Don't Hate me Because I am Beautiful: Identifying the Relative Influence of Celebrity Attractiveness and Character Traits on Credibility

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1   Introduction

A celebrity spokesperson is typically defined as a recognizable person who uses this recognition to promote a consumer good through an advertisement. Celebrity endorsers are widely used to engage consumers. Past research has shown that almost 25% of all television commercials contain celebrity endorsers (Erdogan et al., 2001). As of 2010, it was estimated that $50 billion was spent on celebrity endorsements in traditional media (Crutchfield, 2012) and another $35 billion on digital endorsements (Shayon, 2011). Celebrities have their own brand and equity, and each celebrity's brand is important to marketers as they seek to transfer the celebrity's image to the endorsed product (McCraken, 1989).

Perhaps the most studied characteristic of effective celebrity endorsers is their credibility. For decades, celebrity attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness, the three dimensions of source credibility (Ohanian, 1990; Ohanian, 1991), have been examined and shown to create positive advertising effects (Amos et al., 2008; Baker and Churchill, 1977; Goldsmith et al., 2000; Hovland and Weiss, 1951; Pornpitakpan, 2004). Celebrity attractiveness is often associated with physical beauty and to some extent likability, and trustworthiness with sincerity and honesty. Expertise is a function of the match between the celebrity and the product endorsed; a celebrity should have special knowledge or experience with the category to have developed expertise. Tiger Woods can endorse golf equipment and be viewed as having the expertise needed to offer a valuable opinion, but in light of his recent bad press, it is possible consumer assessments of his character could undermine his expertise. Arguably, trustworthiness may be most important as it determines the credibility of the message as a whole. However, there has been no examination of what celebrity characteristics create trustworthiness. Indeed, there has been little research examining celebrity personality and what elements might influence the perception that the celebrity is trustworthy.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relative influence of celebrity characteristics such as physical attractiveness and character traits on consumer perceptions of celebrity credibility, using the dimensions of trustworthiness and expertise. Furthermore, we explore how celebrity philanthropy might also

influence those perceptions. A recent Huffington Post article highlights the value of celebrity philanthropy by suggesting that some celebrities, who are in some ways very unlikeable and unattractive, should be given "another chance" because they are active in supporting good causes (McDonald, 2013). In fact, with so many celebrities in the press for negative behaviors, some celebrities might seek a way to improve consumer perceptions of their character and credibility. The results inform future academic research on celebrity effects, offer a new dimension for inclusion in the profiling of celebrity endorsers, and offer implications for celebrities seeking to improve their image.

2   Literature Review

2.1   *Celebrity Endorser Effects*

A celebrity endorser can be defined as someone who is identifiable and uses that identification to support a product through some type of advertising. Decades of research have shown that there are several positive brand outcomes of celebrity endorsement. Ads with celebrities can cut through ad clutter, and leave a stronger memory trace (McCraken, 1989). Positive ad and brand attitudes can result from a good celebrity/brand match and a celebrity endorser can reposition a brand by associating his/her image with a brand (Tantiseneepong et al., 2012). A celebrity spokesperson can help a product to stand out among its competitors (Dean and Biswas, 2001). Increased product interest (Maronick, 2006) and stock value (Agrawal and Kamakura, 1995) are other outcomes of celebrity endorsements. Successful celebrity endorsers have been shown to be likable, familiar, expert, attractive and trustworthy (Atkin and Block, 1983; Ohanian, 1990; Eisend and Langner, 2010; Choi and Rifon, 2012; Tantiseneepong et al., 2012). Thus, the overall image the endorser is a vital part of an endorsement's success.

A celebrity is successful as an endorser when, in the eyes of the consumer, the positive images and meanings associated with the celebrity are transferred to the endorsed product. The characteristics of the celebrity transfer to a product, and in this case, the corporation (McCracken, 1989). McCracken's (1989) model of meaning transfer is widely used to explain how celebrities influence consumer brand perceptions. The transfer process from celebrity to a product helps explain some of the appeal of a celebrity endorser; a person will purchase a product endorsed by a celebrity in the hopes of becoming more like that celebrity. In order for meaning, or image variables, to transfer from the celebrity to the brand, the celebrity must first acquire that meaning from the societal culture. Recent research shows that this transfer of image is facilitated when the consumer

perceives the celebrity as a version of their aspirational, and not actual, self (Choi and Rifon, 2012). Therefore, celebrity endorser effectiveness is heavily reliant on the positive image of the endorser and target consumer perceptions of the positive image as desirable.

2.2   Celebrity Credibility

The positive and desirable image of the celebrity endorser is based on perceived credibility of celebrity. Endorser credibility has received considerable attention because it is a critical factor to create the desirable image of the endorser (e.g., Aronson et al., 1963; Bergin, 1962; Bochner and Insko, 1966; Goldberg and Hartwick, 1990; Sternthal et al., 1978). In the context of celebrity endorsement, credibility is defined as the extent to which the source is perceived as possessing expertise relevant to the communication topic and can be trusted to give an objective opinion on the subject (Belch and Belch, 1993, pp.189-190; Ohanian, 1990).

Celebrity credibility is a function of attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness (Ohanian, 1990; Ohanian, 1991). The first dimension of credibility is attractiveness. A substantial body of research in advertising suggests that physical attractiveness is a critical factor that influences an initial judgment of another person (e.g., Chaiken, 1979; Kahle and Homer, 1985). In fact, most studies have revealed that a physically attractive endorser facilitates attitude or opinion change (Baker and Churchill, 1977; Caballero and Pride, 1984; Chaiken, 1979; Joseph, 1982). For example, Joseph (1982) concluded that attractive communicators are steadily liked more and have more positive impact on the associated product than unattractive communicators. Physical attractiveness has been defined in terms of both facial and physical aspects (Baker and Churchill, 1977; Patzer, 1983) and the construct generally includes model attractiveness (attractive-unattractive) (Baker and Churchill, 1977), sexiness (Steadman, 1969), sexualness and likability (Maddux and Rogers, 1980), or chicness (Mills and Aronson, 1965).

Next, expertise refers to the match between the celebrity and the product endorsed so that a celebrity endorser can have special knowledge or experience with the category to have special expertise. Expertise indicates that the celebrity is competent, knowledgeable, has experience, and is qualified (Tantiseneepong et al., 2012). Similar concepts of expertise are "authoritativeness" (McCroskey, 1966), "competence" (Whitehead, 1968), or "qualification" (Berlo et al., 1969). Previous research showed that source expertise is positively related to attitude change (Maddux and Rogers, 1980), respondent's compliance with the message (Crisci and Kassinove, 1973), and agreement on advocated position (Crano, 1970).

Lastly, trustworthiness refers to the message audience's degree of confidence in, and the level of acceptance of, the endorser and the message (Ohanion, 1990). That is, trustworthiness is a listener's trust in a speaker. Trustworthiness is an important cue to lead attitude change. For example, highly trustworthy communicator can make an opinionated message more effective than non-opinionated communication (Miller and Baseheart, 1969). And a trustworthy speaker was more persuasive regardless of his or her level of expertise (McGinnies and Ward, 1980).

2.3   *Celebrity Character Traits, Philanthrophy, and Credibility*

As noted earlier, Ohanian (1990) identified three global characteristics that can make a celebrity more effective. The three characteristics are attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness. These global factors, however, do not account for the unique characteristics that any one celebrity might possess and are thought to transfer to the products they ally with (McCracken, 1989). Choi and Rifon (2007), for example, elaborated on Ohanian's work using traits identified in marketing, psychology and advertising. They identified genuineness, competence, excitement and sociability as desirable endorser's unique traits. Other personal traits for celebrity may include wise/stupid, down to earth/arrogant, socially responsible/irresponsible, or caring/uncaring characters (Choi and Rifon, 2007).

Empirical evidence supports the use of a celebrity that fits the product for greater credibility and ad effects (Koernig and Boyd, 2009). For example, an attractive celebrity would be more effective at selling beauty products than an unattractive celebrity. Or a racecar driver would be more effective at selling tires than a golfer. A caring celebrity would be more effective at endorsing family related products than a celebrity with uncaring character.

Celebrity involvement in philanthropy such as donation or other social responsible behavior can influence his/her persona or character traits (Littler, 2008). Celebrity involvements with charitable causes have spread over the past two decades (e.g., Audrey Hepburn's work for UNICEF). The third sectors have used marketing campaigns and branding to expand social issues using celebrities. Celebrity involvement with charitable causes can raise the profile of a campaign, and get wider media exposure (Lettler, 2008). Therefore, we summarize this review of literature with three broad research questions:

RQ1: What characteristics of the celebrity endorser drive the perceived trustworthiness?

RQ2: What characteristics of the celebrity endorser drive the perceived expertise?

RQ3: How does celebrity philanthropy influence the perceptions of trustworthiness and expertise?

3   Methods

3.1   Sample

A total of 567 undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university participated in the study. 381 of the participants are female, 184 are male while 2 are unidentified. Their age ranged from 18 to 27 years, with an average age of 20 years.

3.2   Data Collection Procedures

Subjects were recruited through email to participate in the study that was administered online using SurveyGizmo and were randomly assigned to see one of four celebrities (Ellen DeGeneres, Angelina Jolie, Kim Kardashian, or Lindsay Lohan). Forbes ranked Ellen DeGeneres, Angelina Jolie, and Kim Kardashian in the top 75 of Forbes 100 most powerful celebrities (Pomerantz, 2013) indicating they were all relevant choices to generate a range of perceptions of celebrity philanthropy. The measured variables were perceptions of celebrity philanthropy, attitude toward the celebrity, celebrity physical attractiveness, character, expertise, and trustworthiness.

3.3   Measures

All measures used a seven-point, semantic differential scale. Perceived philanthropy history was measured with one item (1 = low, 7 = high). Items from Choi and Rifon (2012) were adapted to measure attitude toward the celebrity (unfavorable/favorable, good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant, Cronbach's alpha = .92), celebrity character (wise/stupid, down to earth/arrogant, socially responsible/irresponsible, caring/uncaring, Cronbach's alpha =.8), celebrity physical attractiveness (attractive/not attractive, classy/not classy, elegant/plain, beautiful/ugly, sexy/not sexy, Cronbach's alpha = .89), celebrity expertise (expert/not expert, experienced/inexperienced, knowledgable/not knowledgable, qualified/unqualified, skilled/unskilled, Cronbach's alpha = .94), and celebrity trustworthiness (dependable/undependable, trustworthy/untrustworthy, honest/ dishonest, reliable/unreliable, sincere/insincere, Cronbach's alpha = .92).

4   Results

We conducted two sets of hierarchical regressions, first with trustworthiness as the dependent variable and then expertise as the dependent variable. We used attitude towards the celebrity, physical attractiveness and character as independent variables in the base model, and add perceive philanthropy to the

second model. We also ran a simple regression to examine the relative importance of different specific character traits on perceived trustworthiness.

As shown in Table 1, 74.9% of the variance in trustworthiness was explained by the independent variables in the Model 1. Character (β = .466, p <.001), attitude towards the celebrity (β = .298 , p <.001), and physical attractiveness (β = .212, p<.001) all statistically significantly predict trustworthiness (F (3,527) = 5256.96, p < 0.001). Perceived philanthropy (β = .93, p <.001) is also positively related to trustworthiness and added .6% of the variance in trustworthiness. Results in Table 3 showed that within character traits, being down to earth (β = .337, p <.001), and caring (β = .325, p <.001), had bigger effects on trustworthiness, compared with being wise (β = .156, p <.001), and socially responsible (β = .149, p <.001).

Results in Table 2 showed that 60.1% of the variance in expertise was explained by the independent variables in Model 1. Character (β =. 430, p<. 001), attitude towards the celebrity (β = .257, p <. 001), and physical attractiveness (β = .187, p <. 001) all statistically significantly predict expertise (F (4, 526) = 408.30,, p <0.001). Perceived philanthropy (β = .177, p <. 001) added 2.2% of the variance in expertise and was also positively related to expertise. Within character traits, being down to earth (β = .340, p <. 001) and caring (β = .313, p <. 001), have bigger effect on expertise, compared with being wise (β = .113, p <. 01), and socially responsible (β = .097, p <. 05) (See Table 3).

Table 1: Regression Results of Celebrity Characteristics on Trustworthiness

	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	t	B	t
Character	.466***	12.880	.449***	12.472
Attitude towards celebrity	.298***	8.306	.275***	7.637
Physical Attractiveness	.212***	7.785	.197***	7.246
Perceived philanthropy			.093***	3.719
Df	F(3,527)		F(4,526)	
F	5256.960***		408.303***	
R^2	.756		.756	
Adjust R^2	.749		.755	

Note. * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

Table 2: Regression Results of Celebrity Characteristics on Expertise

	Model 1		Model 2	
	β	t	B	t
Character	.430***	9.507	.400***	9.028
Attitude towards celebrity	.257***	5.676	.212***	4.748
Physical Attractiveness	.187***	5.474	.159***	4.720
Perceived philanthropy			.177***	5.658
Df	$F_{(3,525)}$		$F_{(4,524)}$	
F	263.418***		217.235***	
R^2	.601		.624	
Adjust R^2	.599		.621	

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

*Table 3: Regression Results of Specific Character Traits on Trustworthiness and
    Expertise*

	Trustworthiness		Expertise	
	β	t	B	t
Wise vs. Stupid	.156***	.156	.113**	2.676
Socially Responsible vs. Irresponsible	.149***	.149	.097*	2.451
Caring vs. Uncaring	.325***	.325	.313***	6.919
Down to Earth vs. Arrogant	.337***	.337	.340***	8.220
Df	$F_{(4,539)}$		$F_{(4,537)}$	
F	293.845***		170.107***	
R^2	.686		.559	

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

5   Discussion

Widely used in advertising and marketing strategies, the most successful celebrity endorsers are seen as attractive, familiar, and experts, but more importantly, trustworthy and likeable (Atkin and Block, 1983). However, few studies have looked at celebrity personality traits and examined what characteristics of the celebrity stand out in consumer's perception of credibility. The current study contributes to the celebrity endorser effects literature by comparing the relative influence of celebrity physical attractiveness and celebrity character on perceived trustworthiness and expertise, as well as examining how celebrity philanthropy affect these perceptions.

In a nutshell, the study findings show that perceived philanthropy, attitude towards the celebrity, physical attractiveness, and character traits, were all

significant predictors of perceived trustworthiness and perceived expertise. Favorable attitude towards the celebrity and physical attractiveness increase the celebrity's perceived trustworthiness and expertise. This result is consistent with advertiser's selection of endorser selection decisions. Advertisers often use physical attractiveness and favorability as the most critical criteria to choose their product endorser.

However, according to our study results, celebrity character traits are more important than the physical attractiveness in predicting trustworthiness and expertise. This finding suggests that advertisers should consider more of the character traits of the celebrity than his or her physical beauty. The results in Table 3 detailed that celebrity character traits such as down to earth, caring explained more variance of celebrity credibility than being wise, and socially responsible. Thus advertisers should take cautions when they use celebrity endorsers perceived as arrogant and uncaring in order to gain credibility. The findings also indicate that perceived philanthropy help to increase celebrity's trustworthiness and expertise. Celebrities could increase perceived credibility by involving in charity, philanthropy or social marketing campaigns.

The possible limitation of this study is that we only used four female celebrities to test celebrity credibility and did not use fictitious celebrities to increase external validity, thus prior attitude toward the celebrity may influence the results of the study. Future study can use a wider variety of real celebrities, or use fictitious celebrities with certain scenarios. This study also only looked at celebrity good behavior, thus further investigation could include celebrity bad behavior. Future research could also examine other outcomes variables of celebrity endorser effect, such as ad attitudes, brand image, and purchase intention.

6   References

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