

Celebrity Endorsement and Reverse Image Transfer

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(including questions)

The purpose of the study was to investigate reverse image transference in the celebrity-endorser and brand-endorsee relationship, including a relational link to paracrisis response strategies in the case of negative brand publicity. The research responds to previous calls to measuring the impact on a celebrity's credibility of negative publicity about the endorser-brand (Thwaites et al., 2012).

Theoretical framework

Recent research has argued that source credibility is a relevant factor in successful celebrity endorsement. The higher the level of source credibility a consumer perceives, the more favorable the brand image that is being endorsed (Sliburyte, 2009). Source credibility consists of three attributes; Attractiveness, Trustworthiness and Expertise; which when combined can drive a higher likelihood of purchase intention (Ohanian, 1990). Source attractiveness has been found to extend beyond physical characteristics to other admired attributes such as skills, intellectualism and intelligence (Lord & Putrevu, 2009). Source trustworthiness has been shown to be a key factor in reduced source credibility when dealing with sudden negative celebrity publicity related to dishonesty (Parker & Fink, 2012). Source expertise was found to be a singularly important attribute when related to athletes and in general is seen in the literature as a more important credibility attribute than attractiveness (Till & Busler, 1998). Transference theory postulated that the meaning attributed to a celebrity moves from the endorser to the product when they are matched up in an advertisement (McCracken, 1989), provided the association is used congruently (Till & Busler, 1998). The theory suggests that the only return the celebrity receives is financial compensation. In reality, celebrities receive additional benefits, with consumers attributing greater feelings of trustworthiness towards athletes that endorse orange juice as opposed to cigarettes (Charbonneau & Garland, 2010). Reverse Image Transfer (Halonen-Knight & Hurmerinta, 2010) proposed that brands may become incongruent with their promised values, leading to the risk of negative transference of meaning to the celebrity. The level of identification that a consumer has with a celebrity endorser, and the endorsed brand, can result in a re-evaluation of the celebrity's credibility, and therefore the level of perceived attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise (Um, 2013). Therefore, the following hypotheses were posited:

H₁: A brand receiving negative publicity will negatively affect source credibility.

H₂: A brand receiving negative publicity will negatively impact perceived celebrity attractiveness.

H₃: A brand receiving negative publicity will negatively impact perceived celebrity trustworthiness.

H₄: A brand receiving negative publicity will negatively impact perceived celebrity expertise.

The impact of negative image transfer from the brand to the celebrity may change a consumer's perception of the celebrity, dependent on the strength of negative perception for the event and the level of blame attributed to the celebrity (Akturan, 2011). Negative publicity is a reputational threat, which may resemble a paracrisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2012), which is a publicly visible situation relating an entity with the perception of irresponsible or unethical behaviour. Five strategic responses have been proposed to minimize reputational damage; no comment, denial, excuse, justification and confession (Coombs, 2007). In the case of low expected responsibility either 'distance from brand' and 'support brand' have been found to be equally effective (Uhrich & Flöter, 2014). The 'no

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comment' strategy appears to be the least effective (Lee & Cranage, 2014). Therefore, the following hypotheses were posited:

H₅: A celebrity will experience a higher level of negative perception of overall source credibility following a 'no comment' response.

H₆: A celebrity will experience no change in the perception of their attractiveness following a 'no comment' response.

H₇: A celebrity will experience a higher level of negative perception of their trustworthiness following a 'no comment' response.

H₈: A celebrity will experience a higher level of negative perception of their expertise following a 'no comment' response.

Method

A repeated measure experiment through the self-administered source credibility scale was used (Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). A non-probability sample of 84 respondents was recruited in South Africa to participate in the study. The broad appeal of the selected celebrities, Chad le Clos, Itumeleng Khune, and Minnie Dlamini, was confirmed in a pretest focus group. Chad le Clos was an Olympic Gold medal swimmer, who endorsed the Future Life Foods brand. Presented to the respondents as the endorser of Future Life Foods, he was shown to provide a 'no comment' response following a fictional story of high sodium content in the foods; a key contributor to high blood pressure. Itumeleng Khune was the goalkeeper for the premier Kaizer Chiefs Football Club, and represented the national men's team in the 2010 FIFA World Cup. Presented to the respondents as the endorser of Vaseline for Men, he was shown to provide a 'support brand' response following a fictional story of palm oil content in the product, a key contributor to deforestation and harm to African wildlife. Minnie Dlamini was a television presenter for a variety of pop culture programs on the national television broadcaster. Presented to the respondents as the endorser of Motion Hair products, she was shown to provide a 'distance from brand' response following a fictional story of palm oil content in the product.

Results

The results demonstrated support for seven of the eight hypotheses. Source credibility reduced from 67.6% to 55.6%, attractiveness from 59.6% to 56.8%, trustworthiness from 73.7% to 59.5%, and expertise from 68.8% to 50.9%. As expected, the 'no comment' response resulted in a higher level of negative perception for trustworthiness, expertise and overall credibility. Interestingly, the results also found a significantly higher level of negative perception for attractiveness.

References available on request.