

The question is, for ad agencies as for brands, how to choose a celebrity for advertising. What to take the most into account? Are awareness and popularity of the celebrity enough to insure ad efficiency? What are the other factors which could play a role and explain the celebrity endorsement efficiency? Alongside this phenomenon, research into the role of celebrities in advertising has also increased since the 1990s (Amos, Holmes and Strutton, 2008; Seno and Lukas, 2007; Pringle and Binet, 2005; Erdogan, 1999; Ohanian, 1991). These works have highlighted several explaining factors, among them congruence being one of the most important determinants. What are the effects of congruence on ad efficiency? Is it better to choose a celebrity above all popular or congruent with the brand? These are the questions this research more specifically investigates.

Celebrity Endorsement: Theory and Efficiency Factors

Of course endorsement efficiency depends on ad execution quality, media planning, public relations... but it is above all linked up with the choice of the celebrity, as shown through the different models imagined to explain this phenomenon.

The Source Attractiveness and the Source Credibility Models

The attractiveness model assumes that the effectiveness of the message depends on the physical characteristics of the source which make it attractive (Chao, Wührer and Werani, 2005; Till and Busler, 2000). A celebrity spokesperson's physical attractiveness has a positive impact on brand recall, attitude towards the brand, and purchasing intent (Kahle and Homer, 1985; Joseph, 1982). Here, the endorser's physical attractiveness is assumed to have an influence on the target's acceptance of the advertising, particularly due to the phenomenon of

identification. The effectiveness of the message depends on the endorser's similarity, likeableness, and familiarity. While there is no doubt that a celebrity endorser may improve attitude towards advertising and a brand, its impact on purchasing behaviour is less clear (Erdogan, 1999). Attractiveness of the source is not the only characteristic of a celebrity to take into account (Friedman and Friedman, 1979) and is mainly significant for brands related to physical appearance (Kamins, 1990).

The source credibility model was developed in the 1950s by Hovland and colleagues (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). According to this model, the effectiveness of a message depends on the perceived level of expertise and trustworthiness of an endorser (Ohanian, 1991). Expertise refers to the extent to which the endorser is perceived as a valid source of information (Erdogan, 1999). It is a matter of determining whether the advertising target perceives the endorser as having a certain level of experience, knowledge, and know-how that makes their recommendation of a product and/or brand credible. Erdogan's review of previous literature (1999) indicated that a source perceived as highly credible is more effective and persuasive than a less credible one, as well as inducing a more positive change of attitude towards the brand or product and more changes in behaviour. Trustworthiness refers to the endorser's honesty, credibility, and integrity, as perceived by the target. It is a matter of determining whether the consumer trusts the source for the honest, objective way the information is presented (Ohanian, 1991). However, as McCracken (1989) and Erdogan (1999) noted, limiting the assessment of an individual to certain dimensions may seem rather restrictive.

These models may seem attractive but they have been criticized on several levels (Erdogan, 1999, Bower and Landreth, 2001). They do not properly take into account the multifunctional aspect of certain characteristics of the source and there is no proof that the dimensions examined are the correct ones. However, above all, these models seem incomplete as they do not consider all the significance and perceptions connected to a particular celebrity, merely focusing on certain characteristics of the endorser, so we do not feel they are capable of capturing what a person, as a whole, is capable of contributing to an advertisement. We think that McCracken's meaning transfer model (1989), which includes all the cultural connotations of celebrity, is more suitable, as it explains the endorsement process as a whole.

McCracken's meaning transfer model (1989)

This model has the advantage of including affective and cognitive aspects. The transfer theory relies on the endorsement process described by McCracken (1989). This process is based on the idea that, in the consumer society, which is organized around culture, celebrities have a shared cultural significance in the eyes of consumers (McCracken, 1989). McCracken defines this transfer as the translation of the meaning of celebrity to a product or brand, e.g. in advertisements with celebrity spokespersons. Endorsement is effective when an individual who buys and consumes the product appropriates the meaning associated with the celebrity, which has been transferred to the product.

The McCracken model makes it possible to explain how celebrities transmit an extensive set of associations to the brands they endorse. Therefore, before companies select celebrities to represent their brands, they need to ensure that the person conveys the right meaning.

It is precisely this congruence between personality and brand that facilitates meaning and affect transfer from one to the other (Misra and Beatty, 1990; Kamins and Gupta, 1994, Lynch and Schuler, 1994). It is thus useful to define this concept of congruence in greater detail.

The Role of Congruence between Brand and Celebrity

The role of congruence

The term "congruence" is used in several research areas, particularly brand extension, co-branding, sponsoring, and endorsement. In all these cases, the aim is to assess the fit between a brand and another entity (a new product category, another brand, an event, or an individual) (Fleck and Quester, 2007). A variety of terms have been used (congruence, fit, link, "match up effect", etc.) but the general concept is the same.

In the field of celebrity spokespersons, congruence was not really defined as such until Misra and Beatty's work (1990, p. 161). They deduced that it consisted of the fact *"that the highly relevant characteristics of the spokesperson are consistent with the highly relevant attributes of the brand"*. A number of authors have studied specific aspects of celebrity, such as gender and skin colour (Huston, d'Ouille and Willis, 2003) or physical attractiveness (Kamins, 1990), but few have analysed congruence in the broader sense.

The two dimensions of congruence

Heckler and Childers (1992) analysed the congruence between visual and verbal elements in advertisements, adapting concepts used in social cognition and, particularly, the memorization of social characteristics, to advertising. Thus, they started from the concept of theme, which originates in verbal discourse and presents the general content of the story told by the advertisement. Congruence is then defined in two dimensions: *relevancy* and *expectancy*. Relevancy reflects the extent to which the information contained in the stimulus contributes to or prevents a clear identification of the main theme or message being communicated. Expectancy refers to the degree to which an item or piece of information fits into a predetermined pattern or structure evoked by this theme. This interesting approach suggests that the concept of congruence may be two-dimensional. These two dimensions are also mentioned in the area of brand extensions (Lane, 2000; Tauber, 1988), but under different names.

The impact of congruence between a celebrity and the brand endorsed on the brand

At first glance, it may seem logical that congruence between the celebrity and the brand endorsed should have a positive impact on the brand's image and that, the stronger the link, the more impact the association should have on the brand. Furthermore, the better-suited, more relevant or congruent the celebrity/brand pair is perceived to be, the greater the positive response to advertising in terms of attitude, or even purchasing intent (Kahle and Homer, 1985 ; Kamins, 1989 and 1990 ; Misra and Beatty, 1990 ; Lynch and Schuler, 1994 ; Erdogan and Baker, 2000 ; Till and Busler, 2000 ; Batra and Homer, 2004).

However, it is possible to imagine a more complex relationship and examine an alternative hypothesis, i.e. that a certain level of incongruence may have a positive impact on response to advertising, particularly in terms of brand image. Indeed, a moderate level of incongruence between an expectation and an object may be beneficial, provided it is perceived as interesting and positive (Meyers-Levy and Tybout, 1989). In that case, a relatively poor fit between brand and celebrity may be stimulating and encourage individuals to process the information more intensively and elaborate more (Lee, 2000). In the case of sponsoring, a slight inconsistency between the sponsor and the event should lead to enhanced recall and more favourable attitudes than in the case of total consistency (Jagre, Watson and Watson, 2001). However, if the incongruence is so great that consumers have to change their cognitive structures to comprehend it, they have a tendency to exhibit negative reactions, leading to negative cognitive elaboration and a feeling of frustration (D'Astous and Bitz, 1995).

Propositions

Finally the efficiency of celebrity endorsement seems to be explained by two types of variables: the ad processing could be quite holistic and based upon affect, a positive affect towards the celebrity leading to a halo effect and being transferred to the brand. Attitude towards the celebrity would be relevant as a measure of attractiveness, whatever the reason why (physical attractiveness, personality...). Or this processing could be quite analytic and based on cognitive inferences. Brand/celebrity congruence would be relevant there. So the first question is to know which one of these two variables would have the greatest effect. Another question is to know if people would be influenced by their affect to estimate brand-celebrity congruence. Would a person who really likes a celebrity always find him/her congruent whatever the context? So is there any correlation between attitude towards the celebrity and congruence evaluation?

Model and Methodology

To address our research question, we have developed the model depicted in Figure 1. This model is inspired by Brown and Stayman's meta-analysis (1992), by recent research by Bergkvist and Rossiter (2008), and of course by our earlier discussion. This model includes brand perceptions and purchase intentions, which improves nomological validity. Examination of the relationships will make it possible to compare the respective effects of congruence and attitude toward the celebrity on preattitude toward the ad (PTA). To assess concepts prior and after the stimulus, the study was conducted at two points in time (A and B). Like in Bergkvist and Rossiter's model (2008), brand beliefs have a direct and indirect (through attitude) effect on purchase intention.

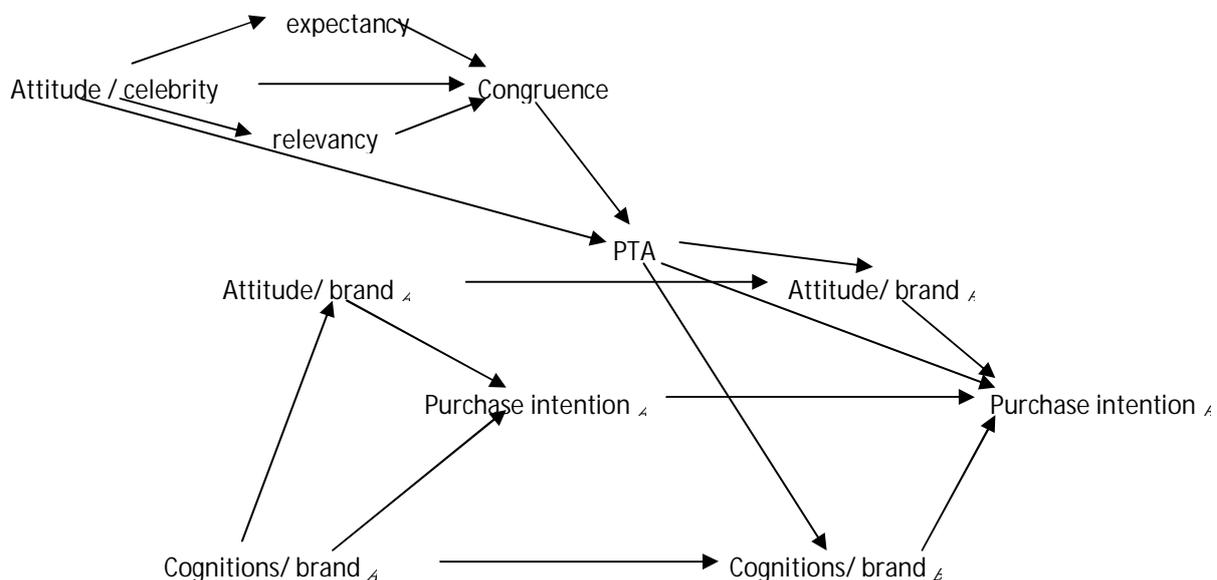


Figure 1: research model

After exposure to a stimulus (brand endorsement by a celebrity), it can be expected that congruence (and its two dimensions, relevancy and expectancy) and attitude towards the celebrity influence PTA. Also, as mentioned earlier, we expect an "affective halo" to occur: an individual who appreciates a celebrity may think that she/he is congruent with whatever endorsed brand. As demonstrated by Brown and Stayman (1992), PTA has a direct and indirect influence (through brand beliefs and attitude) on purchase intention. As explained by Lafferty, Goldsmith and Hult (2004) and Bergkvist and Rossiter (2008), all constructs measured in A (first period) will be strongly related to their counterparts measures in B (second period).

Research Design and Main Results

Figure 2 summarizes the research design. We selected two luxury brands (Yves Saint-Laurent and Dior), which is relevant with our research study (luxury brands use extensively celebrities in their ads) and the sample (aged between 18 and 65, high income). We also selected various celebrities, supposed to possess various levels of congruence and image. Each respondent of the treatment group was only exposed to one condition of congruence (one endorsement) and in the control group, there was no exposure.

Some t-tests show that the exposure to the stimulus (exposure to the endorsement) has an effect on the measured variables. We used AMOS 15 to test the model, which fits the data quite well ($n=445$, Chi-Square = 692.151 (ddl=313; $p=0$), RMSEA = 0.034, SRMR=0.052 and CFI = 0,970).

Both congruence and attitude toward the celebrity have a similar effect on PTA (total standardized effect=.69), brand attitude and purchase intention (standardized coefficients are respectively .16 and .10). Expectancy has a much more important effect on congruence than relevancy (standardized coefficients respectively .62 vs .11). All the relationships hypothesized in the model are significant, except that:

- PTA only influences some of the four dimensions of brand image (namely rarity, pride, provocation and "haute-couture"). These four dimensions affect brand attitude, but only some of them influence directly purchase intention.
- PTA does not directly influence attitude towards the brand, nor purchase intent

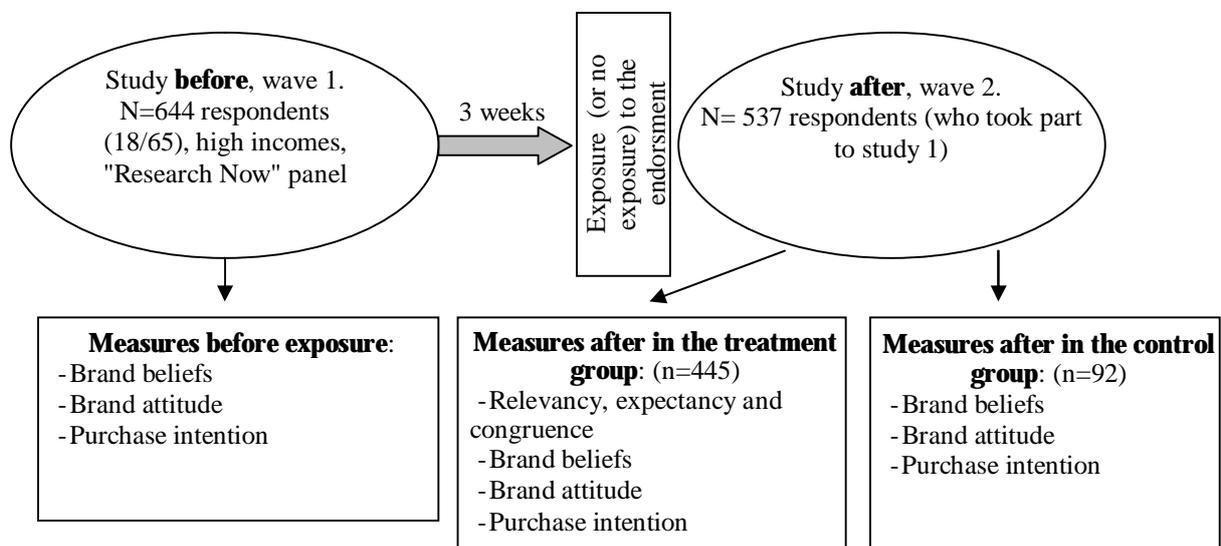


Figure 2: The research design

Each respondent of the treatment group was only exposed to one condition of congruence (one endorsement) and in the control group, there was no exposure.

Conclusion

Our research shows that congruence between a celebrity and a brand is as much important as the attitude toward the celebrity when considering preattitude toward the ad featuring a celebrity endorsing a brand. These results are also important for managers: brands choose usually endorsers who are appreciated by their target market. Our research suggests that it is not enough and that it is also important to take brand-celebrity congruence into account, in

order to maximize the effectiveness of the ad.

The data collection was conducted on a sample of the target population, by a specialized company, which insures good external validity. There are however limitations because only two brands were tested. Moreover, could the findings be generalised to lower involvement products? Other studies should focus on other product categories.

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