

Some Critical Factors in the Perception of the Credibility of Television Endorsements

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Abstract

Testimonial has for long been one of the major techniques of executing television commercials. People considered celebrities often make huge sums of money from endorsing products or services. One area of interest in the employment of endorsers is their use in every day, cheap and widely available products. This study explored the consequences for credibility of the use of international, high-brow celebrities in endorsing these kinds of products.

A sample of students of the Department of Mass Communication at the Anambra State University of Technology was used. Questionnaires measuring their attitudes towards the use of an international, sophisticated endorser on a currently running Lux commercial were administered. Results show that the use of such type of endorsement did not have any significant positive impact on perception and overall credibility of the endorsement. Interest, however, was discovered to be a major predisposing factor in the perception of the credibility of the endorser.

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Quelques Facteurs Critiques Dans la Perception de la Crédibilités des annonces publicitaires télévisées

Résumé

La performance des acteurs a été pour longtemps l'une des techniques de base utilisées dans la production des annonces publicitaires télévisées. L'on a vu des célébrités se faire des fortunes d'argent pour des services de production des annonces publicitaires télévisées.

L'un des domaines d'intérêt dans l'usage de telles célébrités, est leur utilisation quotidienne dans la publicité des produits largement disponibles et très bon marché. Cette étude s'embarque dans l'exploration des conséquences résultant de l'utilisation de telles célébrités internationales pour la publicité de ces produits.

Un groupe d'étudiants du département de la Communication de Masses de l'Université Technologique de l'Etat d'Anambra a été utilisé pour effectuer cette étude. Des questionnaires évaluant leurs attitudes envers l'usage d'une célébrité internationale sophistiquée pour la publicité du produit Lux, ont été distribués.

Le résultat est que de telles publicités n'avaient pas tellement d'impact positif sur la crédibilité générale du produit. Il a été cependant noté que ce pouvait être un facteur important prédisposant positivement les téléspectateurs envers l'acteur concerné et sa crédibilités.

Introduction

Perhaps in no other area in communication as in advertising is the concept of strategy ever so pronounced. Strategy, the plan that underlies the execution of an action, is at the heart of all advertising efforts. Advertising goals, media messages all come after a thorough process of analysis and rationalization of different strategies. Rather than being an intuitive process, they are usually the results of disciplined scientific imaginations.

These rationalizations or strategies that underlie advertising executions are many and varied, and are in much use in contemporary advertising. Engel *et. al.* (1971) explain that testimonial ads adopt the style of presenting people and situation for the audience to imitate. It is basically hinged on an emotional appeal in which the audience is made to associate the highlighted positive qualities of the individuals with their use of the product. In straight forward testimonials, the individuals used, otherwise known as the endorsers, bear testimony to the efficacy of the product or service, and subtly invite the target market to imitate them in order to attain or enjoy the same positive benefits.

The use of testimonial endorsements has grown tremendously in advertisements. It is hinged on the belief that people are more prone to be persuaded by those who they respect, admire or look up to. A number of factors, or course, facilitate this pattern of reaction. Central to these facilitators is the concept of credibility in persuasive communication. People are more likely to accept messages from a credible as against a non-credible source (Fishbein *et. al.* 1972).

In addition, the concept of a referent that has been so well developed in social psychology points to the significant impact models exert on communication (Hyman 1960). In fashion and beauty advertising, contemporary practices are suggestive of the fact that people normally regarded as stars, especially in sports and the arts, exert tremendous influence on the choice behaviour of consumers. Incidentally, such figures often form the bedrock of testimonial endorsements. This, however, does not preclude people from different occupational and professional situations endorsing products or services. Bovee and Arens (1982) point out that 'figures from all walks of life endorse products, ranging from big name stars and personalities to unknown and professionals'.

But by far the most prevalent style has been to use stars and celebrities. As much as the use of these celebrities gains attention for the products and services, one of the overriding questions has always been the believability of the messages they deliver. Do they eventually turn out to be perceived as credible by their audiences?

The current study aims at answering this question in the case of a particular TV ad that employs a highbrow international model¹ as the

endorser. The advertisement is the Lux commercial. Lux is a toilet soap that is in wide use in Nigeria, is readily available and has a high repurchase cycle. Moreover, it is relatively cheap, selling at about two Nigerian naira or about 30 US cents. The major point of interest for this research and which provides ample room for extrapolations about other products with similar market characteristic is that Lux is considered an ordinary beauty product that anyone in the street can afford to use.² The interesting point of inquiry is whether an advertisement on such a product can evoke a high degree of acceptability and believability of message if the product is endorsed by a highbrow celebrity.

Fortunately, there is a commercial on Lux that is currently running on several Nigerian television channels, including NTA Channel 10 and ABS-TV Channel 50, the ones most readily accessible to our sample. The commercial features an international model, Karlo Praetto, who claims that her radiant and attractive skin, the gateway to the jet-set lifestyle she lives, is a consequence of her use of Lux toilet soap.

Several questions form the central concern of this study in relation to the use of Karlo Praetto as an endorser for the Lux commercial. They are:

- a. Do consumers believe that the endorser's physical condition is as a result of using the product?
- b. How do consumers perceive the sincerity of the endorser?
- c. What is the relationship between interest in the product and perception of the trustworthiness of the endorser?

Based on the above questions, the following hypotheses were developed for testing:

- a. Males are more predisposed to believe that there is a genuine association between the endorser's condition and use of the product than females.
- b. Males are more predisposed to perceive the endorser as sincere than females.
- c. There is a correlation between the level of interest in the advertised product and perception of the trustworthiness of the endorser.

Use of Personal Endorsement

Endorsements, especially in the mass media, have often come in two forms: media and personal. Media endorsement entails public support by a mass medium for a candidate, programme or issue. It is usually prevalent during political electioneering campaigns. Personal endorsements, on the other hand, is frequently associated with commercial advertising, in which an individual, or sparingly a group, endorses the positive qualities of a product or service.

Personal endorsements are often made by popular or famous persons.

Hank Seidon (1977) points out that to have any value at all, 'a spokesperson must be believable or at least uniquely suited to a particular situation, product or service.' He stressed that endorsed advertising will only be believable if there is a connection between the endorser and the product or service. Seidon points out some pre-requisites for effective personal endorsements:

- a. the endorser must be believable.
- b. the endorser must be appropriate for the product endorsed.
- c. the endorser should never be allowed to overpower the endorsement.

At a more practical level, the use of Candace Bergen, a well-known movie star and top photographer in the Polaroid Instant Camera advertisement, it was believed would help build awareness and name recognition for the product as well as establish a high-level of credibility for the ad (Winsk 1982). The success of the campaign had been largely attributed to the use of this star.

Furthermore, the authoritative *Advertising Age* magazine had attributed the emergence of the British Airways to the top position in the trans-Atlantic routes to the firm's ad campaign of that period which featured a well-known British actor, Robert Moorley (Winsk 1982).

Methodology

The survey research design was employed. The population for the study was the students of the Department of Mass Communication at the Anambra State University of Technology, Enugu. Since this is an exploratory study, the focus on an identifiable group was considered pragmatic.

Sampling was done through the systematic procedure using the students' lists as a sampling frame. Altogether, 180 students were sampled and comprised both sexes.

In the Lux commercial used for the study, the endorser claimed that her smooth skin is a consequence of her use of Lux. The setting was one of glamour and jet-set lifestyle, characteristic of an immensely successful and attractive model. Given her success, the viewer was subtly invited to experience the same quality of skin condition through use of Lux.

The first step in data collection was to eliminate those students who reported not have seen and watched Lux, or if have seen it, cannot recall accurately how it was presented. This was done to ensure that only those knowledgeable about the commercial participated in the study. Those found so were then given a questionnaire to complete. It sought to measure their perception of the credibility of the endorser, their interest in the advertised product and their disposition to action following the information received from the commercial.

Credibility has been identified as having two components:

trustworthiness and expertise (Hovland *et. al.* 1953). However, only the trustworthiness was perceived as necessary for this study and was consequently measured. Trustworthiness was operationalised as a belief that the endorser can be trusted or relied on to say the truth about the product. Untrustworthiness was the converse, while a response that could not be categorised into either of the two was described as neither. Interest was defined as a liking or favourable disposition for the product, Lux. This could be high when the respondent indicates that his liking or favourable disposition is skewed in that direction. It could equally be average or low. A converse disposition towards Lux is regarded as no interest.

Sincerity was operationalised as an acceptance of the commitment of the endorser to what she said about the product, while insincerity is the reverse.

The focus of the analysis was the pattern of respondents' responses, especially on critical variables that sought to ascertain the extent of their believability of the endorsement. The nominal differences between believing and non-believing responses formed the bedrock of the analysis. Attention was also paid to the differences in patterns of responses between males and females. Here, a simple statistic, the chi-square test, was considered appropriate in determining the degree of association between sex and pattern of response. Two patterns were examined, namely, sex and perception of the sincerity of the endorser; and sex and perception of the endorser's physical condition upon her use of the product.

Finally, the analysis focused on the correlation between the level of interest shown in the advertised product and perception of the trustworthiness of the endorser. Two statistics, the correlation coefficient and t-test, were utilised in determining whether it was positive or negative.

Results

Of the 161 respondents that finally completed the questionnaire 82 were males and 79 females.

Perception of association between the endorser's physical condition and use of the product was low. Only 13 percent of respondents pointed out such a relationship. On the other hand, nearly half, or 45 percent of the subjects, failed to link the two factors. 40 percent of the respondents could not point to any discernible pattern of relationship between the variables.

Table 1: Patterns of belief of association between the endorser's physical condition and claims she makes for the product.

Attitude	Number
Association	22
No Association	74
Can't say	65
Total	161

Regarding the sincerity of the endorser, many respondents believed she made the endorsement for purposes of the advertisement and not necessarily because she believed in it. Eighty-three percent of the respondents responded in this manner. Only 15 percent of the sample perceived her as being sincere, while less than two percent could not say whether she was sincere or not.

Table 2: Patterns of Perception of the Sincerity of the Endorser.

Perception	Number
Sincere	24
Insincere	134
Can't say	3
Total	161

The hypotheses adopted a more specific categorisation of the samples by focusing on particular demographic and psychographic variables, namely sex and interest in the advertised product, respectively, and focusing on the inter-play between them and the subjects' responses. Hypothesis one states that males are more predisposed to believe that there is a genuine association between the endorser's condition and her use of the product than females. Table 3 presents the pattern of responses on this subject. While 15 percent of the males perceived an association, only 13 percent of the females responded in a similar fashion. However, when the data on the table was tested for significance using the chi-square test, a statistically insignificant result of $X^2 = 0.51$ was obtained.

Table 3: Sex and Perception of Association between the Endorser's Condition and Use of Advertised Product.

Sex	Association	No Association	Can't say
Male	12	35	34
Female	10	31	31
Total	22	74	65

$$X^2 = .51, V = 2, P > .05$$

A cross tabulation of the pattern of responses on sex and perception of the sincerity of the endorser equally indicates an absence of association between the two. Chi-square test of the data (shown in table 4) yielded a low value of 1.55. The import of this is that hypothesis two which states that males are more likely to perceive the endorser as being sincere is, therefore, not valid.

Table 4: Sex and Perception of Sincerity of Endorser.

Sex	Sincere	Insincere	Can't say
Male	12	67	3
Female	12	67	0
Total	24	134	3

$$X^2 = 1.55, P > .05, V = 2$$

Hypothesis three measured the correlation between levels of interest in the advertised product and perception of the trustworthiness of the endorser. A test of the data, which is presented in table 5, reveals an almost perfect positive correlation of .997 between the two variables.

Table 5: Level of Interest and Perception of the Trustworthiness of the Endorser.

Interest	Trustworthy	Untrustworthy	Neither
High	29	0	13
Average	83	3	16
Low	12	2	4
None	8	0	1
Total	132	5	34

$$t = 20.82, P > .05$$

Discussion

The results show an interesting distribution of responses that offer many useful insights. They suggest that the respondents were not fully persuaded on the credibility of the endorser. Even if they saw her statements as credible, they were not convinced that it was responsible for the attractiveness of her skin. In effect, in interpreting the message the subjects could have placed the merits of Lux on one side and completely disassociated it from whatever beauty that radiated on the skin of Karlo Praetto, the endorser. This paradoxical conclusion can be clearly seen in the fact that more than 83 percent of the respondents saw the endorser as insincere; more than 40 percent could not relate her physical condition to use of the advertised product, and yet more than 70 percent of the respondents perceived her as being trustworthy.

An explanation that can be pursued vigorously is the nature of the product. Lux is a relatively cheap toilet soap, widely available, common and has a high repurchase cycle. For most beauty products with these characteristics, consumers rating of their importance and efficacy could be far lower than those often given more expensive, less widely available and more selectively used products (Engel *et. al.* 1971). Thus, for an international model to say that the everyday Lux is responsible for her smooth skin condition may lead to distortions and dissonance in the respondent prior knowledge about and general evaluation of beauty products.

Therefore, they could find her trustworthy — a person to trust because of perception as a fit person to talk about beauty, but eventually did not find her message about Lux and her skin condition sincere. One interesting conclusion can be drawn from this and that is that trustworthiness on its own is not a sufficient condition for a credible communication. It is a pre-requisite which must be accompanied by actual delivery of information that is perceived to be true. This is critical

when such information is presented in an advertising context and on a consumer product that has been in wide use for a prolonged period of time, and, therefore, one over which the consumers have extensive prior knowledge and experience.

The results of this study also point to the fact that sex may not be a critical factor in the analysis of the credibility of tv endorsement, especially when they concern everyday products that are in wide use and are cheap. There wasn't any statistically-significant difference in the patterns of reactions of males and females in all the critical variables tested in this study.

Interest appears to be a more significant explanatory factor in the perception of the credibility of tv endorsements than the demographic factor, sex. The findings of this study show an almost perfect positive correlation between level of interest and trustworthiness of the endorser. It seems, therefore, that interest in the product would enhance consumers' appreciation of the endorser.

Summary and Conclusion

This study has explored the perception of the credibility of tv endorsements in widely used everyday products, particularly when such an endorser is considered sophisticated or highbrow. Our findings do indicate that such endorsements find it difficult to achieve a high level of credibility and conviction among its audience. Perhaps, a limiting factor may be the use of a single commercial. In spite of this limitation, the results offer useful extrapolative insights into other products and commercials having the same characteristic as Lux and its tv commercial. Further research needs, therefore, to focus on this to see if the results obtained in this study can be generalised to other situations.

Furthermore, the crucial question of whether an endorser, not perceived as being sophisticated or highbrow, could be used more successfully to advertise a cheap widely used everyday product should constitute a major point of future inquiries. In other words, can an endorser that is perceived as not being sophisticated achieve a higher degree of credibility and acceptance than one perceived the other way round?

The results obtained in this study could have been due to the level of education and exposure of the sample. Future research should also be directed at the interplay of variations in education, social exposure and perception of the credibility of tv endorsements.

Notes

1. A random survey of students of the Anambra State University of Technology, Enugu, before the study began rated the endorser as very sophisticated and highbrow.
2. The survey mentioned above rated Lux among one of the commonest, most cheaply available and widely used of all toilet soaps.

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