To Use the Obvious Choice: Investigating the Relative Effectiveness of an Overexposed Celebrity.

AUTHOR:

Subhadip Roy, IBS Hyderabad

The practice of using celebrity endorsements in advertising to promote products dates back to more than a hundred years. According to McCracken (1989), a celebrity endorser could be defined as, *…any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement* (p. 310). Recent research on celebrity endorsement suggests that the percentage of celebrity advertisements out of the total number of ads aired is as high as 25-30% in western countries (Shimp 2000) and around 60% in India (Shashidhar 2008). With this in mind, it's not surprising that the celebrity endorsement phenomenon has attracted increasing attention from practitioners and academics over the last three decades. In India however, multiple endorsements by celebrities is a common phenomenon (Patro and Dutta 2010). The popular celebrities may get more than 10 brand endorsements in a single year and this trend is common across Asian countries like India (Shashidhar 2008) and China (Hung et al. 2011). As an example, Indian cricketer M.S. Dhoni has more than 25 brand endorsements while actor Shah Rukh Khan has 21. At the same time there are celebrities with fewer endorsements such as actor John Abraham (such Clinic Shampoo and Garnier) and chess grandmaster Vishwanathan Anand (such as NIIT and AMD). The obvious implication would be that a celebrity with more number of endorsements (The term overexposed celebrity is used in the paper for a celebrity with a high number of product endorsements), would be in demand and would charge a higher fee than a celebrity with lesser number of endorsements. However, the question which could be asked is whether the overexposed celebrity would generate a more favorable impact on the consumers. In this regard, early research (Tripp et al. 1994) suggested that multiple endorsements by a celebrity would have a negative impact on the consumers' perception of the celebrity credibility and would adversely affect attitude toward the advertisement. More recently, Ilicic and Webster (2011) have supported similar views when they found multiple endorsements by a celebrity to negatively affect consumer attitudes. In such a scenario, it would be interesting to investigate whether an overexposed celebrity

would have a differential impact on consumer attitudes in the Indian context than an underexposed one. Moreover, a well researched phenomenon in celebrity endorsements suggests that celebrity product congruence is important for achieving positive consumer attitudes in the context of celebrity endorsements (Friedman and Friedman 1979; Kamins and Gupta 1994; Mittelstaedt et al. 2000). The present study investigated the relative effectiveness of an overexposed celebrity vis-à-vis the same for an underexposed celebrity in presence of Celebrity-product congruence/incongruence. The study also explored the possible reasons behind the observations gained from the former objectives.

Based on the literature review, four hypotheses were developed initially to test a) the relative effectiveness of an overexposed celebrity vis-à-vis an underexposed one in presence of congruent/incongruent product conditions; b) the effect of celebrity-product congruence on consumer attitudes; c) the relative effectiveness of an overexposed celebrity vis-à-vis an underexposed one when both endorse the same product. The study was further augmented on the basis of findings from the first three phases of the study into investigating the reasons behind the perceived ineffectiveness of the overexposed celebrity to generate significantly different outcomes in consumer attitudes than an underexposed celebrity.

The findings from the first phases suggested that an underexposed celebrity may be equally effective in generating favorable consumer attitudes as an overexposed one. In fact, the findings also pointed out that the underexposed celebrity generated more favorable consumer purchase intention (PI) than the overexposed one. On major finding also suggested that in case the celebrity is overexposed, the misfit between him/her and the product may cause more negative PI whereas in case of an underexposed celebrity, the misfit does not cause the PI to decline, rather it increases. This may be because of the fact that the consumers are well aware that the celebrity is getting a big amount of money for the endorsement and thus they are more negatively oriented when the celebrity endorses a product with which he/she does not have a perceived fit. The study findings also pointed out that the congruent celebrity product combinations were found to create more favorable consumer attitudes. The findings from the last phase emphasized on the conclusions drawn from the earlier phases. The very fact that a celebrity was endorsing multiple brands or was repeatedly exposed was sending a signal to the consumer that he/she was doing this for money. Thus the credibility of the celebrity was decreasing which was evident from the credibility values obtained in the post treatment findings. So, the overexposed celebrity, even

though popular, was not able to generate more favorable consumer attitudes than the underexposed one. One more interesting finding came out from the last phase implied that the perceived expertise of the celebrity was not dependent on the number of endorsements but was derived from his/her achievements in the respective field. Lastly, the attractiveness of the overexposed celebrity was found to decrease with information on number of endorsements and this contradicted the traditional notions of attractiveness of a celebrity being only related to his/her physical appearance (Ohanian 1991; Silvera and Austad 2004).

The most important implication of the study is a question which could be raised to the advertiser who is using the same celebrity for multiple brands. Celebrity endorsements are expensive and the celebrity who is getting a lot of endorsements is obviously a popular celebrity. In India, a popular celebrity like Dhoni or Shah Rukh Khan could earn up to INR 50 million (1 INR or Indian Rupees = 0.02 USD approx) from an endorsement deal. The study findings question effectiveness of such expenditure. The findings also suggest that whatever be the level of exposure of the celebrity, it is always a safer option to go for a congruent celebrity product endorsement than an incongruent one. Thus the marketer should carefully select those celebrities who are perceived to be matching with the endorsed products. The major findings also suggested that using a celebrity may be a better option than using no celebrity, and thus it encourages the marketers to opt for a celebrity endorsement strategy. The very fact that a celebrity is endorsing multiple brands or is repeatedly exposed is sending a signal to the consumer that he/she is doing this for money. This in the long run can erode the credibility of the celebrity and may not able to evoke the expected response from the consumers. Thus a marketer should try and use different less exposed celebrities at different points of time rather than opting for an already popular celebrity.