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Physiognomy is the use of facial lineaments and somatic traits to judge mental abilities, characters, and emotional attitudes. Following Lavater's work [Lavater originally published in Germany the Physiognomische Fragmente, zur Befoerdung der Menschenkenntniss und Menschenliebe, (Leipzig & Winterthur, 1775-1778), in four volumes, which were followed by a French edition (Essais sur la Physiognomie, destinee a faire connaitre l'homme et a le faire aimer, Le Haye, 1803), widened with new essays. A further extended version of the same work was published posthumously in France under tow different titles: L'art de connaitre les hommes par la physionomie (Paris, 1806-1809, 1820, 1835) and La Physiognomonie ou l'art de connaitre les hommes d'apres las traits de leur physionomie, leur rapports avec les diverses animaux, leurs penchants, etc. (Paris, 1845). In this article, we have followed the text of the latter in the Italian translation of Francesco Gallo (Fisiognomica, 2nd Edition, Rome: Atanor, 1988). Quotations are made by page and Fragment number.], a review of physiognomical traits is presented and discussed. After these guidelines, a pilot experiment is conducted to test the credibility of endorsers in print ads according to three components: trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. Results support the hypothesis of common interpretations to certain somatic features of anonymous endorsers.

INTRODUCTION

Some years ago there was an ad, picturing the face of President Nixon, whose claim was the following rethorical question: "Would you buy a used car from this man?".

Since the world began to Nixon's years and beyond, people have always considered everything firstly from its appearance, its exteriority, its surface. Who buys a used car from a dealer that looks like a burglar? Who buys a parcel of oranges that seem rotten? Who lets his daughter go out with a date that looks like Meatloaf? People do not judge something relying exclusively on its aspect, but partially they do. From its exteriority, they arrive at its interiority; and this is the essence of physiognomy. "Each insect is acquainted with its friend and its foe; each child loves and fears without knowing the cause, because of physiognomies. (...) There is not a man - the first time he is in company with a stranger - who does not estimate, compare, and judge him according to appearances, even if he has never uttered in his life the word physiognomy. (...) Physiognomy is the guide of our actions." (p.14, Fragment IV).

Although everybody seems to be a naive physiognomist, physiognomy has not always been treated as a science and, especially in the modern age, it has been charged with allegations of prejudice and racism. Despite this ostracism, a hidden physiognomic attitude exists in many literatures, such as theatrical representations or advertising dramatizations, where physiognomy and interpreted roles seem to share common features which go beyond the simple pairings nice-good, ugly-bad. There is, in other words, a semiotics of characters and roles that, even without any coded rule, seems extraordinarily rigid and unambiguous: certain characters do not fit into certain roles, they are not persuasive and, consequently, a certain physiognomy forcibly ties to certain roles. Once this physiognomic attitude is deciphered, it could explain the sense of the origin itself of physiognomy and its universal nature, which is popular and unconscious.

Physiognomy is an ancient discipline and its foundations trace back to centuries ago. Yet, since it has to do with the immediate knowledge of man - his true essence - some of its disclosed rules could be useful also today. In this article, we do not question the validity of physiognomy as a science, rather we shall assess its current validity in providing short-cuts to the maximization of endorsement effectiveness. We shall act as the "chartists" of the stock market, who determine the value of securities only from their trends in prices, without knowing the fundamentals of their underlying companies or even the field they are in. They are not interested to know "why" it happens, but rather "how" it happens.

In this article, we shall provide a review of physiognomical traits and their meanings in terms of character's attributes according to the work of the founder of modern physiognomy, Johann Kaspar Lavater, and we shall apply them in a pilot experiment with physiognomies of endorsers in print ads. Basically, we attempt to answer to the following questions: Have consumers similar perceptions of character's attributes of endorsers from somatic traits? Is it possible to build a semiotic of physiognomic characters which is able to provide short-cuts to the maximization of endorsement effectiveness?

LAVATER'S PHYSIOGNOMY

In the middle of the 18th century, under the influence of the encyclopedic culture, the pietist reverend Johann Kaspar Lavater published the Physiognomische Fragmente (1775-1778), a work in four volumes, which benefited from the collaboration of the major talents of his time, Goethe included. The scope of his work was to rebuild Physiognomy, a very ancient theory that, by assuming a relationship of

interdependence between the character of a person and his exterior aspect, purposed to deduct the psychological characteristics from the observation of his physical and somatic traits.

After Aristotle, also Lavater pursued the idea - not just a western one - of a co-existence of essence and phenomenon. Physiognomy (from the Greek, nature-knowledge) is in fact an inquiry into the law of nature which contends that the essence of a thing exists in its form. Particularly, it maintains that the analysis of the human aspect - its forms and proportions - can reveal the very essence of man: his intellectual capacities, his character, his moral inclinations; in a word, everything he is and everything he can or could be. For every writer of physiognomy, the starting point is the same: since a relationship exists in nature between form and content, appearance and interiority, it can be possible to trace back one from the other, and vice versa. The differences among theorists become evident when we search for a method leading to a classification of signs for defining this relationship.

Physiognomy has always been characterized by an essential theoretical ambivalence, that of being a "quasi-science", a middle way between rationality and divination. Therefore, each time, according to the chosen approach - either a rational or a mystical one - this discipline has been treated, respectively, from a medical-scientific perspective (as, for example, in the sixteenth-century treatise Metoscopia by Gerolamo Cardano, an Italian philosopher and physician who tried to apply the methodological rigor of medicine to physiognomy), or from a magical-religious perspective (which finds its roots in popular beliefs and superstitions, as in the late sixteenth-century famous essay, Della Fisiognomica dell'Uomo by Giambattista Della Porta, who presented caricatures of human faces which resembled various animal profiles, with the aim to compare them on the basis of their psychic characters).

In Lavater's physiognomy, the scientific perspective prevails. Lavater claims that, even though physiognomy is "immediate cognizance of man" - true intuitive knowledge, in so far as it is unaccountable as everything which results from revelation and inspiration - yet, it can be reduced to a certain degree under specific rules. Physiognomy can become a science like those sciences which are not purely mathematical - such as theology, medicine, etc. - and a forerunner of psychology - which Lavater defines as "the doctrine of the perfection of the human body in a healthy status" (p.51, Fragment VIII). He traces a whole series of mediations and rules which should raise physiognomy to a certain level of reliability and predictability which is peculiar to science. He believes in the existence of a physiognomical semiotics, founded on the nature and the structure of bodies, and warns: "Leave our science if you believe that the organic works of nature were made as an Arlequin dress! Not even the skin of a flea was made by chance" (p.69, Fragment XIII). Lavater's physiognomy has specific norms that can be taught and learned, explained, transmitted, and perceived. But, as in all the other sciences, on various topics it leaves much space to interpretation, feelings, and intuition, giving a significant weight to the intrinsic qualities of the experimenter.

THE PHYSIOGNOMIC DICHOTOMIES

Lavater does not explain physiognomy trait by trait: his work lacks in the continuity of a discursive thought. Readers must rather draw their alphabet from his multiple examples, taking the common features and their interpretations from his fragmentary, aphoristic descriptions. As a matter of fact, Lavater calls his Chapters, "Fragments", which remain the products of his intuition, as autonomous islands, separated and compoundable in jumbled confusion. Even the interpretation of somatic traits seems mutable and diverse; there are never definite signs of a character - or, rather, if we look carefully, they are not so. Basically, inside his classification, he applied the method of dichotomic division (the same methodology followed by Aristotle in his Historia Animalium), which is built through couples of opposite attributes - the soft v. the hard, the slow v. the fast, the grave v. the acute - and culminates with the juxtaposition par excellence: the male v. the female. In each couple of opposites, there is a positive pole, usually connected with the idea of courage (andreia), and a negative pole associated, on the other hand, with the idea of cowardice (deilia).

Beauty v. Ugliness

Another important dichotomy has major implications in our use of physiognomic rules in the advertising field, particularly to predict the suitability of an attractive endorser to promote a specific product and, in turn, to assess the efficacy of that particular ad. The dichotomy beauty v. ugliness goes beyond the boundaries of the extremely superficial idea of physical attractiveness commonly conceived and used in advertising. Sometimes, a person who seems clearly ugly is not so to a scientific physiognomer. According to Lavater, beauty - like ugliness - is never defined univocally, because a unique canon to determine beauty or ugliness does not exist. A person's physiognomy is never static: beauty arises from the existence of a certain balance in the ethical events of one's life; ugliness is the product of the lack of this balance. Behind Lavater's position on the problem of beauty, the ethical purpose is clear: virtue makes people beautiful, vice makes even the most beautiful faces hideous and ugly. Consequently, beauty and ugliness in a person are in direct relationship to beauty and ugliness in the moral nature of that person: "What passes in the soul is reflected in the face", Lavater says. "The higher the moral perfection, the higher the beauty; the higher the moral corruption, the higher the ugliness. (...) Virtue makes beauty; vice makes ugliness." (pp.56-58, Fragment IX). [He argues: "How many times, we have said to ourselves: 'She is a beautiful woman, I do not deny it, but I don't like her', or 'but I cannot stand her'. And how many times we have said to ourselves with the same confidence: 'This man is ugly; yet, in spite of his ugliness, he made a good impression on me. I felt that I would have enjoyed his company.' (...) Children, in particular, give the proof of these assertions: lacking as they are in any experience, they stare with their eyes at a face that does not apparently have anything beautiful, not even nice, but that possesses the expression of a great soul; whereas, in the opposite case, they often cry aloud" (pp.58-59, Fragment IX).]

Nature v. Education

To Lavater, moral inclinations as well as lineaments and figure are transmitted to descendants. Schooling, environment, learning and continuous training can change one's nature, yet natural inclinations often return in spite of education and habits. Any change brought to the body cannot completely obscure the original physical conformation which is the mirror of one's natural tendencies. On a face, every recurrent expression leaves a permanent mark at the end. The more a change in expression is repeated, the stronger, the deeper, and the more indelible is its imprint on the soft parts of the face, or even in the bone tissues when it occurs since the early youth.

REVIEW OF PHYSIOGNOMIC TRAITS

Lavater's position is that physiognomy is used by everyone who tries to anticipate the character of a person he faces and to predict his inclinations. People can do this consciously - as the so-called scientific or philosophic physiognomers do - or unconsciously - as people generally do. Lavater maintains that the very first impression always acts as an inspiration, because people are instinctively able to infer the basic information about one's character from specific somatic features. The observer unifies every single clue that comes to his eyes: he considers the whole body - forms, colors, bones, muscles, elasticity, rigidity, and so on. Sight is, therefore, the privileged sense in physiognomy and eyes are the main instrument of the physiognomer.

If advertisers are able to use the alphabet of somatic traits, they can design more effective ads by manipulating the somatic features of endorsers appearing in their commercials. Lavater does not provide an explicit code of the diverse physiognomical traits and their significance, but it is possible to derive it from the plenty of examples he gives in his work. Sometimes, the link between the trait and its meaning in terms of character's attributes is explicitly exposed; sometimes, it is not completely consequential or direct. In Tables 1-9, we present a review of facial traits which could be directly related to a specific attribute of a character. They are divided into three groups:

negative traits, which anticipate detrimental aspects of the character; positive traits, which are the opposite; and interlocutory traits, that are related to the character's attributes which can be judged differently according to situations.

In his book, Lavater quotes other authors of physiognomy, among the ancients and his contemporaries. We have used them too, in the following paragraphs, to explain some of the mentioned traits - as they give the flavor of Lavater's research - together with a choice of figures taken from Lavater's original text.

TABLE 1 (/volumes/e02/02120t01.gif)

(/volumes/e02/02120t01.gif)

HEAD SHAPE (/volumes/e02/02120t01.gif)

FIGURE 1 (/volumes/e02/02120f01.gif)

(/volumes/e02/02120f01.gif)

HEAD SHAPES (/volumes/e02/02120f01.gif)

Head Shapes

Particular attention is given to the length and width of one's head, without falling into the excesses of phrenology, that discipline which claimed to predict inclinations and mental faculties through the measurement of human skulls' angles, bumps, and shapes. Lavater does not provide precise or optimal dimensions, measurable with callipers and protractors, but rather he offers general rules which derive from visual observations. The purest head profile to a physiognomer is one which is as large (from the tip of the nose to the hair junction) as it is high (from the top of the head to the point of separation between the chin and the neck). The other two unfavorable cases are presented in Table 1. In Figure 1, Lavater illustrated three extreme cases of head shapes seen by the rear that could be used as yardsticks to judge different characters.

Foreheads

Foreheads assume a particular importance in physiognomy. Lavater recognizes this principle quoting Herder (p.22, Fragment V): "On a forehead light and joy reside; and also melancholy, anxiety, stupidity, ignorance, and perversity. It is the copper plate where the human feelings are carved by the fire". Pure designs, curvatures, and positions - rather than wrinkles and temporary conformations - are their essential features. Three main classes exist: receding (bending backwards) foreheads; perpendicular foreheads; and protruding foreheads. Each of these classes can be further divided according to straight, curved, or broken (double, triple) lines that form their profile. Contours in female foreheads are simpler; those in masculine foreheads are usually longer, straighter, or more receding and contracted, or even edgy. When they are curved, they have wrinkles and are generally split in two sections (see, p.109, Fragment X). Figure 2 represents some cases of forehead which are recalled in Table 2.

It is evident to Lavater that somatic traits are linked together. He once asserted that together with hundreds of circular foreheads, he could not even see one aquiline nose; and on hundreds of squared foreheads, he saw only one with deep and long wrinkles. He could not find any perpendicular foreheads together with a prominently curved inferior part of the face (except for the chin). And he found no gently curved foreheads, not a receding one, when the nose was short and protruding, or deeply sunken in relation to one's profile (see, pp.94-95, Fragment XIII). Lavater has attempted to establish the following physiognomic axiom: every shape made of straight lines is to strength, rigidity, and intelligence as every shape made of curved lines is to weakness, flexibility, and sensuality (cf., p.166, Fragment XXIII).

TABLE 2 (/volumes/e02/02121t02.gif)

(/volumes/e02/02121t02.gif)

FOREHEAD (/volumes/e02/02121t02.gif)

FIGURE 2 (/volumes/e02/02122f02.gif)

(/volumes/e02/02122f02.gif)

FOREHEADS (/volumes/e02/02122f02.gif)

FIGURE 3 (/volumes/e02/02122f03.gif)

(/volumes/e02/02122f03.gif)

FOREHEAD PROFILES AND INDIVIDUAL TEMPERS (/volumes/e02/02122f03.gif)

He distinguishes eight conditions for the existence of a perfectly beautiful forehead which is able to express intelligence and nobility: (a) length equal to that of the nose and of the inferior part of the face; (b) width that is oval or squared in the top; (c) absence of permanent wrinkles, except in moments of meditation, deep sadness, or proper indignation; (d) receding in the top and protruding in the bottom; (e) simple, horizontal orbital frontal; (f) having in the middle, perpendicularly and transversely, a small, imperceptible cavity which separates the forehead in four equal parts; (g) with a lighter color than any other part of the face; (h) with well defined contours. The rationale behind these conditions belongs to the axioms of proportion stated by ancient Greeks. According to them, a harmonious face could be divided into three equal parts and the forehead should be necessarily low and oval in the junction with hair.

From the main wrinkle in the forehead, it is then possible to detect the personal degree of responsiveness of an individual, the so-called individual temper. Ancient philosophers distinguished four individual temperaments, as many as the body elements: the choleric, dominated by the heat; the phlegmatic, dominated by the humidity; the sanguine, dominated by the air; and the melancholic, dominated by the earth. On a forehead, every line that is curved or that forms an oval indicates a temper that is far from being choleric; while, every line that is straight or even broken indicates a much higher ardor (cf., p.143, Fragment XVIII). Figure 3 illustrates how a forehead profile can give an account of these temperaments.

TABLE 3 (/volumes/e02/02123t03.gif)

(/volumes/e02/02123t03.gif)

EYES (/volumes/e02/02123t03.gif)

FIGURE 4 (/volumes/e02/02123f04.gif)

(/volumes/e02/02123f04.gif)

EYES (/volumes/e02/02123f04.gif)

Eyes

Eyes possess an anomalous, constantly changing nature in comparison to the other parts of a face. Their mobility and indecipherability, that make a codification almost impossible, are probably due to their localization on the edge of outside and inside, as if they were an active part of both worlds. "Eyes belong to the soul more than any other organ (...);" says Buffon in his Natural History, "they express the more ardent passions and the more tumultuous emotions (...) as soon as they come out; (...) eyes receive and reveal, at the same time, the light of thought and the heat of passion; they are the sense of soul and the tongue of intelligence" (p.190, Fragment XXIV).

TABLE 4 (/volumes/e02/02124t04.gif)

(/volumes/e02/02124t04.gif)

EYEBROWS (/volumes/e02/02124t04.gif)

FIGURE 5 (/volumes/e02/02124f05.gif)

(/volumes/e02/02124f05.gif)

EYEBROWS (/volumes/e02/02124f05.gif)

Lavater discovers this revealing nature of eyes in some verses of the Bible as well (p.17, Fragment V): "Who keeps his eyes staring is trying to deceive you" (Salomon: XVI, 30). And also: "The fool has always wandering eyes" (Salomon: XVII, 24). In ancient Greece, the form of the eyes in artistic representations of Gods was a decisive element of difference among their statues. Winkelman, in his Art of Greeks, argues that Jupiter, Apollo, and Juno have always big, round eyes to express power and beauty; Venus has small eyes with the inferior eyelid pointing up to express grace and greatness; Pallas has got big eyes but with eyelids down to express virginity and purity. Scipionis Claramontii, in Semiotica Moralis asserts that a retracted gaze, typical of a person that always looks stealthy, comes from cupidity or modesty, when the sight is held by shame or when it is mindful to decency. He argues that "women with these gazes deceive their lovers"! (p.191, Fragment XXIV). Aristotle in his Physiognomica intervenes on the topic by saying that: "Those who have protruding eyes are stupid. And those who explain this trait as a sign of apparent decency are even more stupid"! (p.192, Fragment XXIV).

TABLE 5 (/volumes/e02/02125t05.gif)

(/volumes/e02/02125t05.gif)

NOSE (/volumes/e02/02125t05.gif)

FIGURE 6 (/volumes/e02/02125f06.gif)

(/volumes/e02/02125f06.gif)

FOUR CLASSES OF NOSES (/volumes/e02/02125f06.gif)

Figure 4 supplies some examples of eye shapes without providing the complete array.

Eyebrows

Often eyebrows provide the critical element to judge human characters (cf., p.193, Fragment XXIV). According to Lavater, it is a universal law of nature that, every time eyes are well defined and marked, very near to the eyebrows, eyebrows are quite marked too. This is definite sign of wisdom (cf., p.99, Fragment XIII). It is also difficult to see arched eyebrows in a long-limbed, very thin figure (cf., p.95, Fragment XIII).

To Le Brun, the famous French painter who wrote a treatise on the characters of passions quoted by Lavater, the differentiation among each emotion is visible in the different movements of the eyebrows' arches: "There are two movements that express every wave of passion. These two movements are directly related to two appetites in the sensitive side of the soul: the concupiscence's appetite and the anger's appetite. The movement towards the top of the head expresses all the more ferocious and cruel passions. (...) When eyebrows rise in the middle, the extremities of the mouth rise too, and this elevation expresses pleasant feelings (...). When eyebrows go down in the middle, then the extremities of the mouth go down, and this movement reveals a physical pain. When we laugh, every trait is distorted: the eyebrows go down towards the forehead center making the nose, the mouth and the eyes going down too" (pp.194-195, Fragment XXIV).

TABLE 6 (/volumes/e02/02126t06.gif)

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MOUTH (/volumes/e02/02126t06.gif)

Figure 5 provides a dozen eyebrow types with different degrees of perfection.

Nose

To every physiognomer, the nose is the natural prolongation of the forehead (cf., p.172, Fragment XXIII). Lavater maintains that "the nose is the support of the brain, (...) the foundation on which the entire weight of the facial arch rests" (p.205, Fragment XXV). The nose in physiognomy is the keystone of the whole face: its dimension and its shape are crucial elements to understand the temper of a man. A big, conspicuous nose always promises something important - good or bad; its shape decides then on the tenor, the quality, and the type of this surplus. Non cuique datum est habere nasum, Lavater reminds (p.205, Fragment XXV): a beautiful nose by itself is enough to anticipate an excellent and extraordinary character.

FIGURE 7 (/volumes/e02/02127f07.gif)

(/volumes/e02/02127f07.gif)

MOUTHS (/volumes/e02/02127f07.gif)

TABLE 7 (/volumes/e02/02127t07.gif)

(/volumes/e02/02127t07.gif)

CHIN (/volumes/e02/02127t07.gif)

TABLE 8 (/volumes/e02/02127t08.gif)

(/volumes/e02/02127t08.gif)

CHEEKS (/volumes/e02/02127t08.gif)

TABLE 9 (/volumes/e02/02128t09.gif)

(/volumes/e02/02128t09.gif)

HAIR (/volumes/e02/02128t09.gif)

To be perfectly beautiful, a nose must satisfy the following nine conditions: (a) length equal to that of the forehead; (b) a light recess next to the root; (c) a large back (spina, dorsum nasi) with almost parallel sides (therefore, a little larger in the first half); (d) not having a hard or fleshy tip (orbiculus) with too sharp or too large inferior contours; (e) well defined nose-wings (pinnae) with nostrils that gradually shrink; (f) not having a base longer than one third of the nose length; (g) nostrils which are a little pointed in the front and a little curved in the back; (h) smooth nose-sides like walls; (i) having at least a width of half an inch on each side (pp.205-206, Fragment XXV). A nose like this is able to express by itself the great character of a man and his moral and physical strength.

All noses can be classified in only four main categories (see Figure 6): a) Noses having the inferior part (which consists of nostrils and the extreme contour of its base) horizontal: they are the best, the nobler, the more spiritual, and also the rarer; b) Noses having the inferior part turned up: they do not generally imply stupidity; c) Noses whose having the inferior part turned down: they indicate a tendency for melancholy and often, at the same time, a humorous and joyful wit; d) Noses that are cartilagineous: they indicate prudence, determination, energy, and a choleric temperament.

Mouth

According to Lavater, there are some proportions always respected in human physiognomies. For lips and mouths, in particular, he argues: "When foreheads are protruding, inferior lips are generally protruding too, except in children (...). The distinct closeness between eyes and nose always involves a remarkable distance of the mouth. Very long gums, or a long space between mouth and nose, always imply small superior lips. Long-limbed constitutions and figures generally possess fleshy and well defined lips" (p.95, Fragment XIII). The space between the nose and the mouth - such a part of the superior lip that covers the superior row of teeth - is called pallium (or curtain): the longer this section is, the shorter the superior lip is; the shorter, more concave this section is, the larger, more curved the superior lip is. The pallium is only one of the seven sections in which Lavater separates a mouth to analyze one's character (see, in particular, pp.208-210, Fragment XXV).

He uses the words of Herder to express his consideration for this trait. The mouth represents the sensual part of a face: taste and love, appetites and passions. When the superior lip is curved, it means pride and fury; when it is roundly shaped, goodness; when it is withered and weak, dissoluteness. The inferior lip seems to have a minor role, that of supporting and closing the superior one. In general, a quite open mouth indicates a tendency to lamentation; a closed one, a disposition to resignation. When it is tightly shut, it indicates something negative. Even the Bible says: "Who tightens his lips has already committed the crime" (Salomon: XVI, 30).

Figure 7 provides examples of three prevalent bad configured lips (a, c, and d).

Chin, Cheeks, and Hair

The chin is the lower part of a face and the locus of instinct, exteriority, animality. It shows, through its projection and its massiveness, the visible presence of people's propensity to defend against or to attack the others. When receding, or lacking in projection, it indicates an elusion, an interiorization or, in a way, a scarce consideration to materiality. Lavater, in a posthumous work entitled Phisiognomische Positionem, asserts that a chin can definitely reveal the prudent man: in this case, it must be a little receding; its inferior part must be a little protrudent and sunken in the middle; finally, it must be well defined and proportioned. With a pointed nose and a pointed chin, it is rare (or even impossible) to find big lips; on the contrary, it is common to find marked lineaments from the nose to the mouth (cf., p.211, Fragment XXV). As a general rule, when the chin is long, the nose is long too (cf., p.215, Fragment XXV).

Cheeks provide some clue on the sensitive, animal part of a man. A naturally nice cheek which is agitated by a light shaking next to the eye is a sign of a generous, sensitive heart which is unable of any vileness. "Beware of those who never smile pleasantly!" Lavater warns. "The grace of a human smile shows like a thermometer the goodness of the heart and the nobility of the soul" (p.223, Fragment XXVI).

Finally, hair offers numerous clues on the temperament of an individual, on his force, on his feelings, and his intellectual capacities. It does not allow dissimulation (cf., pp.224-225, Fragment XXVI).

PHYSIOGNOMIC CONSEQUENCES ON THE CREDIBILITY OF THE SOURCE

How the consumer perceives the endorser can affect the persuasive impact of the ad. The endorser, in fact, is an important source of information for the advertised product and his credibility influences the effects of the message. The choice of the endorser, therefore, is often crucial, as his personality can get transferred to the brand with enough repetition. Generally, the effects of a source on the attitude towards the ad can be understood using consistence theories, assuming that a positive reaction to the person endorsing the brand can improve a negative opinion about the brand. Research on the underlying dimensions of credibility has shown that audience judges the credibility of the source on three components: trustworthiness, expertise, and likability (Klebba and Unger 1982). From the previous review, it is possible to classify, in a dichotomic manner, all the character's attributes tied to physiognomical traits in three major dimensions related, respectively, to these three components: Infidelity v. Loyalty; Stupidity-Weakness v. Intelligence-Strength; Brutality v. Moral Beauty. The physiognomic appearance of the endorser can have important consequences on all the three components:

Perceived Trustworthiness

No matter if the endorser is a celebrity, an expert, a typical satisfied consumer, or an announcer, he must be perceived as trustworthy to make the message believable. Physiognomy can act both as a subliminal channel of important information for famous endorsers and as the main channel of information for unknown endorsers whose potentialities to be credible, all the other things being equal, depend on their own look. Consequently, it is important to test endorsers' physiognomic traits on the dimension of Loyalty and on its opposite, Infidelity (which is one of the most studied dimension in physiognomy) to detect the kind of feelings they inspire to potential buyers.

Perceived Expertise

An expert is usually the best choice where the product is technical or consumers need to be reassured on its safety. Doctors, dentists, lawyers, engineers, and other kinds of experts are typical endorsers in advertising. When their identity is unknown to the majority or when they are impersonated by actors, usually their countenance is chosen to resemble the plastic beauty of a Dr Kildare. In a way, a physiognomic semiotics is already currently applied by using the positive traits of the Intelligence-Strength dimension. Lavater explicitly gives the portrait of "an almost superhuman figure", that can be easily recognized today in the traits of this kind of endorsers. [To Lavater, the best proportions can be found in the contemporary presence of the following somatic lineaments: 1. Clear symmetry between the three ordinary sections of the face: forehead, nose, chin; 2. A horizontal forehead with horizontal, thick eyebrows; 3. Blue or light brown eyes with eyelids covering one quarter or one fifth of the pupils; 4. A nose with a large, parallel back; 5. A horizontal mouth, with a superior lip whose central line is a little lowered in the middle and an inferior lip not bigger than the superior one; 6. A round, protruding chin; 7. Short, dark brown, undulated hair (cf., p.86, Fragment XII).]

In the choice of an expert endorser, nobody has yet dared to apply the opposite dimension, that of Stupidity-Weakness, which implies small eyes, almost invisible superior eyelids, an extremely turned-up nose with very small nostrils, half-opened mouth with a descending angle, furrowed cheeks, and a considerably massive chin (cf., p.29, Fragment V; and p.212, Fragment XXV).

Perceived Attractiveness

Current research on physical attractiveness tends to show that "what is beautiful is good." All the other things being equal, the stronger the physical attraction of the source, the greater the liking and the persuasive impact will be. In the physiognomy literature, however, the topic of beauty and attraction is critical, because of the assumption of beauty coming from the morality of the individual (i.e., the endorser) as it shows in his somatic traits. We do not believe that this ethical explanation can still sound completely credible nowadays, especially when advertisements appeal to sexual drives. Yet, to remain in the spirit of Lavater's physiognomy, we should use the dimension of Moral Beauty to define attractive models and its opposite, Brutality, for unattractive. On the other hand, if we would like to rely on somatic traits that express sensuality rather than moral beauty, we could use those classified among the interlocutory traits as signs of voluptuousness and lust.

A PRELIMINARY EXPERIMENT

A pilot study was conducted to test the physiognomic hypothesis that people give common interpretations in terms of character's attributes to certain somatic traits of endorsers in print ads. Somatic traits were selected in Lavater's taxonomies on the base of the above-mentioned three double dimensions. For each of the three related components of source credibility, a different product was chosen to create a reasonable match between the type of endorser and the product being advertised (see Kahle and Homer 1985). For the trustworthiness component, tested through the Loyalty/Infidelity dimension - by reasons of similarity with product personality - the selected product was a washing machine, which was identified in a pre-experiment as a product which must last years without causing problems. For the expertise component, tested on the Intelligence-Strength/Stupidity-Weakness dimension, the selected product was a medical toothpaste, which was identified as a product usually advertised through the endorsement of a medical doctor's impersonator. For the attractiveness component, tested through the Moral Beauty/Brutality dimension, a perfume was selected after a pre-testing to represent fashion goods.

METHOD

Subjects

Two hundred undergraduates at an Italian state university participated in the experiment, with 25 students per class taking part at any one time.

Procedure

Experimenters distributed a booklet containing three sections of advertising stimuli and a questionnaire. Subjects were informed in the covering page of the booklet that the study concerned the evaluation of several print ads and, particularly, the choice of the endorser of the product. Each section contained three filler ads and two target ads. All the five ads appeared simultaneously on one wide page, but their order was systematically varied. Sections were separated by blank pages and also their order was systematically varied; each section was viewed until subjects were instructed to turn the page. Following each 5-ad sequence, subjects were asked to answer questions related to that section. After completing the test, subjects were asked demographic questions, debriefed and dismissed.

TABLE 10 (/volumes/e02/02130t10.gif)

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RESULTS (/volumes/e02/02130t10.gif)

Target Ads

Each target ad was structured using a conventional format which is frequently employed in advertising (cf. Speck, Shumann, and Thompson 1988). Each ad included: (1) one cue related to the endorser schema (a drawn of the endorser's face); (2) two cues related to the product schema (a drawn of the product and its brand name - which was chosen to recall the name of the product category); (3) four pieces of information about the product. Each ad was designed to present the product in the foreground and the endorser's face behind.

Manipulations

In the three sections, the trustworthiness component, the expertise component, and the attractiveness component were tested, each with a specific product. In the two target ads of each section, the endorser's face was made of somatic traits (namely: head shape, forehead, eyes, eyebrows, nose, mouth, chin, cheeks, hair) which were chosen in accordance to each specific dimension (e.g., for the trustworthiness component, one target ad with all traits belonging to the Loyalty dimension and the other target ad with all traits belonging to the Infidelity dimension). The three filler ads were made with endorser traits which were randomly chosen in the other two dimensions. Traits were combined together by a computer graphic software. Four pieces of information related to different product personalities were inserted into each ad's text of each section of the booklet to emphasize, respectively, the need for a lasting product, a medical efficient product, and a fashionable product.

Exposure Time and Dependent Measures

The amount of time allowed for the subjects to process each section was varied. Half of the subjects was allowed only 15 seconds to process ads in each section; while the other half was allowed 60 seconds. In both conditions, they had 15 more seconds to indicate in the questionnaire the best and the worst endorser type for each product.

Results and Discussion

Results of this preliminary experiment are presented in Table 10. They generally support the hypothesis that somatic traits influenced consumers' perception of endorsers in print ads. Both for positive and for negative traits, this influence was stronger when the exposure time was shorter, presumably when the first impression was not yet contaminated by personal experiences which could be elicited by further observation. Results were extremely significant for the first two components of source credibility, trustworthiness and expertise, and especially for the negative side.

A greater dispersion was obtained for the attractiveness component, most probably due to an unfortunate choice of the product (i.e., the perfume). This product is usually advertised by glamour models, rather than by endorsers unveiling an inner transparency (in our test, moreover, endorsers in filler ads were endowed by several somatic traits of sensuality). Sanitary towels or detergents could probably be better choices for the test, providing the idea of cleanliness and tidiness. The reason these dimensions did not act accordingly to

expectations could probably be found in an in-salient explanation of results (Guido 1993), by perceivers being contextually attracted to ads by elements of incongruity with their own schemata.

Findings are limited by the use of Western-European physiognomies, since Lavater' studies did not account for multi-racial somatic traits. More generally, of course, limitations could be found in the use of physiognomy by itself, as every pseudo-science which does not have definite and quantifiable methods of inquiry, but it is rather based on popular knowledge with deep cultural roots. Physiognomy, however, as involuntary science, has its own primitive methodology of scientific kind. It is research of relationships between cause and effect, between thing and attributes - e.g., a rotten apple and its disgusting taste, that even if it does not take place in laboratories, it is surely on Earth since the beginning of mankind. Research in social interactions have already demonstrated that there be some truth in the physiognomers' observation that perceptions based on appearance are veridical, for reasons that are neither mystical or absurd (Berry and Brownlow 1989).

Reasonably, with the development of research in genetics, it will be possible to overcome the current empiricism, by demonstrating the link between certain somatic traits and some inner attributes, laying purely scientific foundations to physiognomy (cf. Secord, Dukes, and Bevan 1954). Future research in advertising and consumer research could treat physiognomy as a new field of inquiry: many topics in marketing could be analyzed from a physiognomical point of view, such as activation of affect (cf. Berry and McArthur 1985). For example, the Coca-cola white bear of a recent Christmas commercial, with his big, round eyes far apart on his large, flat forehead, possesses the traits of a baby face and, for this reason, it induces affect. Physiognomy could also be used to study somatic features of sellers, tuning, in turn, their sales approaches. Like other unconventional techniques (e.g., graphology), it has been already employed by some companies in the selection of personnel (Mackenzie Davey 1982), although this use appears unethical. As non-verbal behavior, physiognomy could be used to study all aspects of communication that are expressed without the use of the overt, spoken language.

Lavater' speculations could trigger off the study of characters associated to certain physiognomies, as Lavater himself wrote in his Introduction (p.xvi): "I do not promise (...) to offer you the entire alphabet we need to decipher the original language of nature written on the face of human beings (...), but I flatter myself to have deciphered at least some of the characters of this divine alphabet (...)." To do this, however, it seems necessary to be open to novelties even when they might be traced back to two hundreds years ago. We started with this paper by having his words in our mind (p.xv): "I don't know if it is more temerarious to deny that there is an expressive force in the traits of a face, or to prove this truth to those who refuse it. And yet, I wrote on the science of physiognomies; surely not for those who refuse it".

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