

DOCTORAL THESIS

Consumers' perceptions and responses to advertising with product endorsements by traditional celebrities and online influencers: a relational approach

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Abstract

The practice of celebrity endorsement has been widely adopted in advertising industries around the world. In the Chinese advertising world, celebrity endorsement has been a commonly used strategy since 2010. Celebrities from the entertainment and sports industries have been frequently employed to promote messages about advertised brands or products. This is a traditional way of celebrity endorsement. Recently, however, the development of new media has led to the emergence of self-made micro-celebrities, termed ‘online influencers’ in this dissertation. Facing the popularity of online influencers in the digital world, marketing communication practitioners have started using them to advertise brands and products, and to engage target audiences in advertisements. A new way of celebrity endorsement has developed. As a result, advertisers need to make decisions on whether to adopt traditional celebrity endorsement or online influencer endorsement. In this regard, it is necessary to figure out which celebrity endorsement method, traditional celebrity or online influencer endorsement, is more persuasive.

Our study aims to explore how celebrity-audience relational motives (information, entertainment, and involvement motives) interact with celebrity endorser’s typology (traditional celebrities or online influencers) to determine the persuasiveness of celebrity endorsement appeals in advertising. The study’s conceptual framework hypothesized that celebrity-audience relational motives play a determining role in the audiences’ attitudes toward celebrities, whereas celebrity typology adjusts the impact of celebrity-audience relational motives on the audience’s attitude toward celebrities. Also, it was theorized that audiences’ attitudes toward celebrities would influence the persuasiveness of advertisements containing celebrity endorsements. In this causal relationship, the celebrity-product fit moderates its impact.

A mixed methodology was applied in this dissertation. The first method used was qualitative personal interviews, conducted with 15 Chinese respondents between August 2018 and February 2019. This exploratory study's purpose was to get audience's insights on their perceptions of traditional celebrity and online influencer endorsement, and to develop a conceptual framework based on the empirical data. Results in the first exploratory study revealed that compared with online influencers, a much closer relationship was found between interviewees and traditional celebrities. Also, the overall affective evaluation of traditional celebrities and their endorsement appeal was found to be more positive than that of online influencers. The second study confirms that celebrity-audience relational motives significantly determine the audience's attitude toward celebrity endorsers. The stronger the relational motives are, the more positive audience's attitude could be. Besides, celebrity typology effectively moderates the impact of entertainment motive on attitude toward celebrity endorsers. Moreover, if audiences evaluated celebrity endorsers positively, the persuasiveness of advertising with celebrity endorsement would be significantly improved on both affective and behavioral levels. Furthermore, the celebrity-product fit further enhances the advertising persuasiveness. Based on the findings, theoretical and marketing communication implications are suggested to enlighten communication practitioners on how to select celebrity endorsers and what factors to consider to guarantee the persuasiveness of advertising through celebrity endorsement appeals.

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