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Research Paper

Older Consumers' Perceptions of Advertising with Celebrity Endorsement

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Abstract

As most of the developed societies are ageing, how to engage older consumers in advertising has become important to marketing communication practitioners. A qualitative study was conducted in March 2021 by interviewing a convenience sample of 20 persons aged 50 to 64 in China. Interviewees most often recalled celebrity endorsers who frequently appear in popular TV dramas. Source attractiveness was the main reason for recalling the celebrity endorsers. Source attractiveness, source credibility, and congruency with image of the brand, as well as moral qualities of celebrities were frequently reported as major factors that brands should consider when selecting an endorser. Interviewees perceived that credibility of endorsers was closely related to their moral behavior. Regarding advertising effect, interviewees perceived that advertisements with celebrity endorsement could enhance brand awareness, create positive feelings about the brand, and enhance purchase intention. Interviewees perceived that traditional celebrities enjoy a higher level of credibility and persistence of popularity than online influencers. The study discusses the theoretical implications for whether the main theories of celebrity endorsement are applicable to older people in China as well as the practical implications for marketing communications.

Introduction

The aging of populations is a global phenomenon. China is no exception to this. It has been an aging society since 2000 (Feng et al., 2020). Apart from the increase in the size of the aging market, the sector's strong consumption capacity is also a catalyst in encouraging brands and marketers to target the aging as an important and profitable consumer market. In the China Report on the Development of the Silver Industry, the older population's consumption capacity in China is projected to reach RMB 106 trillion by 2050, accounting for a third of the country's GDP (Ingrosso, 2021).

Faced with the aging trend and strong consumption potentials of older adults, both marketers and scholars need to understand how to engage this sector through persuasive communication. Celebrity endorsement is a commonly used tactic in advertising strategy in China (Hung, Chan, & Tse, 2011). The effect of celebrity endorsement has been thoroughly investigated by existing studies among all age groups except the older consumers (Ong & Chang, 2009). Older adults, when featured in advertisements, have typically been subject to persistent negative stereotypes in that their memory, cognitive and physical capabilities deteriorate as they get older (Prieler et al., 2015). These portrayals in advertising reinforce stereotypes of older adults and affect how they view themselves (Donlon, Ashman, & Levy, 2005). In light of the growth of older consumer market and its great potential, it has been suggested that marketing communication practitioners avoid stereotypes and enhance comprehensive understanding of the older consumer market (Kim & Jang, 2019), prompting a recent study by Chan and Fan (2020) investigating how older adults in Hong Kong perceive celebrity endorsement in advertising.

The research literature of celebrity endorsement proposed four main theories to explain how it works, including the source credibility model, the source attractiveness model, the product match-up hypothesis, and the meaning transfer model. However, a meta-study of 32 studies by Brockington (2015) found that significant celebrity effects came mainly from US student samples that might not be applicable to non-US and non-student samples. Furthermore, most of these studies employed quantitative survey methodology, neglecting the possibilities of other qualitative methods such as interviews or ethnographic methods (Brockington, 2015).

Celebrity endorsement is a prevalent advertising execution strategy in China (Hung, Chan, & Tse, 2011). Hung and her colleagues (2011) proposed a relational perspective model that celebrity-worship leads to value-transfer that, in turn, affected brand purchase intent. Findings from a national survey showed that consumer celebrity worship is a significant antecedent to the endorser effects (Hung, Chan, & Tse, 2011,). However, we could not find any qualitative study on older consumers in China and celebrity endorsement besides Chan and Fan's (2020) study conducted in Hong Kong. We expect that there would be differences in perception of celebrity endorsement among older Chinese consumers in Hong Kong and mainland China given the differences in media and consumer environment. We, therefore, designed the current study to examine how older adults in China perceive advertisements with celebrity endorsement and whether the major theories of celebrity endorsement are applicable to the Chinese society. Four research questions were addressed. They are:

RQ1 What characteristics of celebrity endorsers in advertisements contribute to older consumers' advertising recall?

RQ2 What factors do older consumers think advertisers should consider in selecting celebrity endorsers?

RQ3 How do older consumers perceive the persuasiveness of advertisements using celebrity endorsement?

RQ4 How do older consumers perceive the difference between traditional celebrities and online influencers?

Most definitions of older adults are based on people's chronological age. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), an older person was referred to as "a person who has reached a certain age that varies among countries but is often associated with the age of normal retirement" (World Health Organization, 2004). The normal retirement age of many developed countries ranged from 60 to 67, while that for developing countries ranged from 50 to 55. In China, the legal retirement age is 60 for males, 55 for female cadres, and 50 for female workers (State Council, 1978). Therefore, we consider people aged 50 or above as older adults in this study.

Literature Review

Older Adults in China and Their Portrayal in Advertising

Older adults in China constitute a potentially profitable market from a marketer's perspective. Among the 1.4 billion Chinese population, 14 percent are aged 65 or above in 2021 (Population Reference Bureau, 2021). In other words, there are around 200 million people aged 65 or above in China. In 2017, there were more than 110 million older persons with monthly household incomes over RMB4,000, including 20 million with monthly incomes over RMB10,000 (Daxue Consulting, 2019). It is estimated that China's older consumers will have an annual purchasing power of $4,100 per capita by 2050 (Doctoroff, 2010). Compared with the younger consumers, older adults have more leisure time to participate in consumption activities such as the use of healthcare products, care services, and the like (Daxue Consulting, 2019). Besides this, older customers have been found to show stronger emotional attachment to brands and are more willing to pay a premium for trustworthy brands than their younger counterparts (Amatulli, Guido, & Nataraajan, 2015). In other words, building long-term relationships with older consumers has the potential to generate steady profits for the brands (Quester et al., 2014).

Although older adults comprise an important consumer market, this group of older people is under-represented in advertising and is often portrayed in a stereotyped way (Cuddy & Fiske, 2002; Prieler et al., 2015). For instance, the controversial advertising campaign "I've fallen and I cannot get up", which described older people in impoverished states suffering from poverty or illness (Swimberghe et al., 2018). Older adults are portrayed as uncommunicative, not very clever, and senile in a number of instances (Harrington, Bielby, & Bardo, 2014; Roy & Harwood, 1997). Yoon and Powell (2012) noted that the portrayal of older consumers was transiting from a

negative characterization as annoying, forgetful, and bossy, as in Tesco's Dotty campaign, to a more positive depiction as in the Marks & Spencer Twiggy campaign. Scholars found that prejudice towards (Mumel & Prodnik, 2005) and fear of aging (Treguer, 2002) are responsible for this portrayal. Furthermore, as people age both chronologically and cognitively, their creativity declines and they are often perceived as conservative, inept, and grumpy (Aimetti, 1999). Scholars have suggested advertisers should present images of older consumers in a relevant and acceptable manner to engage consumers and at the same time fulfill their social responsibility to portray different groups fairly (Carrigan & Szmigin, 2000).

Celebrity Endorsement in Advertising

Employing notable public figures to encourage and spread positive word-of-mouth about an entity such as a brand is known as celebrity endorsement (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016). Celebrity endorsers are often well-known public figures. Entertainment and sports celebrities are frequently invited to do product endorsements in advertising (Hung, 2014). Celebrity endorsers share some common characteristics such as being highly talented, having an outstanding appearance, or sporting a unique lifestyle (Atkin & Block, 1983). It is a very useful strategy and is becoming increasingly popular (Chan et al., 2008).

Existing studies have thoroughly analyzed the impact of celebrity endorsement in advertising from both its positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, celebrity endorsement encourages the purchase of endorsed products and improves the value of endorsed brands (Erdogan, 1999). Four source-related models are frequently used to explain how celebrity endorsements work in advertising. They are the meaning transfer model, the source attractiveness model, the source credibility model and the celebrity-brand fit model (Erdogan, 1999). The meaning transfer model suggests that celebrity endorsement is effective in transferring perceived good meanings and feelings associated with the dramatic roles of endorsers to the endorsed products or brands in advertisements, and later to consumers pursuing the endorsed products (McCracken, 1989). The source attractiveness model propounds that physically attractive celebrity endorsers can encourage consumers to purchase products and improve a brand's reputation (Hakimi, Abedniya, & Zaeim, 2011). Apart from physical attractiveness, in this model source similarity, familiarity and likeability also contribute to celebrities gaining public attention (McGuire, 1985). In addition, source attractiveness significantly influences how consumers imitate the celebrity endorsement (Mat et al., 2019). The source credibility model consists of two factors, trustworthiness and expertise, and posits that when celebrities with specific intelligence, talents, or expertise are perceived as trustworthy, they may convince people to support promotional statements about a brand (Ohanian, 1990). Rossiter and Smidts (2012) even proved that the impacts of trustworthiness and expertise vary. Expertise is a stronger predictor of audience persuasion than trustworthiness. The celebrity-brand fit model also predicts the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement in advertising. Till and Busler (1998) explained that in the celebrity-brand fit model the source role is provided by image consistency between celebrities and brands. When a celebrity endorser is a good match with an endorsed brand, the endorser has a positive impact on consumers' attitudes and behaviors (Kamins, 1990). If a celebrity endorser is not a good fit for a brand, audience recall of the endorsed product or brand fades out (Evans, 1988).

Conversely, celebrity endorsers are criticized as being less credible when negative news and scandals are associated with them (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). Till and Shimp (1998) discovered that negative information about a celebrity endorser contributes to a more negative evaluation of the endorsed brand. Amos, Holmes, and Strutton (2008) also proved that negative celebrity information is destructive to a celebrity-endorsed advertising strategy. This can be explained by the meaning transfer model. Negative meanings and attributes are more easily transferred from celebrity endorsers to endorsed products and brands than positive ones (Campbell & Warren, 2012).

Quite a number of the aforementioned studies analyzed celebrity endorsements in advertising. However, the major theories explaining the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement were based on quantitative surveys among student samples in the US (Brockington, 2015). There is a need to examine whether these major theories apply to non-US societies among non-student samples. To fill this research gap, Chan and Fan (2020) conducted an exploratory study to discuss the impact of celebrity endorsement on older consumers in Hong Kong. They found that the source attractiveness and the celebrity-brand fit models carry the most relevance when explaining the advertising effect of celebrity endorsement among older consumers in Hong Kong. Though these insights are important in understanding older consumers and their responses to celebrity appeal, the generalization of results may limit the study in that it focused solely on the Hong Kong market. Since the environment of consumer markets and perceptions of older consumers could well vary between Hong Kong and mainland China, a similar study conducted in the mainland China market is warranted to further expand understanding of the profitable older-consumer sector.

The Rise of Online Influencers and Their Endorsement

The availability of diverse social media platforms and the ease that they offer in creating and distributing user-generated content has led to the global emergence of online influencers. Online influencers are also known as KOLs, micro-celebrities, social media influencers, *wang-hongs*, and the like. They develop a self-branded image on social media by disclosing self-related updates. They show the updates of their daily life through photos, videos, and texts on social media to regularly engage their audiences (Senft, 2008). Many online influencers are quite popular in the digital world. Take Ziqi Li for example. She is one of the most popular female online influencers in China, well known for her vlogs. In late January 2021, she broke the Guinness World Record for "most subscribers for a Chinese language channel on YouTube", with 14 million YouTube subscribers (Guinness World Records, 2021). In Fan's (2021) study, an online influencer is viewed as a new and important type of celebrity endorsers in advertising campaigns. In the marketing field, the phenomenon is named influencer marketing.

Both marketing communication practitioners and scholars pay tribute to the popularity of online influencers. As for industry practitioners, brands increasingly involve online influencers in their brand and product promotional strategies (Marwick, 2015). Scholars also pay attention to the online influencer phenomenon. Many empirical studies have been conducted to analyze the impact of online influencers on consumers. Ye et al.'s (2021) bibliometric analysis of online influencers found that product endorsement by online influencers is a cost-efficient and influential tactic. The persuasiveness of online influencers and their endorsements is influenced by their credibility (Breves, Liebers, &

Kunze, 2019), attractiveness (Lee & Watkins, 2016), and level of engagement with target audiences (Kay, Mulcahy, & Parkinson, 2020). A recent qualitative interview study of the China market even compared traditional celebrity endorsers with online influencers. It proved that when doing product endorsement in an advertising campaign, traditional celebrity endorsers are more respected and persuasive than online influencers among young Chinese consumers (Fan, 2021). Although extant studies have been conducted to analyze how online influencers and their endorsements, we observed that only a limited number of studies have compared their effectiveness with traditional celebrity endorsement. As for how older adults perceive the differences between traditional celebrities and online influencers, no studies have been done in this area.

Given that the aging population is an important component of consumer markets in China, and since there is a literature gap in perceptions of celebrity endorsement and online influencer endorsement in advertising, we conducted a qualitative study to gain insights into celebrity endorsement by identifying factors and the effectiveness of advertising from the perspective of older consumers. The study has the theoretical contribution on whether the major theories of celebrity endorsement are applicable to older adults in China. It has a marketing contribution for practitioners to better engage with these consumers.

Methodology

The qualitative interview research method was used in our study for three reasons. First, most of the extant studies about celebrity endorsement employed quantitative survey methodology (Brockington, 2015). Few studies were done in a qualitative way. Second, the qualitative interview method allows participants to share more in-depth views about celebrities and their product endorsements. Third, few studies have been conducted to analyze older consumers' perceptions of celebrity endorsement in China, and no extant studies answer how traditional celebrities differ from online influencers from the perspective of the older consumer market. Therefore, an interviewing method was applied to conduct this exploratory study. As suggested by Fitch (1994), the qualitative research method is effective in phenomenon description and explanation.

The Interviewees

Personal interviews were conducted with 20 older adults aged 50 to 64. The snowball sampling method was applied to voluntarily recruit participants from Shandong province in China, one of the most developed coastal provinces in China. The mean age of the interviewees was 52.9. Among the 20 participants, 12 of them were female and the remaining eight were male. Six of them were retired, and the remaining 14 were still working as full-time employees. Overall, the educational level was not high among the 20 interviewees. Fifteen of them were graduates from secondary school, two interviewees were graduates of vocational colleges, and the remaining three were university graduates.

Interview Procedure

A semi-structured interview was conducted with 20 voluntarily recruited participants. The interview protocol developed by Chan and Fan's (2020) study was adopted and modified to fit the China context. Two questions were added to explore interviewees' perceptions of online influencers. To facilitate understanding of celebrity endorsement in advertising, interviewees were shown one 15-second television commercial for a health-care product (calcium tablets) endorsed by 61-year-old Ping Lang, a retired Chinese volleyball national player and the head coach of the women's national volleyball team. After watching the advertisement, interviewees were asked to identify the celebrity featured in the advertisement. Immediately after this, interviews via WeChat were conducted by following the interview protocol attached in Appendix 1. The interview protocol had six questions covering the interviewee's most memorable celebrity and endorsement, perceptions of how brands should choose a qualified celebrity endorser, perceived impacts of celebrity endorsement in advertising, and comparison between traditional celebrity endorsers and online influencers.

After receiving approval from the university's Research Ethics Committee, the authors conducted 20 personal interviews in March 2021. Specifically, WeChat, China's alternative to WhatsApp, was chosen to conduct the one-on-one online audio interview, because WeChat is one of the most commonly used communication tools among the Chinese, including the older generation. As of the third quarter of 2021, WeChat had around 1.3 billion monthly active users from different age groups (Lin, 2021). Besides this, the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic limits the feasibility of face-to-face interviews. Overall, each online audio interview lasted around 20 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in Putonghua. Later, coding books were prepared and selected quotes were translated into English.

Coding Procedure

The hybrid coding method, incorporating both deductive and inductive approaches, was used to prepare the coding book. Before the application of the data-driven coding method, the authors conducted the concept-driven deductive coding method to develop the coding frame for traditional celebrity endorsement and its advertising persuasiveness.

A hierarchical coding frame was applied to organize the codes and visualize their relationship under the identified themes. Meanwhile, a data-driven inductive method was applied to identify new categories emerging from the interview transcripts, particularly on the comparison and contrast between traditional celebrities and online influencers. Ground theory was applied when conducting an inductive coding procedure.

Open coding was used to highlight keywords. Axial coding followed to identify the relationship among the open codes. Selective coding was conducted to generate significant themes or patterns based on the comparison of categories arising from axial coding. For instance, when coding older consumers' perceived differences between traditional celebrities and online influencers, authors first identified the keywords frequently mentioned by the interviewees. When describing the traditional celebrities, interviewees mainly used keywords such as professional, well-trained, strong

capability, famous and popular. Based on the summarized keywords, common traits were targeted to develop categories in the axial coding step. For example, descriptive terms such as credible, good reputation, and convincing were about the credibility of the celebrities, while keywords like famous and popular were about the popularity of the celebrities. Thus, these identified keywords were coded as credibility and popularity respectively. After that, selective coding followed to identify a significant theme or pattern. For instance, after comparing the importance of credibility and popularity identified in the step of axial coding, it was found that both of them were two important factors influencing how brands choose celebrity endorsers, and participants weighed them almost equally. The initial round of coding was conducted by one author. Another author went through all the codes. Disagreement was discussed and resolved.

Results

All the interviewees were able to identify Ping Lang as the endorser in the prompt commercial. When interviewees were asked to recall an advertisement with a celebrity endorser, all of them were able to recall at least one advertisement beside the prompt one. All the recalled advertisements were broadcast commercials. Altogether 24 different celebrities were recalled 32 times. Among the recalled celebrities, most of them were Chinese celebrities in the entertainment industry. The most frequently recalled celebrity was Kaili Zhang, a famous Chinese actress around 60 years old. Only two of them were sports celebrities, including Xiang Liu (the Olympic hurdler) as well as Steph Curry (the NBA player), and a female entrepreneur Mingzhu Dong (CEO of Gree Electric). All the interviewees were able to recall the names of the celebrity endorsers. However, only nine out of 20 interviewees could recall the brands endorsed by the recalled celebrity endorsers. The brand with the highest number of recalls was Zulijian, a shoe brand designed for older adults.

The data analysis process generated four themes with one theme for each of the four research questions.

For research question 1 about characteristics of memorable celebrity endorsers, we found theme 1.

Theme 1: The Main Reason for Advertising Recall was Familiarity

Interviewees were asked to explain the reasons for the recalled advertisements being memorable. The attribute most frequently given was source familiarity (reported 13 times). Interviewees reported they often watched TV drama series where the celebrities played the major acting roles. The interviewees were able to recall either the name of the TV drama or the fictitious character whom the celebrity played. Interviewees explained that because they watched the drama so often or they appreciated the acting skills of the celebrities so much, these celebrities were always on top of their minds. In other words, the high media exposure of celebrities created a feeling of familiarity. Here are two illustrative quotes about celebrity familiarity. The first one emphasizes that the popularity of a particular TV drama enhanced interviewees' familiarity with the celebrity. The second one is about how media exposure contributed to familiarity with the celebrity.

> *"Almost everyone my age is watching her TV drama titled Desire."* (Female, aged 50-54)

> *"Ling Jia is a very popular comedian. She has appeared in many TV programs and even the Chinese New Year Gala."* (Female, aged 50-54)

The fit between celebrity and brand (reported 4 times) and celebrity credibility (reported 3 times) also positively influenced older consumers' memory of celebrity endorsers and the endorsed brands. For instance, some interviewees were very attentive. They paid attention to the match/fit between the age or marital status of the celebrity endorsers and the target consumers of the endorsed product category.

> *"In my opinion, the characteristics of celebrities and brands should be matched. Ziyi Zhang has children and is suitable for endorsing products like milk powder. Beautiful people could endorse cosmetic products."* (Female, aged 60-64)

> *"Young girls could endorse cosmetic products and underwear products. Older celebrities could endorse health-related products."* (Female, aged 50-54)

Apart from celebrity-endorser-related attributes, interviewees also reported personal relevance as reasons to recall celebrity advertisements. Two representative quotes are highlighted. The first quote is about personal consumer needs and the second one is about the consumption experience from a family member.

> *"I am going to install air conditioners in my apartment, so I recently pay attention to many air-conditioning brands, including their advertisements."* (Male, aged 50-54)

> *"My wife is using the brand that the celebrity endorsed."* (Male, aged 50-54)

For research question 2 about factors to consider in appointing celebrity endorsers from the marketing point of view, we found theme 2.

Theme 2: Source-related Characteristics and Celebrity-brand Fit as Important Criteria to Select Celebrity Endorsers

Interviewees were asked to report which factors brands should consider when choosing a celebrity endorser. Both source-related attributes and celebrity-brand fit were reported most frequently. Regarding source-related attributes, interviewees most often mentioned popularity, good image, credibility, as well as the integrity of the celebrities. Regarding celebrity-brand fit, interviewees most often reported a match between the qualities of the endorsers and the qualities of the endorsed brands. Interviewees perceived that source credibility was closely related to personal integrity. Interviewees expected that the endorsers should be authentic, down-to-earth, free from relationship scandals or drug addiction, have a high moral quality, and enjoy a high reputation. These characteristics were referred to as civic responsibility in a previous study. Civic responsibility is defined as public and moral behavior relating to the well-being of others (Chan & Fan, 2020). The following two quotes demonstrate how older consumers perceive source popularity and moral qualities as important requirements in choosing celebrity endorsers.

"Brands should choose popular celebrities with good reputation. These celebrities should have good personal quality and be authentic." (Female, aged 50-54)

"I think the bottom line to choosing a celebrity endorser is his or her moral quality. Negative news, such as cheating and keeping mistresses, would affect his or her public image. If the brand invited such a celebrity to do endorsement, it would hurt the endorsed product and its image. For example, Bingbing Fan, a former actress, was investigated for the crime of tax evasion. After this news was released, some supermarkets immediately removed the promotional materials with her image. They worried that the ruined public image of Bingbing Fan would have a negative impact on the company's or brand's reputation." (Female, aged 50-54)

Interviewees reported there should be a match between the qualities of the celebrity endorsers and the qualities of the endorsed brands. They usually put emphasis on the profile or the physical appearance of the endorsers. Here is a representative quote:

"There should be strong association between the celebrity and the endorsed brand. For example, star athletes can endorse sports brands. Pretty woman can endorse fashion and cosmetic brands." (Male, 50-54)

For the research question about perceptions of the persuasiveness of advertisements using celebrity endorsement, we found theme 3.

Theme 3: Advertising with Celebrity Endorsement was Perceived as Effective in Cognitive, Affective and Behavioral Levels

All the interviewees reported that celebrity endorsement in advertising was persuasive in its communication. two interviewees specifically mentioned that advertisements with celebrities were able to sell more than those without celebrities. Some interviewees reported that celebrity advertisements could enhance public awareness of the endorsed products and brands. Some suggested that advertisements with celebrities positively enhance older consumers' liking and confidence in the endorsed brand. Some addressed advertising influence on consumer behavior (e.g., discussion with others about endorsed products and growth of sales). Because of the perceived persuasiveness of celebrity endorsement, one interview commented that celebrities should be law-abiding and should not use their fame to involve in deceptive advertising. They should be responsible to the consumers. Three interviewees mentioned the high cost of celebrity advertising execution. These interviewees expressed their concerns that for the same product, it would cost more if it employed celebrity endorsement. Here are three selected quotes about each level of persuasiveness.

"Celebrity endorsements could attract our attention and arouse our resonance, thus enhancing the recognition of endorsed brands." (Female, aged 55-59)

"If the brand was endorsed by my favorite celebrities, I would have a sense of closeness to the brand. As the saying goes, love me, love my dog." (Female, aged 50-54)

"More people will purchase products endorsed by celebrities." (Male, aged 60-64)

For the perceptions of traditional celebrities and online influencers, we found theme 4.

Theme 4: Online Influencers were Perceived to be Less Credible and Short-term as compared to Traditional Celebrities

When asked about their perceptions of online influencers, three interviewees reported that they were not familiar with online influencers. They reported that they usually watched TV programs for entertainment and seldom surfed the internet.

Among those interviewees who are familiar with online influencers, most had a negative attitude towards online influencers. Negative words such as fake, temporary, low quality, "get rich too easily", artificial, unsubstantiated were used by interviewees to describe them. Interviewees specifically mentioned names of two online influencers who persuaded consumers to buy low-quality products. Here are two typical quotes, representing negative perceptions of online influencers.

"I doubt about the moral standard of online influencers although they are very influential. The online influencer Ziqi Li often endorsed food brands that later on found out to have food safety problems." (Male, aged 50-54)

"I don't like online influencers. They are man-made by the Internet and enjoyed temporary fame. They are not authentic. Traditional celebrities are more substantial." (Female, aged 50-54)

Only one interviewee gave some positive comments about online influencers. Here is the quote:

"I think online influencers could inspire common people to pursue their dreams and make their dreams come true." (Male, aged 50-54)

When discussing the differences between traditional celebrities and online influencers, respondents often described traditional celebrities with positive traits such as outstanding, professional, and hard-working. Only a few interviewees portrayed online influencers positively. Credibility was the most frequently mentioned difference between traditional celebrities and online influencers. Interviewees perceived that traditional celebrities were more reliable and trustworthy than online influencers. Here is a representative quote elaborating the perceived low credibility of online influencers:

"Online influencers are not well educated. They only became popular through the internet with their personal talent or other remarkable features. In my opinion, they have the same image as parvenus." (Male, aged 60-64)

Besides personal credibility, interviewees also commented on the sustainability of popularity. Six interviewees reported that traditional celebrities' careers and popularity were sustainable while eight responses emphasized the vulnerability of online influencers' fame. Here is a representative quote:

"We know nothing about them before they became famous. I feel that they are just a flash in the pan. However, traditional celebrities are able to perform well and are popular in the long term." (Male, aged 50-54)

Discussion

This qualitative study investigates how older consumers in mainland China perceive celebrity endorsement in advertising. Altogether, a convenience sample of 20 persons aged 50 to 64 in Shandong, China, were interviewed in March 2021.

From the theoretical perspective, the results in the current study demonstrated the presence of all four major theories in explaining how celebrities work from the interviewees. Attributes related to source including source familiarity, credibility, integrity, likability, and attractiveness were brought up, indicating the validity of the source credibility model and the source attractiveness model. Among source attributes, moral quality and personal integrity was being emphasized. Congruency or the match-up hypothesis was brought up, indicating the expected matching between the qualities of the celebrities and the qualities of the brands. Interviewees also mentioned how the meaning embedded in the celebrities can be transferred from the celebrities to the endorsed brands, especially for negative news.

Overall, our research findings show some similarities with the findings among the older consumer market in Hong Kong (Chan & Fan, 2020). Specifically, interviewees considered source-related attributes, particularly popularity and familiarity, are crucial criteria for brands to appoint a celebrity endorser. Both studies confirm that the source popularity equips the celebrities with a competitive advantage when marketers screen out the advertising endorsers. Besides, the moral quality of the celebrities such as celebrities' integrity should also be considered when marketers select the advertising endorsers.

Differences do exist between the older consumer markets of mainland China and Hong Kong. In Chan and Fan's (2020) Hong Kong study, advertising frequency was a major factor in influencing older adults' memory of celebrity advertisements. However, only two interviewees mentioned the importance of advertising frequency in this study. This can be explained by the differences in the celebrity endorsement appeals in mainland China and Hong Kong, which may lead to the varied focus on what to pay attention to in celebrity advertisements. In Hong Kong, celebrity advertisements are mainly presented in commercials during the advertising break of television programs. Consumers could consciously know what they are exposed to in advertisements. However, in mainland China, native advertising, a new way of advertising, has been widely introduced to traditional media platforms such as television after 2015 (Zhang, 2017). In television dramas, many celebrity advertisements, recently, are featured in a native advertising format called "Zhong Xiao Ju Chang" (meaning mini-drama). In this new native advertising, the advertising setting and outfits of the celebrity endorsers are very similar to that appearing in the TV drama. However, it uses the term "Zhong Xiao Ju Chang" to remind the audience that they are watching a creative advertisement, not product placement in the media content. Because of the creativity of the advertising format and the blending into the media contents, consumers in mainland China might not be sensitive to the advertising techniques including the advertising frequency.

Instead, they mainly enjoy the content of native advertising itself and celebrities featured in the contents. Future studies are needed to explore whether native advertising is the main reason leading to the differences in how older consumers memorize celebrity advertisements. Another difference between Hong Kong and mainland China is that when asked about the perceived effectiveness of celebrity endorsements, older consumers in mainland China believed that celebrity endorsers would increase purchase intention, while none of the Hong Kong interviewees specifically stated this to be so. This might be explained by the perceived trustworthiness of advertising among consumers in Hong Kong and mainland China. Hong Kong consumers have always shown some doubt about advertising. A survey found that 36 percent of respondents reported that overall speaking, advertising was not trustworthy. Another 52 percent reported that advertising was half and half trustworthy (Chan, 2018). With the doubt, it would be reasonable to imply that Hong Kong consumers did not find advertising very persuasive.

Our study is the first exploratory study to discuss older consumers' responses to differences between traditional celebrities and online influencers in China. Although more scholars have started discussing the differences between traditional celebrities and online influencers, no current studies have analyzed this in the context of older consumers. Our study finds that older consumers hold a more negative attitude toward online influencers than they do toward traditional celebrities. This is in line with existing comparative studies of traditional celebrities and online influencers in the Asian market (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2021; Fan, 2021). Agnihotri and Bhattacharya's (2021) study in India found that traditional celebrity endorsers are more effective than online influencers regarding product endorsements. The same pattern is found in Fan's qualitative study in China. Fan's (2021) interview study focused on the perceptions of youngsters on product endorsement by traditional celebrities and online influencers. It was found that young people in China perceive online influencers and their endorsements more negatively than they do traditional celebrities (Fan, 2021). However, consumers from Western countries hold a contradictory attitude. Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget's (2019) study found that online influencers are perceived to be more credible than traditional celebrities.

The perceived lower credibility of online influencers among the interviewees may be due to the fact that most of the popular online influencers in China are young and the products they endorsed are mainly fashion, cosmetics, and entertainment that older people seldom consume. As a result, older people will find online influencers irrelevant to them.

Implications for Asian Business

This qualitative study has generated some theoretical contributions, broad marketing communication insights, and specific implications for Asian market. As for the theoretical contributions, one theoretical model about how Chinese older consumers perceive the advertising about celebrity endorsement was developed and presented in Figure 1. Same as most of the existing studies, our study confirms that the classic models of source attributes do play an important role in the persuasiveness of celebrity endorsement. However, extant studies about celebrity endorsement do not further explore what factors contribute to the development of source attributes. A theoretical

gap is filled here as our study introduces factors such as consuming media contents of celebrity and moral quality to the source attributes-related theoretical model, which could explain how some source-related attributes are developed and enhanced. Specifically, consuming media content of celebrities positively influences the perceived source familiarity among older consumers in China, whereas the celebrities' moral quality influences their perceived credibility among older consumers. Source-related attributes, including physical attractiveness, source popularity, source familiarity, source credibility, and celebrity-brand fit influence how older consumers perceive the persuasiveness of celebrity advertising.

Figure 1: Model Diagram about the Persuasiveness of Celebrity Endorsement among Older Consumers
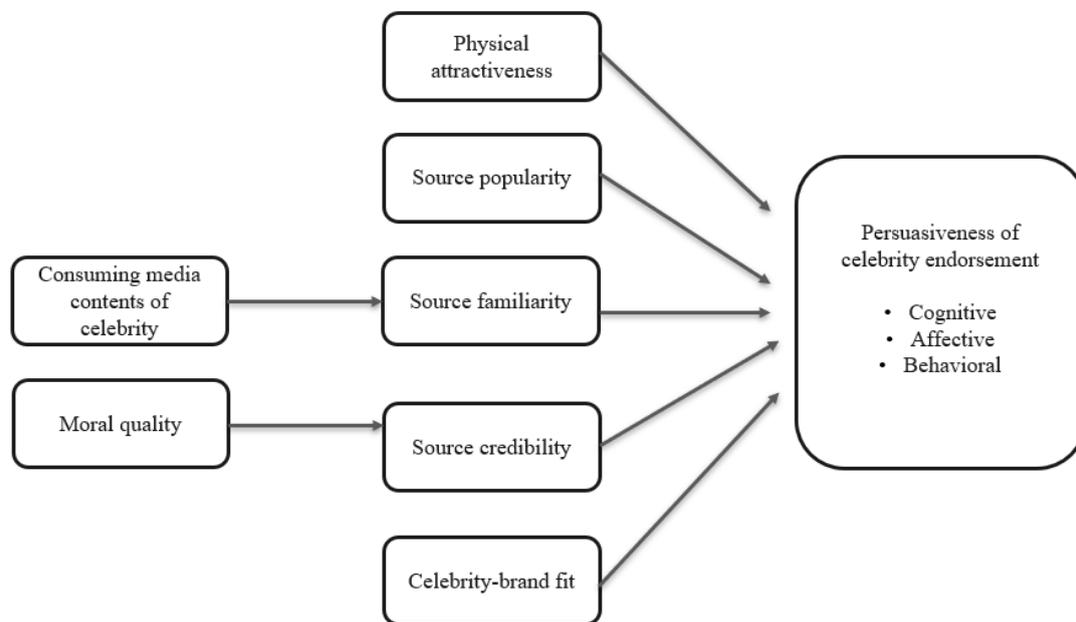
The marketing communication implications are also informative and profound in our study. First, it is wise to choose celebrity endorsers with a good public image when marketing communication practitioners use celebrity appeal in advertising to target older consumers. Campbell and Warren (2012), using three studies, proved that meaning transfer from celebrity endorsers to brands are more likely to occur if the celebrity endorsers are perceived as possessing negative associations rather than positive associations. This means that celebrity endorsers should actively build and maintain their positive images through various media channels and participate in activities that promote social causes. In this way, celebrities can strengthen their credibility in the minds of target consumers. Consistent with Chan and Fan's (2020) study about older consumers in Hong Kong, our study finds that older adults in mainland China also view celebrity endorsers' credibility, particularly their civic responsibility, as important. Some of them even emphasize the risk of meaning transfer from the images of discredited celebrity endorsers to the images of endorsed brands. Compared with traditional celebrities, online influencers do not carry a credible image among older consumers. For example, some interviewees admitted that online

influencers do not make an effort and tend to sell fake goods. To secure endorsement opportunities and eliminate the risk of negative meaning transfer from endorsers to brands, online influencers need to put extra effort into enhancing their personal branding.

Second, it is suggested brands give priority to celebrity endorsers with positive associations such as source attractiveness, source popularity, and alike. Our study finds that source attractiveness and source popularity are recognized by older adults as important factors influencing the selection of celebrity endorsers. Attractive celebrity endorsers and their advertising are more easily recalled by older consumers. This is consistent with previous studies. Kahle and Homer (1985) found that brand recall could be enhanced if celebrities owned the attribute of attractiveness. Chan, Ng, and Luk's (2013) study of adolescents postulates that source attractiveness is more effective than source credibility to enhance the persuasiveness of celebrity endorsement.

Third, it is suggested that advertising executions with celebrity endorsements be tailored for different age groups. Youngsters and older consumers have different attention foci. As for young consumers, advertising executions such as jingles used in advertisements are important factors influencing their memory of celebrity advertisements (Chan, Ng, & Luk, 2013). However, older adults do not share the same view. Our study finds that for older adults, the memorability of celebrity endorsement in advertising mainly relies on the personal attributes of the celebrity endorsers. Advertising execution does not play an important role in older adults' memory of celebrity advertisements. Marketers should therefore put less emphasis on advertising execution details. Instead, the advertisement copy should be crafted to make a strong link between the celebrity endorsers and the brand names.

Lastly, participants in the current study are more likely to associate purchase intention with memorable celebrity endorsers. Marketers can therefore include a stronger sales pitch in the advertisement to leverage the celebrity endorsement. They can include celebrities' images at the point of purchase (POP) in retail shops or online e-commerce platforms as a reminder.

Our study also has significant practical implications for Asian businesses, particularly in the area of how celebrity endorsement influences brands and businesses targeting older adults. It is important to get in-depth marketing insights about older consumers as the growth of the older population is fast globally, and even the fastest in eastern Asia (United Nations, 2019). Our study finds that older consumers have different foci, perceptions, and attitudes toward celebrity advertising compared with the young counterpart study done by Chan, Ng, and Luk (2013). As for older consumers in China, frequent consumption of the media contents of celebrities are associated with the familiarity of celebrity endorsers, leading to enhanced memory of the advertisement. Older consumers in China pay much attention to the celebrities highlighted in the advertisements, instead of advertising execution details. The practical implication for brands and businesses targeting Chinese older consumers or older adults in a China-alike cultural background is to reach older consumers, advertising creativity and storytelling tactics might not be as important as the selection of matched celebrities in the advertisement. To effectively grow older consumers' awareness about the advertisement and advertised brand, marketing practitioners are suggested to carefully identify the most qualified and matched celebrities by considering their characteristics

such as attractiveness, credibility, and popularity. Marketers should also follow closely the media consumption behaviors of the older consumers, especially TV dramas. Our study finds that older consumers cared about celebrity-related traits very much. Among different positive associations about celebrity endorsers, source attractiveness is the leading factor effectively influencing older consumers' advertising recall and their perception of the advertisement. Therefore, the practical implication for Asian businesses is to invite celebrities with a higher level of similarity, familiarity, and likeability to endorse the brands. Consistent with extant studies, source attractiveness significantly improves the communication effectiveness of advertising (Hakimi, Abedniya, & Zaeim, 2011; Mat et al., 2019; McGuire, 1985).

Moreover, older consumers in China are a diversified market with great potential. To reach them by advertising with celebrity endorsement, marketing communication practitioners may consider inviting reputational businesswomen/businessmen to endorse their own brands or products. Our study found that older consumers in China sometimes perceive successful entrepreneurs as "public stars"/celebrities. For instance, Mingzhu Dong, the CEO of Gree Electric, is mentioned by one of our interviewees when asked to name a celebrity they know. Existing studies have also proved the power of the brand entrepreneur/corporate spokesperson in advertising endorsement. Stephens and Faranda's study (1993) highlighted that advertisements featuring the images of corporate individuals including employees are wise decisions. People serving at the brands or corporates are the visible and specific representations of their services (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1988). Another reason to use corporate entrepreneurs as brand endorsers is that many local Chinese brands did not have the competitive advantages in terms of corporate history and marketing budgets like the global brands. The use of their senior management, employees, and frontline staff to be brand ambassadors is a wise way to both visualize the corporate images and efficiently manage their marketing budgets. In addition, the engagement of corporate individuals in advertising also allows brands to effectively control the communication effectiveness as the images of these characters are exclusively consistent with their brands and even target consumers (Tom et al., 1992).

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. [Show the 15-second commercial]: Can you tell me the name of the celebrity endorser in this advertisement and the brand she endorsed?
2. Who is your most memorable celebrity endorser? What is the name of the brand

he or she endorsed? Why is it memorable?

3. What are the important factors for marketers to consider when selecting a celebrity endorser?

4. What are the perceived effects of employing a celebrity endorser on the brand?

5. Nowadays there are some people who endorse brands on the internet. We call them online influencers. What do you think about them?

6. What are the differences between these online influencers and traditional celebrities?