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When Celebrity Endorsers Act in Their Fictional Stage Characters: the Impact of Congruent and Non-Congruent Media Contexts on Advertising Effects

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In advertising, film or TV celebrities can give endorsements in character – i.e. playing fictional roles in films and also in commercials. By means of an experimental study, we contribute to the research on media context effects on advertising effectiveness. We argue that an appropriate fictional media context –which creates the stage persona of an endorser– provides information on fictional character traits that consumers may use to evaluate endorsers in character. We show this to affect endorser evaluation and arousal (measured by means of electrodermal registration) evoked by the ad. In our study, we compare one media context including an actor as a character congruent to the in-character advert, with a media context including an actor in another role (non-congruency).

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When Celebrity Endorsers Act as their Fictional Stage Characters: The Impact of Congruent and Non-Congruent Media Contexts on Advertising Effects

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When consumers recollect media personalities familiar from television or movies, they think of them either as an actor or as the fictional character played by this actor. For instance, when consumers watch TV and Daniel Craig (the current James Bond actor) appears on the screen, they can perceive him as “this is Daniel Craig” or “this is James Bond.” Celebrities known from film and TV can serve as product endorsers while remaining in their fictional persona—they can give endorsements *in character*. According to McCracken (1989, 312), a celebrity known from fictional media is a composite of his or her fictional roles. His/her image therefore depends not on the actor’s qualities as a private person or celebrity, but on the qualities created in the stage persona in TV series and films. The fictional media provide information on fictional character traits that consumers may use to evaluate endorsers in-character. In this research, we consider whether an appropriate media context—that creates the stage persona of an endorser—compared with an inappropriate media context for an in-character endorsement, can enhance the evaluation of ad characteristics and the evaluation of the endorser’s perceived expertise and trustworthiness.

Findings from cultivation theory, children’s perception of advertising spokespersons, and parasocial theory as well as anecdotal evidence would lead us to believe that media images persist beyond the program itself and actually influence viewers’ real-world beliefs. Furthermore, research on media context effects has found that “consumers’ reactions to advertising are affected by their response to the program or print material in which the advertising is inserted” (Wang and Calder 2006, 151) and several findings on media context effects support the hypothesis that congruency between the program and the advertisement leads to greater advertising effectiveness. We add to the research on media context effects on advertising with a study which links celebrity endorsers to concrete fictional program content, i.e. to fictional characters. When program and advertising overlap—for example, when the advert features a character in a scene similar to one in the film or TV series—the advert represents a continuation of the film or TV series, and may evoke a more positive response due to viewers’ familiarity with the character and the advertising story.

Accessibility may also be the reason why information about fictional characters persists over time. When considering fictional worlds, the term *celebrity* is taken to mean the fictional characters rather than actors themselves (Stern, Russell, and Russell 2007). Here, we have to differentiate between two cases. In a long-term perspective, consumers are able to build up a parasocial relationship with a fictional character and come to regard this character as a friend or counsellor. Thus, fans might also rely on the advice of the person playing this character if they see him or her advertising a specific product. However, when we—as in our study—consider a rather short-term persistence of character images and consider media context effects, even if there is no close relationship between the recipient and the fictional character, a film character presented in a program might *prime* viewers, so that they evaluate this endorser as more competent and trustworthy. In our study, we assume that consumers who watch a TV series will consciously or unconsciously transfer the meanings of the fictional character to an advertisement, if the same actor appears as a celebrity endorser

(congruent context). This is assumed to result in more positive evaluations of the endorser than in a media context, where this actor has not been presented in a preceding film, so that no knowledge on character traits is available (incongruent context).

However, conscious reactions, such as an evaluation of a spokesperson or of ad characteristics, may be subject to contrast effects (Stapel, Koomen, and van der Pligt 1996) or source monitoring effects (Johnson 2002). These phenomena refer to consumers’ ability to identify the sources of potential influence and “correct” their memories. We therefore decided to measure consumer responses simultaneously with the perception of the stimuli. In this respect, we are interested in the positive responses to the advertisement in different media contexts and therefore used a measurement process that was also able to capture unconscious processes in relation to *approach* behaviour. In particular, we examined phasic arousal, measured by electrodermal registration (EDR), as evoked by the advertisements presented in a congruent versus incongruent media context. With respect to this approach response, we assume that congruent information attracts more attention and is processed more effectively than incongruent information, because the subject of information is already in people’s minds prior to the ad exposure.

All in all, we expect a congruent media context to have a positive effect on three things: the phasic arousal reactions to the advertisement, the evaluation of the endorser, and the evaluation of ad characteristics. In this paper, the term *congruency* is used to refer to the appearance of an actor as a celebrity endorser in an advertisement in a role that matches the presentation of this actor in a fictional program (i.e. the media context). *Non-congruency* refers to a situation in which the actor as a celebrity endorser is not immediately preceded by a program in which he or she features. These expectations can be expressed in the following hypotheses:

- H1: The presentation of an endorser in a congruent fictional media context will result in higher phasic arousal reactions to the advertisement than a presentation of the endorser in a non-congruent fictional media context.
- H2: The presentation of an endorser in a congruent fictional media context will result in a more positive evaluation of this endorser than a presentation of the endorser in a non-congruent fictional media context.
- H3: The presentation of an advertisement in a congruent fictional media context will result in a more positive evaluation of ad characteristics than a presentation of the advertisement in a non-congruent fictional media context.

To test these hypotheses, an experiment was conducted consisting of two examples (“doctor” show, “undercover agent” show) based on actual TV sequences. The studies compared viewers’ responses to a celebrity endorser in a TV advertisement shown in a congruent versus in a non-congruent media context. The results of the two examples show that an endorser presented in a media context that is congruent to the role presented in the advertisement leads to higher phasic arousal reactions than an endorser presented in a non-congruent context (H1). Furthermore, the endorser’s

expertise and trustworthiness was evaluated as more positive in the congruent media context condition (H2). The study provides a further indication that there are effects due to fictional factors: the enhanced evaluation of the advert with respect to the variable “not irritating” indicates that viewers understand the advertisement story better with the help of the associated film or TV series (H3). We also discuss possible avenues for future research.

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