

Match-up on Physical Attractiveness: Effectiveness of Cartoon Spokes-Character and Human Spokesperson

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Abstract

Marketers have been selecting celebrities to endorse their brands on the basis of their physical attractiveness. Consumers tend to form positive stereotypes about such people because they assume that the endorsers, who are ranked high on one dimension, would excel on other dimensions as well. However, attractive endorsers were found enhancing consumers' favourable attitudes in case of 'matching/congruent' attractiveness related products only. Therefore, the first objective of this conceptual paper is to frame propositions to demonstrate the congruence effect in case of spokes-characters too. Hence, in first part of the study, the propositions related to the impact of attractive/unattractive spokes-characters in terms of product types (attractiveness related vs. attractiveness un-related) have been framed. The second part of the paper is based on the 'distinctiveness' theory which says that an ad having certain stimuli different from similar ads would catch more attention of the target audience and would have a more favourable impact on consumer attitudes. Therefore, the second objective of the paper is to compare the ad- and product-based attitude of attractive human spokesperson and attractive cartoon spokes-characters in terms of product types. All the three propositions presented in the present paper can be empirically tested by researchers in the future.

Keywords: human spokesperson, cartoon spokes-character, match-up hypothesis, distinctiveness theory

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Advertising can be defined as the communicative and persuasive marketing activity which influences consumers' cognition, attitude, and behaviour towards the product being advertised. Among the many types of advertising, advertisements with endorsers or spokespersons are widely recognized (Hsu & McDonald, 2002). Various types of spokespersons (such as celebrities, experts, chief executive officers, and typical consumers) have been studied in literature. Though out of these, 'celebrities' were found to be the favourites (Atkin & Block, 1983), and firms are ready to pay a hefty amount for celebrities to endorse their products. The reason is that the firms can take advantage of the credibility and attractiveness of celebrities, expecting consumers would extend their liking of the celebrity to the products, and would then adopt and purchase the endorsed brand and products (Baker & Churchill Jr., 1977). However, celebrity spokespersons may have some risks attached with them. Celebrities experiencing negative events or scandals may damage corporate image (Till & Shimp, 1998). Famous celebrities may also overshadow the brand in advertisements apart from being expensive. The high-frequency use of the same celebrity to promote multiple brands may cause recommendation fatigue (Erdogan, 1999). In contrast, cartoon spokes-characters do not pose these kinds of risks. Cartoon spokes-characters are highly customizable, adaptable, and controllable, and can even become an identifying symbol of a company. These characters shorten the divide between companies and consumers, and encourage consumers' familiarity and liking for the spokes-character to extend to companies' products. Companies even can design or create their own spokes-characters to match their organizational culture and mission.

To endorse their brands, advertisers have been selecting celebrities on the basis of their physical attractiveness to gain from the dual effects of celebrity status and physical appeal (Singer, 1983). Consumers tend to form positive stereotypes about such people. This is termed as the 'halo effect,' which occurs when people who are ranked high on one dimension are assumed to excel on other dimensions as well (Erdogan, 1999). However, attractive endorsers were found enhancing consumers' favourable attitudes in case of 'matching' attractiveness related products more than attractiveness un-related products. This finding is consistent with the 'match-up'

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hypothesis (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990; Kamins & Gupta, 1994). The 'match-up' hypothesis says that “the endorsers are more effective when there is a fit between the endorser and the endorsed product” (Till & Busler, 2000; p. 1). Therefore, it was imperative to study the 'match-up' effect in case of spokes-characters too, which is the first objective of the present study. Hence, the first set of propositions (P-1 and P-2) of the study is about the impact of attractive/unattractive spokes-character in terms of product types (attractiveness related vs. attractiveness un-related). The third proposition (P-3) is based on the 'distinctiveness' theory which says that an advertisement having certain stimuli different from the similar advertisements would catch more attention of the target audience and would have a more favourable impact on consumer attitudes (McGuire, 1984). A study by Heiser, Sierra, and Torres (2008) about the cartoon spokes-characters and human spokespersons made it further interesting by its finding that the advertising effectiveness of cartoon spokes-characters exceeded that of human spokes-persons. Therefore, the comparison between the two types of endorsers would be worthier to investigate, which frames the second objective. Through the third proposition, a comparison is being done between attractive human spokesperson and attractive cartoon spokes-characters in terms of product types (attractiveness related vs. attractiveness un-related).

Literature Review

➤ **Attractiveness as the Stimuli for Persuasion :** The attractiveness construct is multi-dimensional in nature. It does not simply mean physical attractiveness; it includes all the virtuous characteristics that consumers might perceive in an endorser, for example, intellectual skills, personality properties, lifestyle, or athletic prowess (Erdogan, 1999). However, various studies have found physical attractiveness as one of the most visible and accessible personal characteristics (Caballero & Solomon, 1984; Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972), and these characteristics have such an influence on consumers that it may form and change their attitudes toward products and ad-based evaluations (Caballero & Pride, 1984). Abundant research across many streams exists, demonstrating that physical attractiveness has a significant effect on consumers' judgment and behaviour (Dion, 1972; Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Joseph, 1982; Patzer, 1985; Solnick & Schweitzer, 1999). However, some research findings have also indicated that physical attractiveness does not enhance these measures (Baker & Churchill Jr., 1977; Holahan & Stephen, 1981; Ohanian, 1991).

➤ **Match-Up on the Basis of Attractiveness :** Physical attractiveness of the endorser has been studied as the main basis of the match-up/congruence between the endorser and the product in advertising. Many researchers have studied the impact of congruence between the endorser and the product on the basis of attractiveness and found that the attractive endorsers have a significant effect on consumers' attitudes than their unattractive counterparts (Kamins, 1990; Kamins & Gupta, 1994; Lynch & Schuler, 1994; Till & Busler, 1998; Till & Busler, 2000). It has been proposed that the physical attractiveness of an endorser may enhance product- and ad-based evaluations, when the characteristics of the product match with the celebrity image (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990; Kamins & Gupta, 1994).

The match-up hypothesis explains how the image of a spokesperson, in conjunction with the image of a product, affects consumers' attitudes toward a product and an advertisement. As the paper discussed earlier, the main proposition of the 'match-up' hypothesis says that the positive effects of the spokesperson's physical attractiveness exist only when the spokesperson's image matches with the product's image (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990; Parekh & Kanekar, 1994). For example, an attractive model may be effective in an advertisement for attractiveness enhancing product such as a 'perfume,' but may not be more effective than an average-looking model in an advertisement for an attractiveness un-related product such as a 'pencil'.

One of the earliest studies exploring the interaction between physical attractiveness and product image was conducted by Baker and Churchill (1977). They proposed that the attractive models would have a positive and significant impact when matched with products associated with “romantic overtones”. They manipulated the physical attractiveness of the model used in the advertisement (attractive vs. unattractive) and the advertised

product type (attractiveness enhancing products such as perfume/cologne/aftershave vs. attractiveness unrelated product such as coffee). They used the gender of the subjects as the blocking variable. They found significant interactive effects for male subjects viewing the advertisements. The perfume/cologne advertisement with the attractive female endorser produced positive and significantly higher behavioural intention than the unattractive female endorser; but for the coffee advertisement, the unattractive female endorser was found to be more effective.

Peterson and Kerin (1977) conducted a study in which they manipulated the degree of dress/undress (i.e., demure dress, seductive dress, nude) of a model in print ads for two products, that is, a body oil and a ratchet set. The authors found significant difference in subjects' perceptual evaluations across the product types. For example, the seductive model/body oil treatment combination was found to be the most appealing advertisement, which received the highest rating of perceived product quality produced by one reputed company. The opposite was found true for the nude model/body oil treatment combination. However, the authors did not manipulate physical attractiveness of the model, and their findings indicated that the need for product/model congruency within an advertisement existed.

Caballero and Pride (1984) examined whether gender and attractiveness of the sales representative (used as a model in an experiment ad) influenced the purchase decision of the advertised product, a religious book. Authors found that the use of a highly attractive female sales representative resulted in a significantly higher purchase rate than medium or less attractive representatives. However, no difference was found between the highly attractiveness condition and the controlled condition having no photograph. No effect of attractiveness was found in case of male representatives. These findings are consistent with the match-up hypothesis proposition as the attractiveness of the model could achieve its goal only when it matched with the product. As per the authors, "Attractiveness may achieve greater saliency when associated with the personal care product" (p. 99). As a religious book is not an attractiveness enhancing product, therefore, the findings are consistent with the match-up hypothesis.

Kahle and Homer (1985) used the 'social adaptation theory' to examine the impact of physical attractiveness on advertising effectiveness using 'disposable razor' ads with attractive or unattractive celebrities. The findings indicated that consumers liked the razors more and their purchase intention was significantly higher when they were exposed to the ads with the attractive celebrities compared to the ads with the unattractive celebrities. The authors argued that because razors were a product associated with beauty, the advertisement with the attractive celebrities was more effective because razors increase physical attractiveness, and the attractive celebrity was congruent with the image of the product increasing attractiveness. However, the said study did not examine match-up effects for products unrelated to attractiveness.

Kamins (1990) conducted a study that was an extension of Kahle and Homer's (1985) research by manipulating the degree of attractiveness of a product (attractiveness related vs. attractiveness un-related) with attractive/unattractive celebrity. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of four treatment groups having physical attractive celebrity (Tom Selleck) vs. physical unattractive celebrity (Telly Savalas) and physically attractive product (Luxury car) vs. physically unattractive product (Home PC). Kamins found a significant effect of interaction between attractiveness and product type on the subjects' attitudes. Subjects viewing the ad with the attractive celebrity reported higher evaluation of spokesperson credibility and attitude towards the ad for the attractiveness related product, but no differences were found across the dependent variables between the attractive and unattractive celebrities for the attractiveness unrelated product. These results too support the match-up hypothesis because the use of an attractive celebrity enhanced the evaluation only for attractiveness-related products. The match-up effect was also studied for non-celebrity models. Parekh and Kanekar (1994) conducted a study to test the role of physical attractiveness and type of product (related to beauty vs. unrelated to beauty) on product evaluation. The beauty products included soap and shampoo, and the non-beauty products were stationary and ballpoint pen. The authors found a significant interaction between product type and the physical attractiveness of the model, wherein subjects rated the beauty products higher in product quality for the attractive model. No significant difference was found between the two models for the evaluations of the non-beauty products.

Kamins and Gupta's (1994) study investigated the effects of celebrity-product congruence and spokesperson type on the dependent variables like spokesperson and advertiser believability, attitude towards the product and

advertisements, and purchase intention. It was observed that congruent spokesperson/product had a (limited) significant effect on spokesperson and advertiser believability. However, it was found present in the case of celebrity spokesperson only. Similarly, a spokesperson congruent with the product was perceived to be more attractive (again limited significant) than the incongruent product. This too was found valid for the celebrity spokesperson only. Therefore, increased congruence positively and significantly affected spokesperson believability and attractiveness for the celebrity spokesperson, whereas no effect was evident for the non-celebrity. The reason may be the familiarity of the celebrity, which could have positively affected their social influence. It was also found favourable for attitude and purchase intention toward the product, but had a relatively null effect in terms of the non-celebrity.

Lynch and Schuler (1994) expanded the social adaptation theory principles to include the schema theory. As per the schema theory, when an attractive spokesperson is matched with a product related to attractiveness, attributes like “knowledgeable about the product” were added to the existing spokesperson schema, which finally added an attractive component to it. The match also impacted the product schema, which contained an attractiveness component. The authors conducted two experiments for their study. The results of the first experiment showed that a match-up can produce a unique meaning that is transferable to a schema. Here, a match between the spokesperson's muscularity and products related to muscularity or masculinity (male-targeted products, exercise equipments, and shaving products) appeared to facilitate the transfer to the schema of the spokesperson of the information that the “spokesperson knew about the product”. In the second experiment, the point of experiment was not the 'strength' dimension of the product. The match appeared to happen between the increased stamina associated with a muscular, healthy person, and a more prevalent 'durability' or stamina attribute of the products. In this case, the spokesperson-muscularity/product-type interaction was not significant, that is, there was no significant effect of match on product schemas.

Supporting the basic proposition of the 'Match-Up' hypothesis, Caballero, Lumpkin, and Madden (1989) did not find any effect of endorser attractiveness for 'Slice' (a carbonated soft drink) or cheese. These results can be explained on the basis of the match-up hypothesis because Slice and cheese are not related to attractiveness, so the attractiveness of the spokesperson did not have any effect. However, another implication of the match-up hypothesis is that an unattractive model may be more effective for an attractiveness un-related product. Caballero and Solomon (1984) varied the attractiveness of a model in a point of purchase display for facial tissue and found that more consumers purchased tissue from the display with the model low in physical attractiveness. An explanation for this result may be that the subjects perceived tissue with sickness and illness (unattractiveness), and thus, the product image matched with the image of the unattractive model, resulting in an increase in purchases.

However, there are some studies, which do not support the match-up hypothesis on the basis of attractiveness and have not found the positive impact of the interaction between endorser attractiveness and product type. Till and Busler (1998) conducted one study to consider the role of physical attractiveness versus expertise as match-up factors in the endorsement process. In the first part of their study, irrespective of product types, an attractive endorser was found more effective for brand attitude and purchase intention both. No significant difference was found between the two product types (attractive enhancing/not attractive enhancing) when endorsed by the same attractive endorser. Therefore the 'match-up effect' was not found to be significant in terms of attractiveness in the first part, but it was consistent with the results obtained by prior research studies that an attractive spokesperson will have more positive effect on brand attitude and purchase intention. In Study 2, the actor/candy bar combination was found to be more effective than the actor/energy bar, and the athlete/energy bar combination was found to be more effective on brand attitude and purchase intention than the athlete/candy bar pair. Therefore, in this part of the study, the 'match-up effect' on the basis of 'expertise' was found to be significantly effective on consumer attitudes.

Similarly, Till and Busler's (2000) another study too investigated the differential impact of role of attractiveness and expertise as the match-up stimuli. This study too was in two parts. Under Part 1, the main effect of the endorser's attractiveness was found to be significant and brand attitude was found to be more favourable in case of the attractive endorser than the unattractive endorser, clearly endorsing the earlier findings. However, as far as the

interaction was concerned for cologne (attractiveness enhancing product), brand attitude and purchase intention were significantly higher in case of the attractive endorser than the unattractive endorser. Surprisingly, for pen (attractiveness non-enhancing product) also, brand attitude and purchase intention were found to be significantly higher in case of the attractive endorser than the unattractive endorser. Therefore, these results showed no endorser attractiveness by product type (enhancing or non-enhancing) interaction and did not support the match-up hypothesis based on the endorser's physical attractiveness. The attractive endorser was considered more appropriate and a better fit for both the products. The expertise mean in case of an athlete/energy bar was significantly higher than what it was for an athlete/candy bar. For brand attitude, the interaction was found to be significant, but for purchase intention, the interaction was not found to be significant. Surprisingly, for the candy bar, there was no significant difference in brand attitude based on the type of endorser (athlete or actor). However, for the energy bar, the brand attitude was significantly higher when the endorser was an athlete than when the endorser was an actor. For the energy bar, endorser type had no effect on the "tastes good" belief, but the athlete endorser led to a significantly greater belief that 'Toba' energy bars "give extra energy". Therefore, it is important to first recheck the basic proposition of the match-up hypothesis in the congruence-based studies. Hence, the first set of propositions of the present paper expect to measure the impact of interaction between spokes-character attractiveness and product type on consumer attitudes.

➤ **Spokes-Characters :** In 1996, Margaret F. Callcott and Barbara J. Phillips had defined a 'spokes-character' as "a fictional persona employed to sell a product or service" (Phillips & Callcott, 1996; p. 73). In the same year, Phillips refined this definition and reframed it as "an animate being that is used to promote a product, service or an idea" (Phillips, 1996; p. 146). The 'spokes-characters' have been in use for advertising for many years. Well-known characters such as 'Aunt Jemima,' 'Uncle Ben,' and 'Morton's Salt girl' - all of who made their first appearance in the early part of the twentieth century (Phillips, 1996). But the advent of state-of-the-art animation technologies and its greater accessibility has played an important role in its increased use in both in motion pictures and advertising. The reducing cost of animation technologies has further increased the popularity of these animated spokes-characters (Callcott & Lee, 1995). There are many advantages of using these characters. Studies have shown that these characters have gone beyond merely identification of the product and are being used to establish new brand identity and favourable brand associations (Thompson, 2000), though research regarding these benefits is limited (Garretson & Burton, 2005).

➤ **Match-Up Hypothesis and Spokes-Characters :** There is no study in the spokes-character literature, which has provided evidence of 'match-up' hypothesis among spokes-characters on the basis of attractiveness. However, there are a few studies, which have empirically tested the impact of 'relevancy' between spokes-characters and product types. The findings of content analyses of spokes-characters' commercials and print advertisements revealed that (a) spokes-characters have been used to promote numerous types of products and services, (b) specific types of spokes-characters were pre-dominantly featured with particular types of products, and (c) practitioners appeared to have considered the relevancy of the characters to advertised products (Callcott & Lee, 1994; Neeley, Macias, Clark, & Lee, 2000; Spears, Mowen, & Chakraborty, 1996). Furthermore, analyses of in-depth interviews indicated that consumers did notice character factors like relevance to products and expertise (Phillips & Callcott, 1996). These findings definitely indicate that the 'relevancy' of spokes-characters and product type is on top of the mind of not only the practitioners, but also on consumers' mind too. 'Relevancy' has been defined as the degree of fit between the spokes-character and the advertised product (Miniard, Bhatla, Lord, Dickson, & Unnava, 1991; Sengupta, Goodstein, & Boninger, 1997) and the degree to which the character communicates brand-relevant information, like an attribute of the product with which it is paired (Garretson & Burton, 2005).

Garretson and Burton (2005) used three studies to examine various integrated marketing communications (IMC) strategic combinations, including the effects related to the use of spokes-characters versus verbal attributes, advertisement - package coordination, character relevancy, and the presence of new, favourable brand information

that may compete for cognitive resources on packages. Based on conceptual rationales drawn from encoding specificity, network associations, and the elaboration likelihood model, the findings offer empirical evidence that pertains to the potential benefits of including spokes-characters in IMC campaigns. The authors showed the importance of relevancy between non-human spokes-characters and product type in integrated marketing communication strategies. However, there is another study, where the importance of relevancy was not proved. Garretson and Niedrich (2004) studied the impact of spokes-character relevance on spokes-character trust and finally examined their impact on brand attitudes. They also tested the moderating role of brand experience. On the basis of pre-tests, they selected nine spokes-characters and the brands endorsed by them. They did not find a significant impact of relevancy between non-human spokes-character and the product type on character trust, which is inconsistent with the findings of match-up among human endorsers and product type. Therefore, it would be interesting to see the effect of congruence of human spokes-characters and product type on brand attitude.

Propositions

Findings related to attractiveness-based 'match-up' hypothesis in endorsement (Baker & Churchill, 1977; Caballero et al., 1989; Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990; Parekh & Kanekar, 1994) and related work in the visual processing (Heckler & Childers, 1992; Lee & Mason, 1999) and branding (Herr, Farquhar, and Fazio, 1996; Keller, Heckler, & Houston, 1998) literature streams indicates the relevancy advantage. On the line of these findings, the paper predicts that human spokes-characters' attractiveness too would have the same impact on the ad- and product-based attitude, moderated by product types. Therefore, the first two propositions are as follows :

➔ **P-1: An increase in the physical attractiveness of a human cartoon spokes-character should have a significant and positive impact on ad- and product-based evaluations for a product which is attractiveness related.**

➔ **P-2: An increase in the physical attractiveness of a human cartoon spokes-character should have no significant impact on ad- and product-based evaluations for a product which is attractiveness unrelated.**

Heiser et al. (2008) investigated the effect of using a real spokesperson vs. a cartoon spokesperson in an advertisement on the basis of 'distinctiveness' theory. The distinctiveness theory suggests that certain elements in the environment attract people's attention, get noticed, and are perceived as missing, absent, or different from other stimuli (McGuire, 1984). In case of advertisements, this theory suggests that the ads can be considered as distinctive if they have some typical traits that differentiate them from other marketing stimuli (McGuire, 1984). Furthermore, the cartooned characters in print media are not much prevalent; hence, because of their relative distinctiveness, ads with cartoon spoke-characters would grab more attention from consumers than similar ads which have non-cartooned spokespersons or human spokespersons (Phillips & Lee, 2005). The research findings from the studies based on 'distinctiveness' theory suggests that the creative use of cartoon spokes-people in advertisements has a favorable impact on consumers' attitude toward the ad, their attitude towards the brand, and their purchase intention (Phillips & Lee, 2005). Heiser et al. (2008) found that the creative ads (containing cartooned spokes-character) have a significantly higher impact on consumers' attitudes and purchase intention than similar ads having a human spokesperson. On the basis of these findings, the third proposition of this paper is made.

➔ **P-3: Ad- and product-based evaluations for a product (which is attractiveness related) will be higher in the human cartoon spokes-character and product condition than the real human endorser.**

Contributions to Literature

The present conceptual article provides three testable propositions on the basis of observed research gaps in

congruence literature and spokes-character literature. The present article also borrowed the 'distinctiveness theory' to frame its third proposition. The present paper expects to make two important contributions to the existing literature: **(a)** earlier spokes-character related studies have used 'relevancy' as a general term. The present paper has theoretically introduced 'physical attractiveness' as the basis of 'match-up' hypothesis. Furthermore, none of the studies have investigated the 'match-up' hypothesis in case of cartoon spokes-characters; **(b)** the present paper extends the existing literature by theoretically comparing the attractiveness of human spokesperson and cartoon spokes-character against product types (attractiveness related vs. attractiveness un-related). Apart from the above-mentioned academic contributions, there may be some important implications for practitioners too.

Conclusion

The present conceptual paper has identified the research gaps in the congruence and spokes-characters literature which have important managerial implications too. The paper has borrowed the 'Distinctive theory' to explain the third proposition which addresses the identified research gaps. These three propositions are empirically testable and expect to show evidence of the congruence or 'match-up' effect among the spokes-characters too. These propositions also integrate the theories related to two important endorser types in endorsement literature by comparing the impact of human spokesperson and cartoon spokes-character on ad- and product-based evaluations.

Managerial Implications

The present article expects to help marketers to understand the differential impact of human spokespersons and cartoon spokes-characters on ad- and product-based evaluations. As the marketers and advertisers are spending hefty amounts on hiring human spokespersons, this paper may provide them a crucial clue regarding their future strategies for brand endorsements. Despite paying hefty endorsement fees to the celebrities for endorsing their brands, the marketers still have to depend on the celebrities' perceived personality and image. In case the celebrity is found involved in any negative activities, then this may not only harm the celebrity's image, it may also harm the company's credibility and image. On the other hand, firms can create the cartoon spokes-characters at very low cost. Cartoon spokes-characters are highly customizable, adaptable, and controllable, and can even become an identifying symbol of a company. On the basis of findings of the distinctiveness theory-based past studies, the paper expects the advertisements having cartoon spokes-characters to have higher impact on consumers' ad- and product-based evaluations compared to the advertisements having human spokespersons. If future empirical studies support this assumption from the present paper, then it will have a major impact on the marketers' and advertisers' endorsement policies.

Limitations of the Study and the Way Forward

An obvious criticism of the present paper is its conceptual nature. On the basis of the literature review, the present paper provides three propositions, which can be empirically tested in future studies. Future empirical research should investigate the propositions in various settings involving fictional and real cartoon spokes-characters. It would help to generalize the results of such studies. Another potential limitation of the present paper is the proposed use of a human cartoon spokes-character only. However, the use of a human cartoon spokes-character was mandatory for the third proposition (P-3). The third proposition deals with the comparison of human cartoon spokes-character and human endorser in terms of impact on ad- and product-based evaluations. The future empirical studies may test the first two propositions (P-1 and P-2) in case of non-human cartoon spokes-characters also. Future studies may investigate the role of cartoon spokes-characters' and endorsers' gender as the moderator while investigating their impact on ad- and product-based evaluations. It would be an interesting extension for the future empirical studies based on the present paper.

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