

CELEBRITIES AS “IMAGE CONDITIONER” FOR BRANDS? AN EMPIRICAL STUDY BASED ON THE MATCH-UP HYPOTHESIS

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SUMMARY

Lately, the advertising industry often falls back on individuals who enjoy public recognition in order to endorse consumer goods and to attract consumers' attention. The so-called celebrity endorsers (McCracken 1989) have become common practice in marketing communication to enhance the effectiveness of advertising campaigns (e.g., Erdogan 1999). Mainly, U.S.-American researchers developed various models to explain the effectiveness of celebrity endorsers (e.g., Erdogan 1999; Jowdy and McDonald 2002). In the following, we examine the *Match-up Hypothesis* which suggests that advertising response is positively influenced by the *perceived fit* between the celebrity and the brand or product being endorsed. Literature (e.g., Kahle and Homer 1985; Kamins and Gupta 1994; Till and Busler 2000) indicates that a fit boosts the effectiveness of communication concerning recall, attitude towards the ad and the brand, advertisement credibility, and purchase intention. The common purpose of engaging celebrities in marketing campaigns is to transfer particular characteristics from the endorser to the brand (McCracken 1989). Although McCracken (1989) mentioned in his *Meaning Transfer Model* that there is a positive impact of a fit on an image transfer from the endorser to the brand, to our knowledge, there is no study analyzing this effect. Thus, the following hypothesis is provided:

H: If there is a high fit between the image of the celebrity endorser and the image of the brand, there is a stronger image transfer compared to a low-congruence situation.

Research Approach and Methodology

To minimize external effects, a 2x1 experimental design with one celebrity endorsing two different brands was adopted. A pretest with 26 master students was conducted to select the celebrity and the brands by adopting the items of Aaker's brand personality scale on a 5-point Likert scale (1997). Between the celebrity (Franz Beckenbauer, a German soccer legend) and the first brand (Erdinger, a Bavarian beer brand), a high image fit was revealed; whereas between the celebrity (Beckenbauer) and the second brand (o2, a German mobile company), we discovered a low image fit. As discussions with experts

and the results of the first pretest showed, not all items of the brand personality scale were suitable to measure both the image of the celebrity and the image of the brand. Thus, 12 experts were asked to rate 50 different adjectives in terms of suitability to describe *both* the personality of a celebrity *and* a brand in a second pretest (on a 6-point Likert scale). The 10 items, which showed the highest means for both objects were selected. To measure the image transfer, the study was conducted twice as a classroom experiment with a master student sample. In the first study, 43 students rated the images (celebrity and brands) *without* the spot on a 6-point Likert scale (pre study). The study was repeated two weeks later confronting the same 43 students *with* the spots (post study).

Results and Discussion

The correspondence analysis is a highly effective method to graphically present a complex contingency table in low-dimensional space. Hereby, rows (objects) and columns (attributes) are positioned in such a way that the proximity/distance of the elements gives implications for the perceived fit/misfit between the objects (Hair et al. 1998). The following objects were analyzed: Beckenbauer (without spot, in Erdinger spot and in o2 spot), Erdinger (without and in spot) and o2 (without and in spot). The attributes are the ten characteristics selected in the second pretest. The correspondence table illustrated a high fit between Beckenbauer and Erdinger (without spots). Furthermore, the comparison of Beckenbauer and o2 (without spot) revealed a misfit. The Euclidean Distance was then calculated for each pair. The results of the pair wise t-test for dependent samples showed that there is a significantly higher image fit between Beckenbauer and Erdinger compared to the rig Beckenbauer and o2.

The results of the correspondence analysis and the pair wise t-test for dependent samples revealed that the assessment of Erdinger and o2 was not affected by the stimulus. Therefore, regardless of the image fit, the celebrity did not have an effect on the evaluation of the brands. Thus, the earlier stated hypothesis needs to be rejected. The widely expected enhancement of a product's existing characteristics by a celebrity endorser does not occur. This finding challenges the run for celebrities in marketing communications. Albeit, the correspondence table and a pair wise t-test surprisingly revealed a modi-

fication of the celebrity's image due to the television spot in both experimental lines (Beckenbauer and Erdinger, Beckenbauer and o2). The brand's characteristics have been rubbed off on the celebrity – independent of the image fit (statistics available on request).

Consequently, it is suggested that practitioners should precisely test the effectiveness of an endorser in a marketing communication pretest to discover, which characteristics will be transferred from the celebrity towards the product or vice versa. If there is no image transfer in the intended direction (from the celebrity towards the brand), the appropriateness of a celebrity should be rethought. Regarding the research restrictions, it has to be considered that the image is a rather consistent construct. Therefore, a single contact with a commercial does not necessarily cause an essential permanent image change (Otker and Hayes 1991). Further research is needed to test the empirical findings in a longitudinal study. Furthermore, as our results could have been influenced by the

conception of the primarily known spots and the pre-existing attitude towards the ad or brand, the study should be repeated with yet undisclosed and similar commercials.

The empirical study revealed that an image fit does not affect the image transfer from the celebrity towards the brand. This finding suggests that there is no need to emphasize a match-up between the image of the celebrity endorser and the image of the brand in order to enhance an image transfer. Nevertheless, an image fit boosts marketing communication effectiveness. Consequently, a fit can be seen as a "hygienic factor" in advertising. It is recommended that practitioners should precisely examine in a pre test which aspects in an advertising campaign support an image transfer from the celebrity endorser towards the brand. It remains to further research to test which variables enhance an image transfer from a celebrity endorser towards the brand. References available upon request.

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