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## **The Persistence of Fictional Character Images Beyond the Program and Their Use in Celebrity Endorsement: Experimental Results From a Media Context Perspective**

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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 two experimental studies, 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 evoked by the ad. In Study 1, we compare one media context including an actor as a character congruent to the in-character advert, with a media context including another actor in another role (incongruence). In Study 2, in both media context conditions, the same actor was presented, but in a role that matches, versus one that does not match the in-character advert.

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# The Persistence of Fictional Character Images beyond the Program and their Use in Celebrity Endorsement: Experimental Results from a Media Context Perspective

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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 give endorsements *in character*—i.e. playing fictional roles in films and also in commercials. A celebrity known from fictional media is a composite of his or her fictional roles (McCracken 1989, 312). 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 paper, 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.

Several research findings on media-context effects support the hypothesis that congruency between the program and the advertisement with respect to characteristics like mood, feelings, involvement, humor, etc. leads to greater advertising effectiveness. A theory that is frequently cited as a possible reason for these effects is the congruency/accessibility hypothesis (Goldberg and Gorn 1987). A subsequent stimulus that is congruent to the media context is easier to perceive and process. This ease of processing is associated with a positive affect (Winkielman and Cacioppo 2001). The thematic congruency between program and advertisement is of major relevance in this paper, since an endorsement in character in the context of an appropriate program, forms a thematic connection between program and advert. Therefore, this paper deals with the issue of which fictional media context (thematically congruent or incongruent) represents the best placement for an in-character commercial. In order to address this issue, we conducted two studies analyzing different media context conditions. In Study 1, we compared one media context including an actor as a character congruent to the in-character advert, with another media context including another actor in another role (incongruence). In Study 2, in both media context conditions, the same actor was presented, but in a role that matches, versus one that does not match the in-character advert.

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.

H1: The presentation of an in-character endorsement within a congruent fictional media context results in more positively perceived ad characteristics than a presentation of an in-character endorsement in an incongruent fictional media context.

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 counselor. 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 studies—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 first 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). In order to rule out a mere repeated-exposure effect due to the actor and to analyze whether there are actually effects of the persistence of *fictional character* traits beyond the program, we present a second study, in which we showed the actor in both media contexts conditions, but in different fictional roles. Accordingly, 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 in a role that matches (congruent context), compared with a role that does not match (incongruent context) the preceding media context.

H2: The presentation of an in-character endorsement within a congruent fictional media context results in a more positive evaluation of the endorser’s expertise and trustworthiness than a presentation of the in-character endorsement in an incongruent fictional media 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 Plight 1996) or source monitoring effects (Johnson 2002). These phenomena refer to consumers’ ability to identify the sources of potential influence and “correct” (or even “overcorrect”, Stapel, Koomen, and van der Plight 1996) 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 emotional approach behavior. In particular, we examined phasic arousal, measured by electrodermal registration, 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.

H3: The presentation of an in-character endorsement in a congruent fictional media context results in higher phasic arousal reactions to the advertisement than a presentation of the in-character endorsement in an incongruent fictional media context.

The results of our experimental studies show that an endorser presented in a media context which is thematically congruent to the role presented in the advertisement leads to higher phasic arousal responses. These can be interpreted as more attention in terms of empathic approach responses. This result was consistent in both studies. Furthermore, the endorser's expertise and trustworthiness was evaluated as more positive in a congruent media context across both studies. Thematic congruence was not found to exert a clear affect on ad characteristics, with the exception of the enhanced evaluation of the advert as "easy to understand". This indicates that viewers understand the advertisement story better with the help of the associated film or TV series. Our results have implications for media selection for advertisements including celebrity endorsers known from TV or films. Future research conducted in this area should determine whether these effects are strong enough to impact product evaluations and choice. A further interesting avenue is to analyze whether the congruency between a fictional program and an advert has the potential to undermine evaluations if the associations being primed are negative rather than positive in nature. Level of "transportation" (Green and Brock 2000) into a fictional "world" should be considered in order to further understand the persistence of fictional character images beyond the program.

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