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THE IMPACT OF THE CELEBRITIES' NATIONALITY IN THE CHINESE MARKETPLACE¹

ABSTRACT

Multinational advertisers running celebrity-endorsement advertising campaigns in China typically recycle the original Western endorsers, while Chinese advertisers use both foreign and local celebrities. This study asks if endorsers function as surrogates for country-of-origin, and if the effectiveness of the tactic varies with the perceived ethnicity of the celebrities. It finds no significant influence on perceptions, attitudes or quality evaluations in the reactions of 797 consumers in Shanghai to magazine advertisements featuring celebrities. The explanation may be the respondents' relatively low levels of measured ethnocentricity plus their observed uncertainty about the nationality of the brand. Strategic implications are discussed.

KEY WORDS

Attitude to advertisement, celebrities' nationality, celebrity-endorsement, brand attitude, perceived product quality.

1. Introduction

The use of celebrities as explicit or implicit endorsers of a brand or product is a popular advertising strategy, which has been shown over the years to have a significant influence on advertising effectiveness in various national markets (Atkin and Block, 1983; Kamins, 1989; Misra and Beatty, 1990; Ohanian, 1991; Erdogan, 1999; Praxmarer and Rossiter, 2009; Eisend and Langner, 2010). International advertisers choosing it for overseas markets will often retain the manifestly Western celebrities originally featured in campaigns in the home market, despite the radical differences in the target markets and audiences (Cui and Yang, 2009). As competition has intensified among advertisers in China, celebrity endorsement has become a particularly prevalent tactic in promotional campaigns aimed at the creation of positive associations in the minds of local consumers (Liu et al., 2007b; Chan and Zhang, 2007), and is claimed by Gan (2006) to be "one of the most effective advertising techniques"

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in the Chinese marketplace. One recent study has found that half of all consumers there (49.4%) prefer brands that are explicitly associated with celebrities (Wang, Y., 2006).

An obvious question arises, of fundamental strategic importance: will such advertising campaigns be more effective if those celebrities reflect the target market or the country of origin? This is of course a specific case of the general globalization-versus-localization argument, and it has become the subject of intense interest among specialist academics and thoughtful practitioners (Hong, 1994; Gan, 2006; Morimoto and La Ferle, 2008; Cui and Yang, 2009).

The study reported here investigated how perceptions of the nationality and ethnicity of celebrities explicitly associated with Western brands influenced Chinese consumers' attitudes toward both the advertisements and the brand, and their evaluations of product quality. It is worth remarking in passing that Chinese consumers may find it as difficult to distinguish the nationalities of generally 'Western' celebrity endorsers as their European counterparts might among 'Oriental' celebrities; but that is beyond the scope of the present study.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

The literature shows that endorsement advertising is a frequently-used strategy for the enhancement of advertising effectiveness in international advertising, particularly by Western advertisers in Asian markets, whose endorsers are often themselves Westerners (Frith et al., 2004). Yet it has also been noted that the congruency implications of choosing foreign endorsers rather than local have rarely been investigated (Morimoto and La Ferle, 2008).

Congruence theory (Newcomb, 1968) postulates that in order to maintain harmony and symmetry, individuals tend to be more responsive to people and messages apparently consistent with their own beliefs and attitudes. In the context of international marketing, the inference is that marketers using an explicit or implicit endorsement strategy should localize their advertising strategies in other countries, so as to make it easier for their target audience to identify with the human representatives of the advertised product or brand. Indeed, endorsement campaigns that do not do so may prove to be ineffective or even offensive in the foreign culture (Leach and Liu, 1998). It has been suggested that consumers' own preference for implicit or explicit endorsement of the product by ethnically local individuals is conditioned by a high degree of 'consumer ethnocentrism' (Shimp and Sharma, 1987: 280)

among Chinese consumers (Klein, 2002; Orth and Girbasova, 2003; Wang and Chen, 2004; Klein et al., 2006; Liu et al., 2007a; Wong et al., 2008), the level of which has been found to vary across individuals, cultures and countries (Kaynak and Kara, 2002). Strongly ethnocentric consumers may react cognitively to the threat represented by foreign competition, and reject the purchase of foreign products and brands as unpatriotic (Balabanis et al., 2001).

A distinct body of research links the observed influence of the nationality or ethnicity of celebrities featured in advertisements on consumer reactions to the perceived country of origin of a product or brand (Chao et al., 2005). In the present context, it is intuitively logical to assume that brands endorsed explicitly or implicitly by Western celebrities will be seen as of foreign origin by Chinese consumers, and vice versa, and that this 'country image' (Schooler, 1965) will affect the way in which consumers respond to them. Specifically, studies have shown that it affects: attitudes to a product or brand (Kim and Pysarchik, 2000; Kaynak et al., 2000; Teas and Agarwal, 2000); evaluation of the quality of a product and its attributes (Kim and Pysarchik, 2000; Kaynak et al., 2000; Teas and Agarwal, 2000); attribution of value to it (Teas and Agarwal, 2000); development of preferences for one brand over another (Keown and Casey, 1995; Kim and Pysarchik, 2000); and purchase intentions (Ahmed and d'Astous, 1995; Zhang, 1996).

The influence of country image may vary within a single territory, however, and can be positive or negative depending on the product (D'Astous and Ahmed, 1992; Brucks and Zeithaml, 1991). In China, foreign brands are seen to be of better quality and have a stronger reputation than Chinese counterparts in the automotive and cosmetics markets (McGregor, 2005). Here, the social cachet of foreign brands can outweigh the utilitarian value of the actual products, and is a crucial determinant of purchase decisions (Zhou and Hui, 2003). This is especially true at the luxury end of the market, where a Western image connotes status, cosmopolitanism and modernity (Zhou and Belk, 2004). On the other hand, local products enjoy a higher market share and a better image than their foreign competitors in the white goods, domestic appliances, telecommunications, and computer sectors (Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999; Zhou and Belk, 2004; DeLong et al., 2004; Wang and Yang, 2008). The strategic communication choice between local or foreign endorsers and users thus depends critically on the class of product concerned.

A study by Zhou and Belk (2004) identified two types of reaction to global and local television and print advertising by Chinese consumers. One largely reflected a drive to achieve cosmopolitanism and status by the consumption of global goods, for the sake of *mianzi*, often translated as ‘face’ and describing the prestige that an individual seeks to transmit to others (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). The other reflected a more local focus on Chinese values. The widespread drive among participants to achieve *mianzi* via fashion and beauty products associated with Westerners needs to be balanced, however, against ample evidence of a countervailing desire to forge and reinforce a distinctly Chinese identity in a changing world by choosing Chinese products (Cui, 1997; Wan, 2001a and 2001b; Wang, Z., 2001; Wu, 2001; Zelinsky 2001; Zhang 2001). This is particularly true for such non-luxury, non-cosmopolitan, distinctively local goods as Chinese medicines, foods and non-alcoholic beverages, and banking and financial services. While those develop and evolve in China just as elsewhere, they are seen as elements of identity and not merely superficial fashions (Farquhar, 2002; Jing, 2000; Wu and Tan, 2001).

Bilingual brand naming by Chinese manufacturers is an increasingly common strategy, precisely to confer a more cosmopolitan image (Zhang and Schmitt, 2001, 2004). At the same time, many foreign firms are also opting for bilingual brand names as a means of demonstrating adaptation to the local market and identification with the local culture and language. The result is that confusion about the country of origin of brands is a common phenomenon in China (O’Cass and Lim, 2002; Zhuang et al., 2008).

On the basis of the theoretical framework discussed, five research hypotheses were formulated:

The nationality or ethnic background of celebrities used as implicit brand endorsers in advertising influences: (H1) the way in which the country of origin of advertised brand is perceived; (H2) attitudes towards the advertisement; (H3) attitudes towards the brand; and (H4) perceived product quality

and

(H5) The appropriateness of foreign or local celebrities as implicit brand endorsers depends on the type of product.

3. The study

Data for analysis were collected in personal interviews with a sample of 797 consumers (353 male; 444 female) aged between 14 and 53, in the city of Shanghai. Respondents were selected by the street intercept method of systematic random sampling with no list. Each was exposed to one of a selection of 24 purpose-designed single-page magazine advertisements, half of which were for a fashion wristwatch and half for a mineral water brand. In each of the two selections of twelve treatments, six were explicitly associated with one of six Chinese celebrities and six by one of six Western celebrities. Endorsement was implied by the celebrities' faces in the design, but not made explicit by any associated statement. The Appendix shows how the individual celebrity was the only elements of the design to be experimentally manipulated.

The brand name was chosen on the basis of focus groups containing a total of 92 students in the School of Business of a major university in Shanghai: 60 female and 32 male, aged between 18 and 29. The brand name *PREMIS* was neutral, in the sense that it has no direct meaning or connotation in China, and the translation into Chinese was simply a phonetic adaptation which likewise had no meaning that might bring with it positive or negative brand attributes (Hong et al., 2002; Chan and Huang, 2001). The choice of individuals to be associated with the two products was the output of a process in which the same focus group participants named their ten favourite Chinese and ten favourite Western celebrities, five male and five female in each case. The resulting pool of names was reduced to a shortlist of those mentioned most frequently, from which six Chinese and six Westerners were arbitrarily chosen, evenly split between male and female. They were: Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt and Tom Hanks; Jackie Chan, Tony Leung and Andy Lau; Julia Roberts, Angelina Jolie and Nicole Kidman; Ziyi Zhang, Maggie Cheung and Li Gong.

Data were gathered from the sample by a structured questionnaire administered by the interviewers. The scales used to measure the variables were derived from a review of the relevant literature, so as to ensure valid content. For measuring both attitude to the advertisement and attitude to the brand, the review yielded two dominant paired items: good/bad and like/dislike (Cox and Cox, 1988; Kempf and Smith, 1998; Curlo and Ducoffe, 1998). The latter was chosen for this study, in the form of a 7-point semantic differential scale anchored at "I don't like it at all" and "I like it a lot". With respect to the measurement of ethnocentrism, studies by Shimp and Sharma (1987), Nijssen and Douglas (2004) and

Ettenson and Klein (2005) were particularly influential. There is a consensus in the literature in support of Shimp and Sharma's Consumer Ethnocentric Tendency Scale (CETSCALE), which comprises 17 items validated in the USA, Japan and Germany (Netemeyer et al., 1991), in Turkey (Kaynak and Kara, 2002) and in Spain (Luque-Martínez et al., 2000). The total CETSCALE for this study was curtailed, as it has been by other researchers (Ettenson and Klein, 2005; Russell and Russell, 2006; Reardon et al., 2005; Nijssen and Douglas, 2004), specifically to the three items most widely used in previous research, thereby controlling validity of content while exploiting the convenience of using short scales (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1995). The items selected were "I always prefer domestic products/brands", "Foreign products/brands should be purchased only when no domestic alternatives are available" and "Foreign products should not be purchased because this harms the domestic economy and causes unemployment". Seven-point Likert scales ranging from complete disagreement to complete agreement measured the level of ethnocentricity. The perceived product quality variable was established as a one-dimensional construct and measured by a seven-point semantic differential scale anchored at "The quality of this product is very poor ... excellent" (Klein et al., 1998). Lastly, the perceived country of origin of the brand was measured, following Inch and McBride (2004) and Kaynak et al. (2000), by asking respondents to name the perceived origin, and recording their answers as either "local or Chinese" or "foreign".

4. Results

The influence of the nationality of the celebrities on the perceived country of origin of the brand (Hypothesis 1) was tested by the Pearson's Chi-Square statistic. Table 1 shows that there is no significant link between the two variables, and it can therefore be deduced that the nationality or ethnic background of celebrities associated with the brand does not in itself affect perceptions of the national origin of the advertised brand.

Hypotheses 2, 3, 4 were tested by ANOVA analysis of the scaled data. The results presented in Table 2 show that there are no significant differences between the mean scores obtained in the different versions of the advertisement for the three variables analysed: attitude to the advertisement (H2), attitude to the brand (H3) and perceived product quality (H4). Given that none of these four hypotheses is supported, it can be asserted that, contrary to the arguments advanced by some authors, the nationality or ethnic background of celebrities used as implicit brand endorsers influences neither attitudes to the advertisement and the brand nor

perceptions of the quality of the product, at least in the cases of the two product categories in the study. On the basis of these findings, Hypothesis 5 is irrelevant to the extent that it relates to the appropriateness of choosing between two categories of endorser, neither of which has any effect on attitudes to the brand or perceptions of its quality. These results are hardly surprising in view of the rejection of Hypothesis 1: the lack of any significant effect of the nationality of celebrities on the perceived country of origin of a brand would seem to preclude country image having any effect on those variables.

5. Conclusions and implications

Counter-intuitively, this study has shown that there is no statistically significant relationship between the nationality or ethnic background of celebrities featured in advertisements and the perceived country of origin of the brands endorsed. It furthermore contradicts a popular theme in the literature, that those characteristics of an explicit or implicit endorser will influence the audience's attitudes to the advertising and the brand or their evaluation of the quality of the endorsed product. This is true, at least, of two examples of a luxury and non-luxury product in a large and historically 'westernised' Chinese city, which is known to have sustained a higher rate of economic growth than the rest of the country and to be more open to the outside world (Davis, 2000). The implication for international marketers targeting similar urban Chinese markets is clearly that neither the nationality of celebrities associated with the brand nor the national image of its country of origin is an important enough factor in the effectiveness of an advertising campaign to demand a disproportionate amount of time and effort in strategic campaign planning.

It can be suggested that the superficially contradictory results are explained by the low level of consumer ethnocentrism among the consumers in the study sample. Mean scores on the three 7-point scales used to measure this attribute were all below the mid-point, with the overall average standing at 2.98. It seems that these consumers are more global in their outlook than might have been expected, and that the foreignness of celebrities featured in the advertising causes no prejudice against the product, whether it is an international luxury item or a domestic mainstream product. A possible confounding factor, however, is the developing trend to bi-lingual brand naming by both foreign and domestic firms. Furthermore, Reebok, Apple and Coca-Cola are represented by Chinese celebrities, while some Chinese medical and cosmetic brands have been endorsed by international stars of sport, movies and modelling. There is ample evidence from other studies to support the conclusion that this situation

confuses Chinese consumers about the actual origin of the brands in question (Zhou and Meng, 1998; Hooper, 2000; Zhang, 2001; Zhou and Hui, 2003; Zhou et al., 2007; Zhuang et al., 2008). Given that the ethnicity of celebrities in itself is no longer a reliable indicator of the country of origin of a brand, a logical ingredient of future marketing communications would be to introduce an explicit 'made in' element. In that way, the link between the perceived origin of a brand and the audience's attitude to it and evaluation of it could be re-established.

For the moment, however, our study strongly suggests that, for contemporary urban Chinese consumers, the fact of celebrity transcends the effect of nationality.

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TABLE 1
Influence of celebrity on perceived country of origin

		Brand perceived as local	Brand perceived as foreign	Total
Nationality of celebrity	Western	181	202	383
	Chinese	192	208	400
Total		373	410	783

N = 783 observations (14 scores lost)
 Pearson's Chi-Square = 0.043; p = 0.835

TABLE 2
ANOVA test of differences in means between experimental groups

		Attitude to advertisement			Attitude to brand			Perceived product quality		
		Mean; N; s.d.	F.	Sig.	Mean; N; s.d.	F.	Sig.	Mean; N; s.d.	F.	Sig.
Wrist-watch	Chinese celebrity	3.46; 203; 1.41	1.237	0.267	3.24; 203; 1.30	0.088	0.767	4.08; 203; 1.40	0.021	0.886
	Western celebrity	3.63; 192; 1.48			3.28; 192; 1.38			4.06; 192; 1.50		
Mineral water	Chinese celebrity	3.68; 204; 1.57	0.281	0.596	3.46; 204; 1.43	0.002	0.965	4.16; 204; 1.54	0.117	0.732
	Western celebrity	3.60; 198; 1.44			3.45; 198; 1.38			4.11; 198; 1.41		

APPENDIX
Specimens of the experimental ads

