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An exploratory study on perception of celebrity endorsement in public services advertising

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An exploratory study on perception of celebrity endorsement in public services advertising

Abstract

An exploratory qualitative study was conducted to examine how young adults perceive the mechanism of creation and the influence of celebrity endorsement in public services advertising. Face-to-face interviews were carried out with 29 persons aged 18 to 24 recruited through a quota sampling. Interviewees were asked to recall a government public services advertisement with celebrity endorsement, and report why they found them memorable. Results indicated that the main reasons for finding the advertisements memorable were attributed more to slogans, repetition, and personal relevance than to the performances of the celebrities. Interviewees expected celebrities in PSA to be morally sound. Interviewees perceived strongly that self-interest motivates celebrities to appear in social services advertisements. Based on the results, public services marketers should put emphasis on visual and verbal elements of PSA. Efforts should be made to recruit celebrities that are close to the public. Fictitious characters may be explored in the future as an alternative to celebrity endorsement in the PSA context.

Keywords: Young adults, social policy, non-profit marketing, celebrity motivation, communication effects

An exploratory study on perception of celebrity endorsement in public services advertising

1. Introduction

Celebrity endorsement is an advertising strategy often used to engage consumers and overcome advertising clutter. A celebrity is defined as “any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement” (McCracken 1989, pp. 310). A recent definition proposed by Bergkvist and Zhou (2016) defines celebrity endorsement as an engagement of an individual with public recognition for the purpose of promoting an entity (a brand or a social cause). Advertisers believe that celebrity endorsement in advertisements can bring about the desirable communication effects of brand awareness, recall, and purchase intention (Spry et al. 2011). Advertisements with celebrity endorsement were found more attractive than advertisements without (Kumar and Pushendra 2018). There is an increasing trend in that celebrities are employed not only to endorse products and services, but also to endorse various social and health causes in cause-related marketing (Thamaraiselvan et al. 2017; Leung and Cheng 2016) as well as for the philanthropy industry (Driessens et al. 2012).

In Hong Kong, the government can be considered as the largest advertiser (Chan 2010). According to the licensing requirements stipulated by the Communications Authority, all free-to-air broadcast stations (including radio and television) in Hong

Kong are required to broadcast one minute of the government's public services advertisements each hour free of charge. These messages are known as Announcements in the Public Interest (APIs), which are announcements to provide information that the public needs to know (Wong 2006). The topics of these messages include health, safety, social welfare, legal obligations, availability of public resources, and changes affecting environmental factors that are related to government policy or operational objectives (Information Services Department 2013).

Celebrity endorsement is among the popular communication strategies used in APIs. Other strategies often used are slice-of-life dramas, easy-to-remember slogans, humor, and animation (Chan 2010). A sampling of one in every five APIs on the Information Services Department website found that 13 percent employed a celebrity endorsement strategy (Authors 2019). The Information Services Department of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government serves as the link between the government and the people via newspapers, television, radio, magazines, and other media and aims at enhancing public understanding of government policies, decisions and activities (Information Services Department 2018a). The Publicity and Promotions Division, a division of Information Service Department, is responsible for the coordination of message design, production, and media scheduling of public services advertisements (PSAs) (Information Services Department 2018b). The

Information Services Department has been criticized for lacking yardsticks to measure the effectiveness of publicity campaigns in terms of awareness, attitude/behavioral change, and participation. Some publicity campaigns did not set any performance or communication targets (Audit Commission 2001).

There is a lack of studies exploring how audiences perceive use of celebrity endorsement in public services advertising. An exploratory qualitative study was therefore designed to discuss and explore the research gap. The focus of the current study is to examine the perception among young adults of public services advertisements using celebrity endorsement. Young people represent a major target audience of the government's publicity campaigns as they are often early adopters of innovations (Brace-Govan 2013). The study contributes to current literature by extending the study of celebrity endorsement to the subject area of social services marketing. It may guide future research by identifying factors that can influence the communication effects of celebrity-endorsed PSAs. It has implications for government departments and nonprofit organizations to consider whether use of celebrities benefits their communication goals.

2. Literature review

Characteristics of endorsers

Most of the literature on celebrity endorsement focuses on celebrity persuasion

(Bergkvist and Zhou 2016). Different models have been used to explain the effects of celebrity endorsement on brand evaluation, brand awareness, attitudes toward brands, and purchase intentions. Some of these studies pay much attention to the source factors of celebrities, and examine the effects of source credibility, attractiveness, and liking on brand evaluation (e.g. McGuire 1985). Source credibility in some of these studies is treated as one variable (e.g. Lafferty and Goldsmith 1998; Spry et al. 2011) and as two separate variables in other studies (e.g. Rossiter and Smidts 2012). Most of these studies arrive at the conclusion that celebrity credibility and celebrity attractiveness have positive effects on brand evaluation (e.g. Eisend and Langner 2010; Ohanian 1991). However, the results generated on celebrity liking and brand evaluation are mixed. Some generate positive correlation (Misra and Beatty 1990) while some demonstrate no effect (Miller and Allen 2012).

A meta-analysis of experiments involving celebrity endorsement in advertising found that male endorsers elicit more positive attitudes and higher levels of behavioral intentions than female endorsers. Actors were found to elicit more positive attitudes than models, musicians, and television hosts (Knoll and Matthes 2017).

Brace-Govan (2013) attempts to develop categories to classify celebrities according to their perception as role models. These role models used in social marketing are able to engage the audience through personal relevance, attainability, and value reflection.

Brace-Govan (2013) suggested that social marketers should consider positive inspirational role models that demonstrate mastery and coping strategies.

Celebrity-brand fit and endorsement motivation

Some studies examine how celebrity-brand fit influences brand evaluations. Fit is conceptualized to the degree of perceived similarity between the celebrity and the brand (Bergkvist and Zhou 2016). A meta-analysis of experiments involving celebrity endorsement in advertising found that matching endorsers elicit more positive attitudes and higher levels of behavioral intentions than non-matching endorsers (Knoll and Matthes 2017). Attitudes toward the endorsement are proposed as a mediating variable in the relationships between attitudes toward celebrity, celebrity-brand fit, celebrity expertise, celebrity motives and brand attitudes (Bergkvist et al. 2016). Survey findings indicate that attitudes toward the endorsement mediate the effects of three variables (i.e. attitudes toward celebrity, celebrity expertise, and celebrity-brand fit) on brand attitudes. However, celebrity motives only have partial mediation effect on brand attitudes (Bergkvist et al. 2016).

Nowadays, the nonprofit sector often employs celebrity endorsement as a marketing technique (de los Salmones et al. 2013). A key concern is whether the audience attributes the motivation of the celebrity endorsement to altruistic or intrinsic motives (Becker-Olsen et al. 2006; Folkes 1988; Kelley 1973). When the audience perceives

that the endorser is seeking for their own publicity and image building, the source credibility is low. The audience perceives that it is being manipulated (Forehand and Grier 2003; Samman et al. 2009). On the other hand, when the audience perceives that celebrities endorse a social cause because he or she wants to benefit society by raising awareness of the social cause, source credibility is high (Ellen et al. 2006; Rifon et al. 2004).

A study investigated the motivations of 27 Portuguese celebrities for engaging in health-related social marketing. Results indicated that interviewees were motivated by personal relationships with the social causes, a sense of civic responsibility, and an intention to set a social example of taking right behavior. Interviewees reported that they would decide their endorsement based on the seriousness of the cause, and whether it was going to make a difference in people's lives (Casais and Proença 2012).

Celebrity endorsement in the non-profit context

Attitudes toward the advertisements and the advertised brands were proposed to be related to the source oriented thoughts, product/message thoughts, and advertising execution thoughts triggered from exposure to the advertisement (Patel et al. 2017).

This implies that attitudes toward a PSA and its social cause will be related to the thoughts about the celebrity endorser, the message, and the advertising execution.

A causal model was established to predict behavioral intentions toward a nonprofit organization (NPO) using seven variables, including attitudes toward celebrity, general fit, celebrity-NPO fit, motivation attribution, celebrity credibility, NPO credibility, and attitudes toward the ad with celebrity endorsement (de los Salmones et al. 2013). Empirical evidence was found that celebrities are powerful carriers of feelings and exert influence on ad evaluation through peripheral persuasion routes.

Credibility of the celebrities relies on perceived fit between the celebrity and the NPO fit, and the motivation attribution. When the celebrity-NPO fit is strong, respondents are less likely to attribute the endorsement to self-interest, hence enhancing celebrity credibility. Moreover, attitudes toward the celebrity and general fit between the celebrity and the social cause demonstrate a positive impact on the celebrity-NPO fit (de los Salmones et al. 2013).

An experiment to compare the communication effects of celebrity-endorsed PSA found that a victim of a natural disaster was the most credible and believable spokesperson, when compared with a national celebrity endorse in soliciting donation.

A local celebrity was as credible and believable as a victim, but more credible and believable than the national celebrity (Toncar et al. 2007). A survey in Hong Kong found that public perception of celebrities diagnoses was generally positive.

Respondents agreed that reading media stories about a celebrity with an illness

enhanced their awareness about the disease (Leung and Cheng 2016).

3. Research objectives

In order to communicate with young adults through public services marketing campaigns, the government and public offices need to understand how the target segment responds to PSAs using celebrity endorsement. The current study has the following research objectives:

1. to identify attributes of celebrity endorsers in PSAs as well as attributes of these advertisements that young adults find most memorable;
2. to examine how much young adults understand about the process of employing celebrities in PSAs, including factors that government and public offices would consider in selecting celebrity endorsers and why celebrities would endorse a public services message; and
3. to explore young adults' perceptions about how public services advertisements using celebrity endorsement work.

4. Methods

This study employs an interpretivist approach (Neuman 2003) using a qualitative methodology. Face-to-face structured interviews methodology using predominantly open-ended questions was adopted as it produces rich data (Bernard and Ryan 2010).

The method has been commended as being able to discover people's attitudes, beliefs,

and the basis on which someone has formed an attitude (Cannell and Kahn 1968). The objective is to create a context in which meanings and perceptions associated with celebrity endorsements could be negotiated or shared. An alternative method of survey was not selected because there was insufficient literature to identify the communicative effects of celebrity-endorsed PSA in the Hong Kong context.

The sampling design was a quota sampling set on sex and employment status.

Twenty-eight Chinese adults aged 18 to 24 were recruited through personal networks.

Among them, 16 interviewees were males and 12 were females. Eighteen of them were studying and the remaining 10 were working full time.

The study was conducted in Cantonese in November 2018. Senior university students taking the course 'Marketing to the youth' served as the interviewers. They were trained in interviewing techniques. The average duration of the interviews was 17 minutes. The interviews were conducted at public places such as coffee shops.

A warm-up question and seven carefully worded open-ended questions were used to guide the sessions (for translations, see Table 1). The list of questions was modeled after a previous study (Chan et al. 2013). The interviewees could give multiple responses. The session started by showing a 30-second public services advertisement video clip featuring actor Simon Yam on unauthorized video recording in a cinema.

This advertisement, produced for the Hong Kong Police Force, has been broadcast for

over five years on the free television channels as well as cinemas. It was expected that the interviewees were familiar with the advertisement. As a warm-up, the interviewees were asked to identify the endorser shown. They were then asked to recall a public service advertisement that employed celebrity endorsement, and other questions.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Audio recording of the interviews was later transcribed in Chinese and selected quotes were translated into English by the authors. Throughout the analysis, Marshall and Rossman's (1999) comparison analysis method was used to link data by constantly comparing and contrasting statements (Strauss 1987). Without imposing any themes, the full transcripts were read through once by one of the authors, and then they were read through again and notes were made of possible emerging themes. The notes were then coded to a particular theme. Once a statement had been coded under a certain theme, it was removed. The process of reading, coding and refining the themes continued until all the notes were coded and the list of themes had been finalized. The other author went through the entire collection of transcripts with the coded themes. Discrepancies were marked. The two authors discussed and consolidated the final themes. Because of the small size and the non-random sampling method, the qualitative results can only be

considered exploratory. Therefore, they were not analyzed by age or sex.

5. Results

All the interviewees were able to identify the celebrity featured in the prompt. The interviewees were requested to recall a PSA with celebrity endorsement and report why that particular advertisement created such a deep impression. A total of 19 celebrities endorsing 16 public services campaigns were reported. All of them were local Chinese media celebrities, including popular singers, actors, and fashion models. The public services advertisement featuring actor and singer Andy Lau on enhancing service quality was a hit and was brought up by seven interviewees. This advertisement has been broadcast since 2002. Interviewees commended it as a classic advertisement that had been broadcast over and over again. The script “this kind of service attitude is no longer acceptable nowadays” has become part of daily conversation. Some interviewees even gave Andy Lau the title of “unofficial CEO of Hong Kong”. Interviewees reported that they could easily relate to the advertisement as they came across poor customer services. All interviewees were able to recall the public services message in the recalled celebrity-endorsed advertisements.

The PSA with the second highest recall rate was produced by the Office of the Communications Authority, titled “Prepare for communications in country areas.

Enjoy safe outing” (Office of the Communication Authority 2018). Interviewees reported that the script “Got it! No signal! Having a signal or not does not depend on luck” was easy to remember. They commented that the storyline was vivid and the slogan had a memorable rhythm. Several interviewees remembered the advertisement because they liked hiking and they found the message of personal relevance.

Six of the campaigns recalled were related to health and safety, including campaigns on organ donation, HPV vaccination, cervical cancer prevention, hiking safety, road safety, and public hygiene. The remaining campaigns were related to protection of intellectual property and consumer related issues such as mobile phone service contracts, investing in bitcoin, and use of the Elderly Health Care Voucher.

Altogether five major themes emerge from the transcripts. They are discussed below with selected illustrative quotes.

Theme 1: Participants were attracted by advertising presentations in a celebrity-endorsed PSA, and not the fame of the celebrity

Most interviewees pointed to specific attributes of the advertisements that made the celebrity-endorsed PSA memorable. These include interesting slogans/scripts, engaging storylines, and quality cinematography. For example, some interviewees

found certain slogans/scripts memorable for reasons of rhythm, fluency, imagery, and relevance to daily life. They found some storylines funny, touching, and impressive. They appreciated cinematographic skills such as music, settings, special effects, vivid visuals, animation, and shooting techniques. Other reasons for the memorability of the ads included high frequency of media exposure and personal relevance. Surprisingly, liking for the celebrity endorser was not often mentioned.

Theme 2: Celebrity endorsers in PSA should be morally sound and close to the target audience

When asked why the government employs celebrity endorsers in PSAs, interviewees perceived that the government would like to leverage on media celebrities to attract audience attention, to resonate with the audience, to serve as role models, to make the messages more convincing, and to influence the celebrities' fans.

The interviewees consider popularity, close to the public, positive image, and the celebrity-message fit as important factors government departments should deliberate when selecting celebrity endorsers. The image of the celebrity is perceived to be very important. Interviewees believe that a celebrity should have a positive and healthy image, and be close to the public. Three interviewees

specifically mentioned that celebrities are more credible than government officials because the government on the whole is not close to the people. Celebrities should be morally sound so that they can be looked up to as a role model. They perceive that the celebrities represent the government, and if they were involved in scandals, the communication effect would be jeopardized. Here are two representative quotes:

“To a certain extent, the celebrity is representing the government. His or her image must be acceptable. He or she should not drink irresponsibly, gamble, or do any bad things. He or she should care about society, know what’s going on around us, and be able to give constructive comments.” (Male, working)

“William So and Kelvin Kwan were appointed as an anti-smoking ambassador and an anti-drug ambassador. Later, journalists found that they smoked and they used marijuana. As a result, the PSAs lost their effectiveness. Eventually, the PSAs were cut off. So, not having any scandal will be a crucial factor for the government to consider.” (Male, working)

Popularity is considered an important factor in selecting a celebrity endorser.

Interviewees perceived that a popular celebrity is able to draw attention from the audience and arouse public interest in the featured issue. Here is a representative quote:

“Popularity means that many people know the celebrity, which creates more vocal clamor and eyeballing of the ad. As popularity increases, audience attention and impact will also increase.” (Female, student)

Some interviewees reported congruence between the image of the celebrity and the message a factor too. Interviewees could identify a link between the image of the

celebrity and the social cause he or she advocates. Here is an illustrative quote,

“There is a PSA titled ‘Be a true master of the road’. The PSA features Jacky Chan. The commercial talks about safe driving skills and a responsible attitude being essential to earn the title of driving master. Jacky Chan is a kung fu master. The commercial brings Jacky Chan and driving skills together perfectly.” (Female, working)

Congruence between the image of the celebrity and the message can be enhanced by a careful matching of the age of the celebrity endorser and the age range of the target audience. Interviewees in particular stressed that for the senior citizens’ target segment, the government needs to employ celebrities of the same generation. This is because seniors are not familiar with the younger idols and would not be able to identify them in the PSAs. As the communication effect leverages on the popularity of the celebrity, not being able to identify a celebrity is perceived as a loss.

Theme 3: Celebrities agree to appear in PSAs for personal gain motivations

Interviewees perceived that celebrities appear in PSAs because they enjoy many benefits from the endorsement. These benefits include repeated exposure on television during prime time, ability to reach a variety of target groups such as people visiting community centers, increased popularity, and better job opportunities in the future.

Here are two representative quotes:

“As a celebrity, he needs to take an active role in constructing a positive image of caring about society. Taking part in a PSA is one of the ways. He will become a role model to the public. With increased exposure comes fame and popularity.

PSAs occur very frequently at homes and in public places.” (Male, working)

“PSAs will help the celebrity maintain a high profile among the public. This will bring them profits in the future. He or she will be more likely to appear in commercial advertisements. He or she will earn more income. This is because advertisers will perceive that a person appearing in a PSA has a good image. Advertisers are more likely to invite them as spokespersons for brands.” (Male, student)

Some interviewees perceived that celebrities appear in PSAs because of altruistic reasons such as contributing to society and “buying in” to the advocated message.

Here is a representative quote:

“I think they do it because of civic responsibility. They see themselves as members of Hong Kong society and would like to make a contribution. Or they want to show they care for society. A PSA has the effect of reminding Hong Kong citizens to do good. I think the celebrity wants to spread some positive messages and correct concepts to the public. He or she will get satisfaction from such endorsement.” (Female, student)

It is interesting that only this interviewee gave an altruistic reason alone for celebrity endorsement. All the other interviewees who reported that celebrities endorse PSAs because of civic responsibility perceived that the celebrity also benefited from the endorsement.

Theme 4: Celebrity-endorsed PSAs drive communication effects

The interviewees often reported that using a celebrity in a PSA would increase awareness. Some interviewees perceived that using celebrities in PSAs would leave a better impression and recall for the PSA. This was because seeing the celebrity in other places would remind the audience of the public services advertisement and the

corresponding social causes. Here are two representative quotes:

“The celebrities enjoy higher popularity. It will attract audience attention easily and strengthen the audience’s impression of the PSA. For example, even if the audience is not clear about the message of the PSA, they can search on the Internet using the name of the celebrity as the keyword and watch it again. But if the PSA doesn’t use celebrities, there is no way for the audience to search.”
(Male, student)

“If the government features celebrities in a PSA, it will be more down-to-earth. Anyway, it’s better than having government officials who are not known or supported by the public as spokespersons, such as Legislative Council members or the Chief Executive. After all, the public see celebrities more frequently than officials. Using celebrities brings the message closer to the people and gets it more accepted by the public.” (Male, working)

In the first quote above, a PSA using celebrity endorsement is perceived to be more effective in catching attention and creation a lasting impression. It also provides a cue for the audience to interact with the public services message. In the second quote above, a PSA using celebrity endorsement is perceived to be able to bridge the gap between the government and the public. Encouraging behavioral change is perceived as another effect by the interviewees. Several interviewees consider the celebrities as role models to be imitated. Here is a representative quote:

“After watching a PSA, the audience tends to listen and follow the celebrity’s advocacy. For instance, the audience would think now that if celebrities act this way, we should try to imitate their behavior.” (Male, student)

Some interviewees mentioned that celebrity endorsers would enhance the government’s image. Here is an illustrative quote:

“Occupy Central happened a few years ago. Some people developed a negative perception of the Police Force and, as a result, lost trust in the government.

When the government invites a celebrity to endorse a PSA, it increases public awareness. Celebrities obviously have more credibility among their fans. Endorsement of the government's public services by celebrities enhances public confidence in government departments." (Female, student)

Interviewees also perceived that celebrity endorsers would have an impact on their fans, who are likely to talk about the endorsed message on their social networks.

Some of them would be influenced by their idols to try out the advocated message.

Theme 5: Celebrity-endorsed PSAs will have the biggest influence on the youth

A majority of interviewees reported that young audiences would be affected most by celebrity-endorsed PSAs. This is because they follow entertainment news closely and are more ready to imitate their idols. Some interviewees reported that PSAs would have the biggest impact on housewives and seniors because they spend much time on television and celebrity news. Some interviewees perceived that female audiences are easily affected by PSAs because they are emotional.

6. Discussion

A qualitative study was conducted to examine how young adults perceive PSAs using celebrity endorsement. we have the following observations.

Firstly, the recall of a memorable PSA with celebrity endorsement indicates that the thoughts about the advertising execution play a more important role than the thoughts about the celebrity endorsers in forming an attitude toward the PSA. This gives us a sense of the relative importance of the thoughts created from the exposure of the PSA

in a proposed model (Patel et al. 2017). This finding is contradictory to a previous study (Chan et al. 2013), which found that the endorser's entertainment performance played a crucial role in creating advertising impact. It may be because the celebrities occurring in PSAs often take a "show and tell" role, with limited opportunities for dramatic or entertaining performances such as singing or dancing. Interviewees expected celebrities in PSAs to be role models through personal relevance and value reflection. This finding is consistent with Brace-Govan (2013)'s observation.

Interviewees were able to recall a number of health-related PSA with celebrity endorsement. However, none of them recalled healthy campaigns initiated by celebrities with serious illness reported in Leung and Cheng's (2016) study. This is likely because campaigns initiated by celebrities with illness do not enjoy free broadcast airtime and hence have a limited media reach.

Throughout the interview transcripts, there is a recurrent theme that PSAs in Hong Kong enjoy high credibility among young adults, who perceive that the public should listen to these public services messages and act out the advocated behavior, including those using celebrity endorsement. This result is contradictory to the finding that national celebrity in PSA was not effective in driving donation (Toncar et al. 2007).

However, such difference may be attributed to the difference in the nature of the PSA involved. In the current study, the PSA campaigns are mainly "help-self" type while

in Toncar's study, the PSA campaign is about "help-others".

The current study found that credibility of the celebrity relied on his or her positive image, perceived proximity to the public, and congruence with the social cause endorsed. Interviewees perceived that celebrity-cause fit is important. This finding is consistent with the meta-analysis that matching endorsers were more effective than non-matching endorsers (Knoll and Matthes 2017). The overall high credibility of government's PSA in Hong Kong may be a characteristic of a society with high power distance where the government is seen to be authoritative. Against this background, the government can also be seen as out of touch and position itself far away from the public. In the current study, celebrities are perceived as an agency bridging between an unapproachable government and the public. This finding is similar to that of a previous study (Chan et al. 2013) in that celebrities in commercial advertising are perceived as an agent introducing an unfamiliar brand to a target audience.

Interviewees perceived that celebrities endorse social causes predominantly for direct, indirect, and future monetary incentives. Only a few interviewees attributed celebrity motives to "buying in" to the messages. This finding is contradictory to celebrities' reports that they endorse social causes because of personal experience or the intention to play a social role (Casais and Proença 2012). A previous study found that when a celebrity is perceived to be motivated by financial gains as opposed to actually liking

a social cause, it has a negative effect on brand evaluation (Bergkvist et al. 2016).

Further studies are needed to see how evaluation of a social cause is influenced by the extent to which a celebrity personally practices or likes the social cause.

The interviewees demonstrated a highly sophisticated understanding of the government's process of adopting celebrity endorsement appeals, including how these persons are selected and appointed, and how the endorser benefits from appearing in a government PSA. This is consistent with John's (1999) model of consumer socialization, which states that young persons at this stage are able to understand persuasive intent of advertisements as well as special ad tactics and appeals used.

However, contradictory to John's (1999) model, the interviewees did not demonstrate skeptical attitudes toward PSAs. This may be because the issues featured in PSAs are not controversial enough to trigger debates. Recently, the actor Andy Lau rendered his support to a massive land reclamation proposed by the think tank Our Hong Kong Foundation by providing the voice-over in the project's PSA. There was a lot of disapproval expressed by viewers (Zhang 2018). This example illustrates that skepticism about a PSA occurs when the advertisement features a policy rather than a socially acceptable behavior.

7. Implications for practice

The study indicates that young adults pay much attention to the creative use of words

and images in conveying the advertising messages. They demonstrate sophisticated taste in narrative, music, and cinematography. The crafting of social services messages is therefore important in creating persuasive communication. Social marketers should go back to the basics, putting emphasis on creative copy writing, having a rhymed message presented in an interesting or real-to-life context. The use of celebrities can be treated as an appeal to attract audience attention. The ad's persuasiveness still relies on the craftsmanship of the message.

As celebrities in PSAs are considered to be agents bridging between the government and the public, the closeness of the celebrity to the public should be one of the main criteria in selecting an appropriate celebrity as an endorser. Celebrities endorsing government causes are perceived as representatives of the government. As a result, interviewees expect such celebrities to be almost flawless in their private lives, and scandals and unhealthy lifestyles to be unacceptable. Since the images of these celebrities are strongly linked with the credibility of the government, the government as an advertiser should be aware of the risks involved in adopting celebrity endorsement as a communication appeal. The government should therefore explore safer alternatives to act as spokespersons. Cartoon figures and fictitious human characters should be considered. In recent years, there have been several successful campaigns based on fictitious characters, such as the Big Waster of the Food Wise

campaign and the "yam hor yan" (loosely translated as "anyone") emergency response campaign featuring people dressed in blue spandex bodysuits. Developing these iconic characters may shield government and social marketers from the potential risk involved in adopting celebrity endorsement PSAs. Social marketers should consider conducting research to develop these characters as alternative spokespersons.

As perceived celebrity motive can influence the effectiveness of a PSA, the government should appoint celebrity endorsers who personally practice the related social causes or who are well known for a particular social cause. This will inevitably limit the choice of celebrities. However, it will increase the credibility of the PSA.

The study reveals that the interviewees perceive that celebrities receive much advantage in image-building and future career advancement from the free media exposure they gain by doing PSAs. To a certain extent, public resources are used to support the financial interests of selected individuals. Is this an appropriate way of using public resources? Future study is needed to develop an economic model to compare the respective benefits to the government and to celebrity endorsers in celebrity-endorsement PSAs. The model can be used for the government to make an informed choice in adopting celebrity endorsement appeal.

8. Conclusion, limitations and future research

To conclude, an exploratory qualitative study was conducted to examine how young

adults perceive the government's celebrity-endorsed public services advertisements in the Hong Kong context. Similarities and differences were found with the current research literature. Similarities include the perception that celebrities' image and celebrity-cause fit were considered as important criteria for communicative effectiveness. Celebrity endorsement was perceived as effective in raising awareness and encouraging behavioral changes. However, the current study revealed two differences that stand out from previous studies. First, PSAs in Hong Kong enjoyed unusually high credibility among the interviewees. Second, interviewees demonstrated a strong sentiment that celebrities appearing in social services advertisements do so out of self-interest. Regarding communicative effects, it was found that the main reasons for finding ads memorable are use of an interesting slogan/script and repeated exposure to the ad. Recall of ads due to the presence of celebrity endorsers is secondary to recall due to the attributes of the advertisements. Implications for practice are elaborated on.

The study has a few limitations. Firstly, the sample was drawn from a quota sampling and the results therefore cannot be generalized to the general population. Secondly, the interviewees were prompted by a public services advertisement with a male actor as endorser. This may have resulted in triggering recall of PSAs with male celebrity endorsers. Thirdly, the data relies on interviewees' recall, and recall can be affected by

the frequency of advertisements as well as how recently interviewees have seen the advertisements. Fourthly, the study does not explicitly compare the effectiveness of celebrity-endorsed PSAs and non-celebrity-endorsed PSAs.

As this study focused on young people, future studies may verify the conclusions presented in this research for the general population. Future study can also be conducted to analyze how perceived celebrity motivation, attitudes toward the celebrities, and liking of the advertising executions have an influence on the attitudes toward the PSA and the corresponding social cause using quantitative survey methodology. Experimental studies can be designed to compare the communicative effect of celebrity-endorsed PSA with different celebrity-cause fit levels and non-celebrity-endorsed PSA.

Table 1. English translation of the questions asked

Warm-up question: What is the name of the celebrity in this PSA?

1. Some public service advertisements employ celebrities as endorsers. Besides the one we have shown you, can you recall any other PSA employing a celebrity endorser? What is the name of the celebrity and what is the advertisement about?
2. Why do you remember this advertisement? Which aspects of this PSA are impressive?
3. What are the important factors for government to consider when selecting a celebrity endorser?
4. Why does the government employ a celebrity endorser in the PSA?
5. Why does the celebrity agree to endorse the PSA?
6. What are the effects of employing a celebrity endorser in the PSA?
7. Which type of audience will these advertisements have the greatest impact on?

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