Match-Up Effects Happen For a Reason: the Impact of Activating Persuasion Knowledge on Endorser Effectiveness

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
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The use of endorsers is a common ad tactic. Research on endorser effectiveness has put forward the match-up hypothesis which states that the message conveyed by the image of the endorser and of the product should converge (Kahle and Homer 1985). However, the results of empirical studies testing this hypothesis are inconclusive. Therefore, researchers started to investigate moderators.

For example, Kang and Herr (2006) recently showed that the depth of processing and/or the sensitivity to source biases moderate the impact of endorsers on persuasion. More specifically, in case of heuristic processing and/or in case of low sensitivity to source biases, endorsers merely serve as cues, whereas in case of in-depth processing and/or in case of high sensitivity to source biases, the link between the source and the product becomes important and match-up effects on persuasion arise.

Although prior studies already tested moderators related to the depth and the type of processing, they did not examine the relative weight of each antecedent in the formation of match-up effects yet. The contribution the current research would like to make is to integrate the different prior perspectives and further clarify the conditions in which match-up effects can be expected and why in particular.

Therefore, we turn to the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) of Friestad and Wright (1994). Research built on the PKM shows that the depth of processing only explains skeptical responses to persuasion to the extent that it also leads to a more intense activation of PK (Campbell and Kirmani 2000). Based hereupon, we predict that the activation of PK, rather than the mere depth of processing, drives the perception of the level of product-endorser fit, and as such, determines the persuasiveness of product-endorser combinations used in marketing campaigns.

Additionally, we also look into the role of specific perceptions of tactic appropriateness next to the more general perceptions of persuasive intent (i.e., activation of PK), as the results of Kang and Herr (2006) also indicate that a product-endorser match generally leads to highly favorable attitudes, even after an endorser bias is primed. This is counter-intuitive given the assumption that the activation of PK leads to resistance to persuasion and thus to unfavorable responses (Campbell and Kirmani 2000). However, concerning the latter, Wei, Fischer, and Main (2008) showed that the activation of PK only had a strong negative impact on evaluations when respondents perceived the stimulus to be inappropriate. So, perceptions of tactic appropriateness also seem to determine consumer responses to persuasion attempts.

Therefore, we set up an experiment with a 2 (level of product-endorser fit: non-fit vs. fit) x 2 (level of PK activation: high vs. low) x 2 (depth of processing: high vs. low) between-subjects design in the context of promoting foods as healthy by means of healthy-looking endorsers. We also measured perceived product-endorser fit and perceived appropriateness of the persuasion attempt to test whether they mediate match-up effects on persuasion.

To investigate the impact of depth of processing, we implemented a distraction task (Williams, Fitzsimons, and Block 2004). To manipulate the level of PK activation, we used TV ads versus product placements (Balasubramanian, Karrh, and Patwardhan 2006). Within these formats, real-life stimuli showing either congruent (i.e., healthy model and healthy food) or incongruent product-endorser (i.e., healthy model and unhealthy food) combinations were sought. To prevent confounds, we set out standards for content and execution style and selected several (i.e., four) stimuli per condition (Jackson, O’ Keeffe, and Jacobs 1988). An online pretest with our target group (i.e., female respondents between 18 and 26 years old) showed that the selected stimuli contained the intended level of product-endorser fit.

In the main experiment, run in a lab, 252 young females participated. In two seemingly independent studies, we first randomly exposed them to one of the 16 stimuli, whether or not accompanied by the distraction task, and then asked stimulus related questions (attitudes and attention). A second study with filler and target questions concerning product considerations and purchase intentions followed. Finally, we incorporated questions about mediators, manipulation checks and covariates.

As predicted, we found that in a clear persuasive context, the difference between a product-endorser fit and a non-fit was clearly perceived, which led to a significantly more favorable attitude towards the congruent versus the incongruent stimulus and towards the accompanying endorser. Moreover, the congruent combinations were perceived to be more appropriate than the incongruent ones, also partially explaining the match-up effects. In a context in which the persuasive intent was less obvious, there was no significant difference in perception of product-endorser fit. As a result, no match-up effects were found.

As such, we demonstrated the usefulness of the PKM for the endorsement domain (Friestad and Wright 1994). Based on this model, we were able to clarify the type of processing that leads to the perception of a match versus a mismatch between products and endorsers, and as such, extend prior research (Kang and Herr 2006). Further research could study whether the perception of product-endorser fit and the perceived appropriateness of a product-endorser combination are independent concepts and examine their relative contribution.

Despite the contributions of this study, we did not find the same results on product related responses as on ad related responses. However, prior research has encountered the same issue (Till and Busler 2000). Explanations could be found in the differences between these dependent measures, as, for example, they tend to result from a different type of processing (i.e., rational vs. emotional, conscious vs. unconscious).

The current study also suffers from the limitation that we used ads versus product placements to manipulate PK activation. We controlled for several potential confounds (e.g., type of creative strategy: transformational and positive), but from a theoretical point of view, this was not the cleanest manipulation. Further research could, therefore, manipulate PK activation in a more conservative way. However, using several real-life stimuli has the advantage that they enhance the external validity of the results.
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