Consumer Attitudes toward Celebrity Advertising: Analysis through Balance Theory

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Abstract: Firms often use celebrities as advertising endorsers in Japan because they are attractive or give brilliant performances and thus are perceived as appealing. However, if a celebrity's image is compromised, for example by scandal or controversial behavior, consumers may change their attitude toward that celebrity and thus toward the ads in which s/he appears or the products s/he promotes. Heider's balance theory explains this triangular relationship among ad, celebrity, and audience. However, a consumer's attitude toward a celebrity is less likely to change when s/he closely identifies with that celebrity. This paper makes and empirically tests two hypotheses regarding these phenomena. The t-test reveals that (1) in cases of high identification with a celebrity, a person's attitude toward an ad involving that celebrity will become more negative after the celebrity incurs scandal, and (2) in the case of low identification with a celebrity, attitude toward the ad will not change. Subsequently, this study divides celebrities into attractiveness-based and performance-based categories, and finds that in describing attitude toward ads with performance-based celebrities, the triangular relationship under balance theory can be extended to a square relationship among the ad, celebrity, audience/consumer, and celebrity' performance. The t-test then reveals that (3) in the case of low identification with celebrity, audience attitude toward the ad become *more negative* after scandal, in contrast to the lack of effect for celebrities overall in (2). This paper thus provides a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of celebrity advertising and successfully explains change in audience/consumer attitude toward an ad and perhaps product after celebrity endorser scandal through an extension of balance theory.

Introduction

In human relations involving three individuals, often the attitude of one of them toward another changes depending on the relation of the other two. For example, in human relations formed by three individuals A, B, and C, when both A-B and A-C have good relationships but B-C does not, A might wonder why the B-C relation is not good given that both B and C are have good relations with A. Then, A might come to think, for example, that C is more undesirable if the relation of A-B is better than that of A-C (or the reverse in the reverse case).

Heider (1946) has explained these changes in triangular relationships through his balance theory. He suggested that, in a case like the example above, positive A-B and A-C relations with negative B-C relation are an imbalanced condition, while there is a balanced condition when all relations are positive. In an imbalanced condition, the subject of an action is A, A will change attitude or action to recover a balanced condition. That is, individuals will tend to like whatever is associated with what they already like and will tend to dislike whatever is associated with what they already dislike (Dalakas and Levin, 2005).

On this basis, we will use Heider's balance theory to explain consumer attitudes toward advertising involving celebrities through links among consumer/audience, advertising, and celebrity. Additionally, we will break these results down by "type" of celebrity: celebrities whose value is inherent in their own charm or the way they are promoted ("attractiveness-based celebrities" in this paper) and celebrities whose value is not "in themselves" but in their physical or creative talent ("performance-based celebrities"). We differentiate the two types in this study by expanding balance theory from a triangular to a square framework, with four individual relations—among

consumer/audience, advertising, celebrity, and the celebrity's creative product—and explain change of attitudes thereby.

Literature Review

Balance Theory

Heider (1946) originated balance theory to model three-person relationships and change in them. He referred to the situation where all the relationships in the triangle are positive (where no one involved feels the relationship is "wrong" or "bad") the "balanced condition." When this relationship changes, the triangle becomes imbalanced, and tends to see further changes to restore balance, as people involved feel that this imbalance is "wrong" (Heider, 1946).
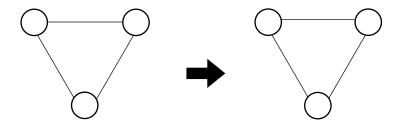

Figure 1

Application of Balance Theory to Celebrity Advertising

Balance theory can be applied in a case where advertising and product endorsement intervene as a mediator between sender and receiver. Dalakas and Levin applied balance theory to the relationship between a NASCAR driver's fans, sponsor, and the driver him-/herself. A driver's fans tend to have more favorable attitudes toward his/her sponsors and to dislike the sponsors of his/her rivals.

According to Dalakas and Levin, when there is imbalance, people will change their attitudes and/or behavior in a way that will restore balance. Individuals will tend to like whatever is associated with what they already like and dislike whatever is associated with what they already dislike; otherwise, there will not be balance. Dalakas and Levin produced a model of NASCAR fan likes and dislikes in relation to drivers and associated consumer products using the conception of "identification."

Identification

Tajfel and Turner (1986) developed social identity theory, according to which individuals consider other individuals or groups they belong to as "existences which are the same as them" through their identification. Fink, Parker, Brett, and Higgins (2009) tested how fans' identification with sports teams is changed by athletes' scandals. Their results show that level of identification is unlikely to change when fans identified closely with those athletes before the scandal and when the team leaders' apologies are good enough after the scandals. Thus, level of identification is a significant concept for the triangular relationship among consumers, advertising, and celebrities.

Hypotheses

High Identification

In the case where the consumer has high identification with the celebrity, this identification should be maintained even if the celebrity is involved in a scandal (Fink, et al., 2009). On the other hand, if a consumer doesn't have high identification with a celebrity, his or her impression of the celebrity may become negative as a result of scandal, and then also his or her impression of the sponsor company and its ads. Then the sponsor company may end the advertising relationship with the celebrity (Figure 2). In this way this triangular relationship becomes imbalanced (Heider, 1946).
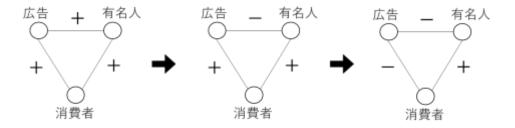

Figure 2

As already mentioned above, in balance theory, an imbalanced relationship among three parties has a disposition to change to a balanced condition. (Heider, 1946) In this case, if a consumer has high identification with a celebrity, they will more likely maintain a positive image of that celebrity (Fink, et al., 2009), as noted, and will change attitude toward sponsor to avoid imbalance condition. Thus, we formulated the following hypothesis.

H1: In the case that a consumer has high identification with a celebrity, when the celebrity is involved in a scandal, the effect on the consumer's attitude toward advertising involving that celebrity will be low.

Low Identification: Relation of Three Individuals

In contrast to 3-1, when consumers' identification with the celebrity is low, they are more likely to dislike that celebrity when s/he does something unscrupulous (Fink, et al., 2009) (Figure 3b). In this way, the relation of the three individuals becomes imbalanced (Heider 1946) by the newly negative relation between consumer and celebrity. However, this imbalanced condition can be rebalanced—to do so, the best solution for the sponsoring company is to fire the celebrity who caused the scandal. Therefore, we propose hypothesis 2 as follows:
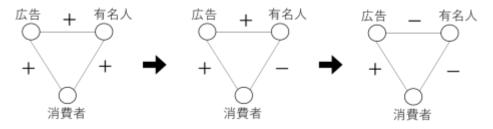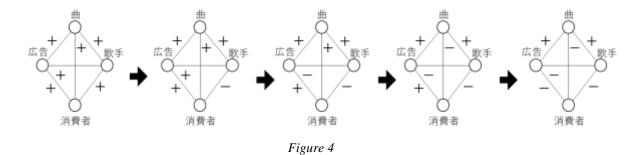

Figure 3

H2: In the case where consumer's identification toward a celebrity is low, when the celebrity causes a scandal and is fired from an endorsement role with a company, consumer attitudes toward the advertising will not change.

Low Identification: Square Relationship

So far, we have considered celebrities whose attractiveness in the market is themselves and their character. We call this kind of celebrity *attractiveness-based.* However, some celebrities are not merely attractiveness-based, for instance, musicians or athletes. These celebrities' "attractiveness" lies in their performance and ability; we call this group *performance-based* celebrities. It may be that the relation of an audience to a performance-based celebrity and the ways that relation may change may be quite different than in the case of an attractiveness-based different celebrity. As this implies, the type of triangular relationship we have outlined under balance theory might be insufficient to reflect these cases. To address this, we have separated the ostensible basis of a performance-based celebrity's attractiveness—his or her work or talent—from his or her "intrinsic" attractiveness, making the relationship with audience and advertising into a square.

For example, if a singer with whom a consumer has low identification causes a scandal, that person is supposed to come to dislike the singer (Fink, et al., 2009) (Figure 4b); then, to address that and achieve balance, the advertising company is expected to dismiss the singer from the ad (Figure 4c). However, if we imagine a triangle consisting of the audience, the singer, and the *song*, we again have an unbalanced condition—the audience may dislike the singer but like the song, despite the fact that the singer and the song are closely connected and indivisible. In this situation, we will expect the audience to come to dislike the song (Figure 4d), because altering one's attitude toward the song, which is strongly linked with the singer to whom one's attitude has already altered, will be easier than perceiving that the singer and the song, which are fundamentally connected, are quite different (Dalakas and Levin, 2005).

Figure 4

What should be noted here is that we assume the relationship between advertising and the song not to be a matter of whether the song is "used/unused as an advertising song," but whether there is a "match/unmatch in the image between advertising and song." This is shown by the fact that a song which formerly played in a TV ad for a given brand tends to remind the audience of the images in that TV ad, even if the song is no longer used by the brand. If we therefore, in the case of scandal, focus on that the relationship among three elements—the audience, the song, and the advertising—and have an unbalanced condition (Figure 4d), we see that changing one's attitude toward the advertising is easier for the audience than recognizing that the advertising and the song are different (Dalakas and Levin, 2005) (Figure 4d). Therefore, we propose hypothesis 3 as follows.

H3: In the case where consumer identification toward a celebrity is low, when the celebrity caused a scandal and is fired from an advertising role and when the consumer dislikes the professional performances of the celebrity, the effect on consumer attitudes toward the advertising will be low.

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Empirical Test

Survey Overview

To examine the empirical validity of the hypotheses, we conducted an empirical analysis. We employed the hypothetical scenario method used by Dube-Rioux, et al. (1988). We investigated 8 scenarios in total: 2 (by identification level; high/low) * 2 (by type of celebrity; charm/creation) * 2 (by consumer's impression toward celebrity's creation; like/dislike).

To assess attitudes toward ads, we adopted the measures developed by Perrien, Dussart, and Paul (1985), Madden, Allen, and Twible (1988), Burton and Lichtenstein (1988), and Holmes and Crocker (1987). We adopted a 7-point Likert-type scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"; participants answered 4 questions about consumer attitudes toward advertising before and after a scandal, to determine whether they would find it "interesting" by Perrien, Dussart, and Paul (1985), "favorable" by Madden, Allen, and Twible (1988), "uplifting" by Burton and Lichtenstein (1988), and "overall liking" by Holmes and Crocker (1987). The participants were 75 undergraduate students, who yielded 45 valid sets of responses (69.23%).

Hypothesis Testing

ANOVA was used to analyze the hypotheses proposed above. For the hypothesis 1 model, the overall F-value was 8.715 and the R^2 value was 0.237 and F-value was 8.715, statistically significant at the 1% level. Therefore, hypothesis 1 was supported. The mean value for before a scandal was 5.200 (standard deviation was 0.415) and for after, 3.467 (standard deviation was 0.415).

Table 1

F value (p)	R^2
8.715 (0.006)	0.237

For hypothesis 2, the overall F-value was 0.001, which was not significant. Therefore, hypothesis 2 was not supported. The mean value for before a scandal was 3.673 (standard deviation 0.402) and for after, 3.687 (standard deviation 0.402).

Table 2

F value (p)	R^2
0.001 (0.981)	0.000

For hypothesis 3, R^2 value was 0.271 and F-value was 9.642, which was statistically significant at the 1% model. Therefore, hypothesis 3 was supported. The mean for before a scandal was 4.479 (standard deviation 0.304), and for after, 3.143 (standard deviation was 0.304).

Table 3

F value (p)	R^2
9.642 (0.005)	0.271

Conclusion

Summary and Outcomes

We explained how audience attitude toward advertising is influenced by the triangular relationship among audience, advertising, and celebrity after a celebrity scandal using balance theory, which posits that changes in one relationship will lead to changes in others to maintain balance or congruency. The outcomes can be summarized as follows.

1. In the case where a consumer has high identification with a celebrity, when the celebrity causes a scandal, the change in the consumer's attitude toward the advertising will be low.

2. In the case where a consumer's identification toward a celebrity is low, when the celebrity causes a scandal and is fired from the advertising role, the consumer's attitude toward the advertising will not change.

3. In the case where a consumer's identification toward the celebrity is low, when the celebrity caused a scandal and is fired from advertising and when the consumer dislikes the celebrity's work, effect on consumer attitude toward the advertising will be low.

These three points were statistically and empirically supported, and clarify three points. First, it is appropriate to apply balance theory to a relationship consisting of audience, advertising, and celebrity. Second, level of identification plays an important part in the application of balance theory in this context. Third, balance theory, which was developed for a relationship of three elements, can be extended to four elements. These three contributions can be added to the body of knowledge on marketing research, developing the current state of science.

In addition, the outcomes of this study may have meaningful implications for what advertisers should do when celebrities they use in their ads are involved in scandals. First, attractiveness-based celebrities who are well known and popular may have many fans whose identification with them is high. If these celebrities are dismissed because of scandals, there is a risk that it will backfire on the advertiser: the audience may come to dislike the ad to avoid an imbalanced condition. Therefore, advertisers should not dismiss attractiveness-based celebrities who are well known and popular, even when they cause scandals.

Second, the attitude of the audience toward fresh, novice attractiveness-based celebrities (who are newly active in show business) who do not already have a large fanbase will be only partly formed and still changeable. In other words, they are more likely to come to be disliked due to scandals. Therefore, when advertisers dismiss those celebrities from endorsement roles promptly after scandals, they can maintain the positive attitude of the audience toward the ad.

Finally, when performance-based celebrities who do not have big fanbases cause scandals, the audience may come to have a negative impression toward not only those celebrities themselves but also their works or performances. Therefore, advertisers should not use scandal-prone performance-based celebrities in ads.

This research thus serves important results for marketing research and practice.

Limitations and Future Research

In this study, the experimental sample was limited to university students because of some restrictions. Their responses are meaningful to an extent, since they are also part of society; but they may not generalize to people

of other ages, occupations, tastes in celebrities, and ideas about celebrity scandal. Expanding the range of research participants will improve the reliability of our findings.

Also, this research considered performance-based celebrities who "create" their attractiveness themselves through their works and did not take up celebrities who do not create their own works, for instance, idol singers. If this kind of performance-based celebrities cause scandals and the attitude of their audience comes to be negative, the image of their songs may not change, because the relation between themselves and their songs may more easily become negative (they may be less closely bound together). This research may provide a meaningful foundation for future work logically and empirically testing the attitudes of audiences toward scandals involving performance-based celebrities who do not create by themselves and their effect on advertising involving those celebrities.

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