



Print advertising: Celebrity presenters

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ABSTRACT

This study validates Rossiter and Percy's (1987) hook theory of presenter characteristics, for celebrity presenters. Firstly, by employing a product-alone control group, the study demonstrates that some celebrity-product pairings have a good fit and can persuade whereas others have no effect or represent such an obviously poor fit that they dissuade consumers from buying the product. Secondly, the study suggests that good fit, and thus persuasion, for celebrity presenters, depends on the audience immediately perceiving that the celebrity is an expert user of the product (for all products) and is a positive role model (for high-risk products). On the other hand, the study reveals that failure of any of four of the celebrity's characteristics causes dissuasion by celebrity presenters; these failures include lack of high visibility (i.e., not widely well-known), perceived inexpertness as a user of the product (a strong negative hook that is probably the reason for the poor fit perception), lack of trust (though this is a weak dissuasive factor for celebrities) and, paradoxically, the celebrity being too likable (for low-risk products). Thirdly, the hook(s) conceptualization of presenter characteristics is superior to the conventional linear conceptualization in that a hook-scored regression model accounted for the same amount of variance in persuasion–dissuasion as did the linear model (adjusted R^2 s of 41% vs. 43%) despite the hook model's handicap of at least one-third lower possible R^2 due to trichotomization of 7-point ratings into positive, neutral, and negative hooks.

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1. Introduction

A major strategic decision in advertising is whether or not to use a presenter. Executionally, thereafter, the decision evolves into what characteristics the presenter should have to maximally influence persuasion. Rossiter and Percy (1987) propose a hook theory of the way presenters' characteristics operate; in contrast with all other theories of presenter effects, hook theory postulates that presenters' characteristics work in a positive threshold manner (and sometimes in a negative threshold manner) rather than in a positive, linear manner.

Rossiter and Percy's (1987) VisCAP model of presenter characteristics incorporates hook theory. The theory's characteristics are visibility (widely well-known, necessary for celebrity presenters and creatable via advertising for "real people" presenters and animated characters), credibility (expertise and trustworthiness), attraction (likability and role-model identification), and power (for coercive persuasion that rarely applies except in public service advertising). Some presenter theories postulate that physical (facial) attractiveness is also persuasive but this is merely because it heightens perceived

credibility (Patzer, 1985). Thus, five specific presenter characteristics are relevant for advertising: visibility or well-knownness, expertise, trustworthiness, likability, and role-model identification.

The present study compares hook theory with the conventional linear effects theory of presenter characteristics in ads. This comparison is important for theory and for practice. The conventional academic theory of presenter (or source) effects implies a "more the better" model of the presenter's characteristics in which any positive degree of perceived possession of the characteristic is thought to be effective. Hook theory, on the other hand, proposes a "threshold" model in which the presenter has to be perceived as *very high* on relevant characteristics if they are to influence persuasion. This "very high" perception has to be immediate and thus can be appropriately described as constituting a "hook." For example, if trustworthiness is a relevant characteristic, which it undoubtedly is for "real people" presenters (see especially the CESLIP model, an extension of the earlier VisCAP model, in Rossiter and Bellman, 2005, pp. 177–187), then the presenter must be perceived, immediately, as very highly trustworthy, otherwise the endorsement will not work. "Real people" presenters are hired mainly because they have a positive trustworthiness hook, which gives them high source credibility despite their often-low expertise. Another instance of a necessary hook is a presenter endorsing high-risk "transformational" consumer products such as expensive fashion wear or luxury holiday resorts; target-audience consumers must perceive a very high degree of role-model

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identification with the presenter before they will commit to taking action.

Functionally, hooks are “thresholds,” above which persuasion is maximally influenced and below which the characteristic either does not have any effect on persuasion or, if *very low*, has a *negative* effect (i.e., dissuasion). Dissuasion, first documented in advertising pretests of celebrity presenters by the [McCollum–Spielman research company \(1980\)](#), is the outcome when a poorly chosen presenter hurts sales of a new product and results in fewer people buying it than if it had been launched on its own. Only the (positive and negative) hook theory of presenter characteristics postulates both persuasion and dissuasion.

In academic advertising research, failure to acknowledge threshold functions in the way variables operate results in many questionable and possibly misleading findings when the independent variables are measured in the usual continuous manner (typically with “7-point scales”). Using 7-point scales, many academic researchers have found what appears to be a positive linear relationship between, say, the presenter’s perceived expertise and brand purchase intention (e.g., [Ohanian, 1991](#)). However, the significant positive correlation could be the result of the often small proportion of consumers who perceive the presenter to have very high expertise (say 6 or 7 on the 7-point scale) and who are the only individuals persuaded (and thus they have scores of 6 or 7 on the 7-point purchase intention scale). That is, both variables could operate in a threshold manner but this is obscured in a linear correlation or linear regression coefficient. The difference in interpretation between a threshold model and a linear model has important implications for managers. From the linear correlation results, managers might conclude, as most academics would, that *any* degree of perceived expertise is sufficient to guarantee persuasion. This is especially likely to be the erroneous conclusion drawn when persuasion is reported as a group mean score (e.g., 4.5 on a 1-to-7 uni-polar purchase intention scale). As [Rossiter and Percy \(1987\)](#) point out, mean purchase intention scores are uninformative about the proportion of consumers who were actually persuaded (other than allowing the trivial statistical inference that the higher the mean, the more people will have scored above it and therefore fall into the “high” persuaded category). Group mean persuasion scores, common in academic research, do not measure persuasion because they are the confounded mixture of the incidence of people persuaded and the degree to which each is persuaded.

Most advertising managers do not actually measure the characteristics that potential presenters possess when selecting a presenter for a campaign. Instead, most managers make an intuitive judgment based on other people’s (such as the imagined target audience’s) likely extreme perceptions. For example, when managers choose a presenter because he or she is a role model for the target audience, such as Britney Spears may be for young women’s casual clothing or young women’s cosmetic products, they base this judgment on the intuition that most young women in the target audience age group identify very highly with the presenter. In doing so, managers are implicitly using a threshold – or hook – model.

The present study tests the hook conceptualization vs. the linear conceptualization of presenter characteristics, comparing the relative ability of the alternative conceptualizations to explain persuasion by comparing (adjusted) R^2 s. The experiment is based on presenter-product combinations in the merely associational format favored in contemporary print advertisements featuring a celebrity. In the experiment, each celebrity is paired with a high-fit product and a low-fit product to provide sufficient variance on the hypothesized essential celebrity presenter characteristic of perceived user expertise. User expertise is product-category specific and thus it varies within presenter for different products (hence high-fit vs. low-fit products). The other characteristics – visibility, trustworthiness, likability, role-model identification, and (though not used here) power – are fixed for the individual presenter and do not change with the particular product that the presenter is endorsing.

2. Hypotheses

H1. The hook formulation of presenter’s characteristics predicts persuasion equally as well as the linear formulation.

The hypothesis of equal prediction is made because although the hook formulation is expected to be more predictive, hook scoring of the presenter’s characteristics is trichotomous for well-knownness and expertise and is effectively dichotomous, due to minimal incidence of negative hooks, for trust, likability, and role-model identification and these truncations substantially reduce the variance available for prediction. Simulations by [Cohen \(1983\)](#) suggest that dichotomization reduces the bivariate R^2 by 35% if the predictor variable is dichotomized at the median, and [Irwin and McClelland \(2003\)](#) estimate a 42% reduction in R^2 if the dichotomization is at the 70th percentile, which is where positive hooks (6+/7) were split in the present study. The reduction in multivariate variance accounted for (by R^2) is even worse with multiple predictors that are dichotomized or trichotomized. A very conservative estimate, therefore, would be a one-third (33%) loss in the possibly attainable R^2 due to hook scoring of the predictors. Consequently, equal prediction by R^2 (adjusted for the number of predictors) would demonstrate *superior* theoretical performance of the hook model given its statistical handicap.

The superiority of the hook conceptualization of presenter’s characteristics should, however, be manifest in another way. The hook conceptualization allows both positive and negative hooks for each characteristic and expects them to be especially prevalent for two of the characteristics, perceived expertise and role-model identification.

Thus, consumers who perceive that the celebrity has very low expertise as a user of the product should be dissuaded rather than unaffected (see H_3). Similarly, consumers who report very low identification with the celebrity may see him or her as a “negative” role model and thus should be dissuaded, especially if the celebrity is endorsing a high-risk product (see H_6). In the conventional linear conceptualization of presenter characteristics, dissuasion effects cannot be captured because what is revealed is either a nonsignificant effect (i.e., no persuasion) or a significant positive effect (i.e., persuasion).

The remaining hypotheses make predictions of which particular presenter characteristics will be significant predictors of persuasion. As noted, celebrity presenters were chosen for the experiment. [Rossiter and Bellman’s \(2005\)](#) CESLIP model update of [Rossiter and Percy’s \(1987, 1997\)](#) VisCAP model of presenter characteristics hypothesizes the following, for celebrities:

H2. Visibility is a positive and negative predictor. That is, a positive well-knownness hook is persuasive whereas a negative hook whereby the celebrity is perceived as little known will be dissuasive.

H3. Expertise is a positive and negative predictor. Indeed, the expectation is that expertise is the strongest predictor because each celebrity endorses both a high-fit product and low-fit product and perceived fit for celebrities is primarily based on perceived expertise as a user of the product category.

H4. Trustworthiness is not a positive predictor. All celebrities are expected to be granted only moderate, not high, trustworthiness as “obviously paid” spokespersons (whereas, for “real people” presenters, high trustworthiness is essential).

H5. Likability is a positive predictor if the presenter is endorsing a low-risk product. Again, too few celebrities are expected to be very disliked to make this a negative predictor.

H6. Role-model identification is a positive and negative predictor if the presenter is endorsing a high-risk product.

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