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The vampire effect: When do celebrity endorsers harm brand recall?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

First received on July 26, 2012 and was under review for 9½ months

Available online 13 January 2015

Area Editor: Aric Rindfleisch

Keywords:

Celebrity endorsement

Brand recall

Brand management

Advertising effectiveness

ABSTRACT

Although many brand managers favor the use of celebrities in advertisements, others worry that celebrities overshadow the brand and thus impair brand recall. Practitioners refer to this overshadowing as the *vampire effect*, defined as a decrease in brand recall for an advertising stimulus that features a celebrity endorser versus the same stimulus with an unknown but equally attractive endorser. Because there is no agreement about whether this overshadowing really exists, this research analyzes the existence of the vampire effect and its moderators in a series of experiments with a total of 4,970 respondents. The results provide important insights into how to avoid the vampire effect by creating appropriate conditions, such as high endorser–brand congruence or a strong cognitive link between the celebrity and the brand. Surprisingly, brand familiarity does not significantly moderate the effect.

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1. Introduction

Well-known celebrities appear frequently in marketing communications to facilitate brand and ad differentiation in cluttered media environments (Atkin & Block, 1983; Erdogan & Baker, 2000; McCracken, 1989; Patel, 2009). A celebrity is a publicly known individual who uses her or his recognition in favor of a product by being depicted with it in an advertisement (McCracken, 1989). These days, this also encompasses individuals who gained their recognition for example from social media sources or reality TV shows. Approximately 20% to 25% of advertisements in general feature some famous person as an endorser (Sliburyte, 2009). Especially in the past decade, the use of celebrity endorsers has strongly increased (White, Goddard, & Wilbur, 2009); combined worldwide spending on corporate sponsorships and endorsements reportedly amount to \$50 billion (Crutchfield, 2010). Such enormous investments benefit the company only if they translate into favorable brand recall, compared with a similar advertisement that features an unknown endorser.

Many brand managers appear convinced of the effectiveness of celebrity advertisements, yet others voice concerns about the appropriate returns on investments of celebrities (e.g., Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995; Erdogan & Baker, 2000; Erdogan, Baker, & Tagg, 2001). At least in some conditions, celebrities even might overshadow the advertised brand, such that consumers remember only the celebrity, not the brand (Belch & Belch, 2008; Rossiter & Percy, 1987). Practitioners refer to this overshadowing as the *vampire effect*³ of celebrity endorsers; as Evans (1988, p. 35) notes, in predicting that such overshadowing is particularly prominent in the absence of any apparent connection between the celebrity and the advertised brand, “the use of celebrities, if they don’t have a distinct and specific relationship to the product they are advertising, tends to produce the ‘vampire effect’: they suck the lifeblood of the product dry; the audience remembers the celebrity but not the product.”

However, there is no agreement about whether this overshadowing effect exists and what factors might moderate it. To date, no scholarly, empirical research has investigated either the existence or the moderators of the vampire effect. Accordingly, we begin by defining the vampire effect, as the decrease in brand recall in an advertisement for an advertising stimulus with a celebrity endorser compared with the brand recall prompted by the same advertising stimulus with an unknown but equally attractive endorser.

³ This term stems from a practitioner-oriented perspective. In the literature, other terms like “overshadowing effect” are sometimes used interchangeably.

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Brand recall achieved through advertising is a critical prerequisite for marketing success, because consumers' brand recall constitutes a necessary precondition of brand equity (Keller, 1993). For example, greater brand recall increases the likelihood that the brand becomes part of a consumer's consideration set (Nedungadi, 1990); in low involvement conditions, it also serves as a heuristic for purchase decisions (Jacoby, Syzabillo, & Busato-Schach, 1977; Park & Lessig, 1981; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Recall leads to brand image generation, that is, the emergence of a set of associations with the brand that require a cognitive node in memory to which they can attach, such as the brand's name (Keller, 1993). Considering how many firms trust and invest in celebrity advertising, it is pertinent to analyze whether overshadowing effects are relevant in this context, as well as whether any conditions might help managers to avoid such a vampire effect. To date, we know virtually nothing of context-specific potential moderators of the vampire effect, such as congruence between the endorser and the brand.

From a managerial point of view, it is of particular importance to know, whether the vampire effect is a real threat, and if it is, how the effect can be avoided. This research contributes to the literature in that it tests for the first time the existence of the vampire effect and its moderators. In a series of experiments with a total of 4,970 respondents, we confirm the existence of the vampire effect across different brands, celebrities, study designs, and methodologies. In addition, we show ways on how managers can decrease or eliminate the vampire effect. A potentially powerful option to avoid the effect is the selection of the endorser, which determines the brand–endorser relationship. Accordingly, we focus on two dimensions of the brand–endorser relationship, namely, the celebrity–brand congruence and the cognitive link between the celebrity and the brand. From a theoretical and managerial perspective, brand familiarity seems also to be a potential moderator of the vampire effect since in celebrity advertisement two stimuli compete for consumers' attention and greater familiarity should shift processing of advertising elements from less to more familiar stimuli (Craik & Lockhart, 1972).

Our empirical results show that high endorser–brand congruence as well as a strong cognitive link between the celebrity and the brand can indeed avoid the vampire effect. However, in contrast with our expectations, brand familiarity has no significant effect on the occurrence of the vampire effect.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

A few studies in the celebrity endorsement domain explicitly focus on brand recall effects and thus have laid the basis for our investigation of the vampire effect. There is one stream of research that compares the effectiveness of celebrity endorsers to non-celebrity advertising. Friedman and Friedman (1979) and Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann (1983) compare the effectiveness of different types of endorsers (celebrities, experts, and typical customers) and show that celebrities improve brand recall compared with groups of typical, average-looking customers or experts. While these studies provide important insights, they do not focus on analyzing the attractiveness of the endorser. Because attractiveness has a strong positive impact on brand recall (Kahle & Homer, 1985), it is not clear whether the higher recall values for celebrities were due to their celebrity status or their higher attractiveness. Mehta (1994) finds evidence that consumers who view a commercial featuring a celebrity mention more endorser-related responses in a thought-listing procedure than consumers viewing a commercial with an unknown model. In addition, the use of celebrity and non-celebrity endorsers does not produce significant effects on brand attitude, commercial attitude, or buying intention (Mehta, 1994). Tanner and Maeng (2012) compare familiar and unfamiliar faces of endorsers, discovering that facial familiarity increases perceptions of trustworthiness. Using morphing software that produces combinations of famous

and unfamiliar faces, they find that implicit recognition is sufficient to prompt consumers' automatic valence judgments of a celebrity.

Another stream of research provides important results with regard to celebrity advertising without focusing on a comparison to non-celebrities. Misra and Beatty (1990) find evidence that brand recall increases with greater fit between the celebrity and the brand, which suggests that the brand–endorser relationship could be an important moderator of the vampire effect. This result is an important indication for further investigating the role of fit as a potential moderator. Constanzo and Goodnight (2005) asked students to recall brand names by cuing them with different celebrity faces. They found that a celebrity recognized in a magazine advertisement did not increase consumer recall of the brand endorsed by the celebrity for both professional athlete celebrities and other entertainment celebrities who are not professional athletes.

Overall, advertising research to date has laid an important basis, but not yet addressed the vampire effect that celebrity endorsers compared to unknown advertising models might hurt rather than help brand memory. Specifically, prior research has not yet examined whether celebrity endorsers hurt brand memory and which factors might moderate this negative relationship, if it exists. The present research addresses these questions.

2.1. Existence of the vampire effect

The overshadowing of brand-related information by a celebrity endorser (i.e., vampire effect) can be explained by the accessibility–diagnosticity framework (Feldman & Lynch, 1988). It suggests whether consumers use a piece of information in their opinion making depends on (a) the accessibility and (b) the diagnosticity (i.e., usefulness) of this piece of information compared to the accessibility and diagnosticity of other pieces of information that are also available. Because a celebrity endorser is more familiar than an unknown one, celebrities should be more accessible and more diagnostic in evaluating an advertisement and, therefore, should overshadow the recall of a brand more than an unknown endorser. For instance, a well-known celebrity might activate certain associations in consumers' memories, whereas an unknown endorser cannot, because he or she invokes no cognitive schema (Bruce & Young, 1986; Misra & Beatty, 1990). Likewise, perceptual processing theory argues that stimulus recall relates positively to the extent of cognitive processing and negatively to the processing of competing stimuli (Massaro, 1970). In line with this theoretical reasoning, prior empirical research has shown that familiar stimuli tend to be more accessible and get processed faster and more extensively than less accessible stimuli (Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Feldman & Lynch, 1988). For instance, in a visual search task, Devue, Van der Stigchel, Brédart, and Theeuwes (2009) find that respondents look at highly familiar persons for a longer time than they do at less familiar persons. Thus, assuming consistent endorser attractiveness (see the introduction of chapter 2 above), we predict that when an advertisement features a well-known celebrity, other stimuli receive less cognitive processing than they would in an advertisement with an unknown endorser. That is,

H1. Recall of the brand is lower when the advertisement contains a celebrity endorser than when it contains an equally attractive but unknown endorser.

In addition to demonstrating a vampire effect, we aim to provide insights into managerially relevant moderators, from both brand and brand–endorser relationship perspectives. Thus, we focus on brand-related characteristics (i.e., brand familiarity) and on the link between the brand and the endorser (i.e., congruence and cognitive link) and provide advice on how to design a celebrity campaign. With congruence and cognitive link, we analyze two distinct facets of the connection between the brand and the endorser. High congruence can be achieved through the selection of a fitting celebrity, whereas a strong cognitive

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