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Are Celebrity-Heroes Effective Endorsers? Exploring the Link between Hero, Celebrity, and Advertising Response

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In an exploratory approach, the study examines the relationship between hero and celebrity by reviewing key dimensions of the celebrity/hero debate: shallowness, flawed celebrity/hero, and narrowness of appeal. The cumulative findings of two studies suggest that attitudes toward celebrities in ads are most strongly influenced by attitude toward advertising in general and least by flawed celebrity/hero. The findings also indicate that the more shallow celebrities are perceived to be and the more narrow their appeal, the more negative the attitude. The research findings provide guidance for marketing practitioners as they develop endorsement strategies.

KEYWORDS *celebrities, hero, ad responses*

INTRODUCTION

The line between celebrity and hero has blurred. Some claim that traditional heroes no longer exist, while others argue that traditional heroes have simply been replaced and are now modern-day celebrities (Harris, 1994). While

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a consensus has not been reached, most people would agree that celebrities are quite popular and commonly used as endorsers in ads. Indeed, C. J. Choi and Berger (2010) argue that mass-mediated celebrities have a far-reaching global influence by pointing out that traditional news magazine subscription rates from 2000 to 2005 increased 2%, while celebrity news magazine subscriptions increased 18.7% over the same time frame. Does that mean society has elevated all celebrities to hero status? Must all heroes today also be celebrities? If so, how does this affect marketing practitioners in their brand endorsement strategies?

Despite common and widespread knowledge about the nature of hero and the nature of celebrity, research that relates hero and celebrity remains sparse. Celebrity as endorser has been examined extensively in the literature (e.g., Atken & Block, 1983; DeSarbo & Harshman, 1985; McCracken, 1989; Ohanian, 1991; Seno & Lukas, 2007). Yet, there has been little-to-no research in the field on heroes (e.g., Holt & Thompson, 2004; North, Bland, & Ellis, 2005), and when studies do focus on the hero-celebrity confluence, they usually are oriented toward professional athletes as endorsers (e.g., Shuart, 2007; Sukhdial, Aiken, & Kahle, 2002). This omission becomes of even greater magnitude in an era when the dimensions of celebrity and hero are merging in the minds of consumers (North et al.). Even more limited is the research examining the relationship between hero, celebrity, and consumer responses to ads displaying celebrities.

Therefore, the central purpose of the present paper is to advance our theoretical and practical understanding of this topic. Specifically, the research conducted for this paper applies a heroic theoretical framework with which to explore the relationship between celebrity and hero and the impact of such a relationship on key ad response variables (Harris, 1994). Two exploratory studies were designed to clarify the understanding of these relationships. Investigations into the nature of celebrities as modern day heroes are rare in spite of the cultural importance of the subject (Brown, 2010; North et al., 2005; Strate, 1994). The literature on celebrities in ads can be greatly enriched by exploring the relationship between celebrity and hero in a time when the two may be linked closer than ever before. Managers should find the results useful when selecting celebrities for ad campaigns.

CONFLUENCE OF CELEBRITY AND HERO

Distinctions and commonalities bridge the gulf between hero and celebrity. A hero may be defined as someone admired for achievements and noble qualities who has produced ideas or objects of considerable and lasting importance to society, and may or may not be well-known, while a celebrity is someone who is famous or celebrated for diverse reasons but is perceived

as producing ideas or objects that have had less, or no, impact on society for a short time (North et al., 2005). Marketers have parlayed celebrity fame into company and product endorsements in an effort to support brands, influence audiences, and increase purchase intentions, which research has shown to positively affect attitude toward a brand and purchase intention (e.g., Amos, Holmes, & Strutton, 2000; Erdogan, 1999; Ohanian, 1991). In marketing, a celebrity endorser is defined as someone who enjoys public recognition and uses it in support of a consumer good by appearing with that product in an ad (McCracken, 1989).

Today, contemporary heroes as celebrities are often created through extensive global communications efforts. According to Brown (201), the combination of media companies and the entertainment industry under multinational firms with worldwide distribution has allowed personalities to become “powerful sources of social influence through media and mediated events” (p. 77). As a result, consumers may have similar attitudes toward what constitutes a celebrity and what constitutes a hero (North et al., 2005). Conversely, some researchers view today’s heroes as famous simply for appearing on or in the media, rather than their intrinsic qualities (C. J. Choi & Berger, 2010). However, hero creation is unlikely today without media assistance (Allison & Goethals, 2011) because the media are motivated to develop heroes with an understanding that coverage of heroes increases circulation or viewership. Of course, because every good deed does not go unpunished, the media engage in *schadenfreude*, the idea that people enjoy watching successful people fail, to tear down the heroes as often as it creates them (Allison & Goethals).

While the exact nature of common ground between celebrity and hero is certainly debatable, there appears to be a redefining movement afoot of what constitutes heroic and what it means to be a celebrity. At the forefront of this reconstitution is the idea of style over substance. Celebrities heroes become well known through media exposure generated by self-promotion (Brown, 2010; Loftus, 1995) with performance, not heroic deed, more in demand by a celebrity-crazed public (C. J. Choi & Berger, 2010). Heroism may not be dead, but the concept of what constitutes a hero has been changed by the speed of dissemination through global communications (Drucker & Cathcart, 1994) to the point that Brown (2010) argues today’s version of heroes should be considered “pseudoheroes” because celebrities have usurped the role of traditional hero. For their part, North et al. (2005) listed Riefenstahl’s pro-Nazi newsreel-style propaganda films as an example of a mediated medium for hero-celebrity proliferation, while Cathcart (1994) pointed as far back as Alexander the Great putting his imprint on coins during his conquests as evidence of hero-celebrity confluence using the medium of the time. These examples would also lend themselves to studies on impression formation, an area that is beyond the scope of this paper. However, as the meanings of hero and celebrity become intertwined, future research

to understand how consumers may distinguish between the two may prove valuable.

EXPLORING THE CELEBRITY-HERO RELATIONSHIP

While heroes have long been present in human history, debate continues over whether we still have heroes, and if so, what is their nature (Harris, 1994). Since the 1960s, this debate has witnessed two opposing viewpoints. The pessimists (e.g., C. J. Choi & Berger, 2010; Strate, 1994) contend that traditional heroes no longer exist and that any modern day examples of heroes are not worthy of being named as such. In essence, the pessimists are disillusioned and claim that traditional heroes have deteriorated and now exist in the altered form of shallow celebrities. In contrast, optimists claim that traditional heroes have been replaced by contemporary heroes, some of whom may be celebrities. They argue that this is not bad, but instead is a manifestation of society's transitioning and vibrant flexibility (e.g., Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Klapp, 1969). Other research has been designed to advance our understanding of the nature of hero. For example, one investigation (Holt & Thompson, 2004) identified distinct viewpoints about hero, with the findings differentiating between two perspectives that, despite their seemingly opposite portrayals, both idealize the hero perspective. The first heroic model emphasizes the importance of respectability, achievement, and civic contributions, while the second stresses the rebellion, untamed potency, and self-reliance of the individual.

While the debate over the existence of traditional heroes persists and casts a shadow of uncertainty over the authenticity of contemporary heroes, what is certain is that the traditional heroic model is evolving and is gradually being re-configured within a contemporary society. From the perspective of the pessimists, the traditional heroic model has deteriorated and ceased to exist. For the optimists, traditional heroes have not ceased but have simply evolved into contemporary versions that display emerging dimensions that are congruent with what the socio-cultural historical era deems to be heroic. In either case, potential exists for celebrities, particularly those who are perceived as heroes, to be effective in promoting social issues, public opinion, and brands (Brown, 2010).

Harris (1994) summarized these opposing views, and the observations led to the conclusion that the debate about whether celebrities are modern day heroes plays out along three dimensions: shallowness, flawed complexity, and compartmentalization. These three dimensions were designed to encapsulate the core opposing viewpoints in the dialogue about the continuing existence of hero as celebrity. In concert, the characteristics capture debated issues related to shallowness, media-exposed hero-like qualities and flaws, and the narrowness of appeal.

According to the debate, shallowness relates to the depth of celebrity character (Harris, 1994). Thus, the celebrity may be known for having depth of character/qualities (or lack thereof), such as being a person of integrity, helping others, or possessing special talents and abilities—characteristics akin to the hero dimensions of morality, activity, and competence (North et al., 2005). The dimension of competence shows up in multiple studies (e.g., Allison & Goethals, 2011; S. M. Choi & Rifon, 2007) and relates to an individual's achievements and expertise, the latter being a sub-dimension of credibility, a source effect attributed to celebrity endorsers.

The notion of flawed complexity relates to the idea of a flawed celebrity/hero and involves the combination of famed features or characteristics and celebrity flaws that are revealed by the mass media as part of their obligation to engage in the *schadenfreude* (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Celebrities are viewed as complex because of the heightened media exposure of not only the hero-like characteristics that catapulted them to fame but, at the same time, their flaws as well. From this perspective, a celebrity may be viewed as a type of modern day hero in spite of their revealed flaws.

Compartmentalization demonstrates the scope of celebrity appeal and is conceptualized in terms of the narrowness and limited breadth of appeal (Harris, 1994). According to conclusions reached by Harris regarding the ongoing debate, pessimists tend to characterize celebrities as shallow reflections of the heroes of yesteryear, negatively evaluate celebrities as lacking hero-like qualities, and perceive them as ineffective because of their compartmental, narrow appeal. Comparatively, optimists positively view the combination of flaws and hero-like qualities and compartmentalization, and assert that modern day celebrities are not without traditional heroic qualities.

Later research presented additional dimensions of interest in expanding our current understanding of heroes and celebrities. Those dimensions were aimed to tap consumers' attitudes toward their favorite hero or favorite celebrity. Two dimensions were found on lists of both favorite celebrity and favorite hero: (a) ordinariness and (b) drive for affiliation. (See Table 1 for a listing of dimensions found for celebrities, heroes, and both.) Among the dimensions common to attitudes toward both celebrity and hero, ordinariness and drive for affiliation were dimensions revealed by North et al. (2005). In that research, ordinariness describes an everyman view of the individual, while drive for affiliation indicates a desire by the respondent to be similar to, or associated with, the hero or celebrity.

Nevertheless, the North et al. (2005) study was designed to deepen our understanding of an individual's attitudes toward heroes and celebrities rather than to investigate the interplay between a celebrity and a hero. In summary, the literature appears to either investigate consumer attitudes toward heroes and celebrities or to center on the debate about how heroes

TABLE 1 Unique and Common Dimensions of Heroes and Celebrities

Unique Dimensions		Dimensions Common to Hero and Celebrity
Hero	Celebrity	
Dimensions of Consumer Attitudes Toward their Favorite Hero or Celebrity		
Inspirational ^a	Likable ^e	Ordinariness ^f
Leadership ^a	Attractive ^e	Drive for affiliation ^f
Emotional attachment ^f	Disdain ^f	
Dimensions that Encapsulate Core Opposing Viewpoints about the Nature of Hero and Celebrity		
Moral ^a	Credible ^e	Competent ^{a,b}
Good ^d	Genuineness ^b	Shallowness ^c (competence maps to lack of shallowness)
Strong ^d	Exciting ^b	Flawed Complexity ^c
Active ^d	Sociability ^b	Compartmentalization ^c

SOURCES:

^aAllison & Goethals (2011).^bChoi & Rifon (2007).^cHarris (1994).^dOsgood, Suchi, & Tannenbaum (1975).^eMcCracken (1989).^fNorth, Bland, & Ellis (2005).

are distinct from celebrities. To our knowledge, ours is the first to focus on the later in an ad context. Table 1 provides a brief overview of some of the key dimensions in these areas of research.

The Shallowness Counterpart: Source Effects

The idea behind celebrity shallowness is straightforward. A celebrity who is *not* shallow rose to fame for having depth of character or special qualities (or lack thereof), such as being a person of integrity, helping others, or possessing unique talents and abilities (Harris, 1994). These qualities are varied and may range from being a trusted person to one that has special talents—that is, competence—that set him or her apart as a highly skilled expert in some area. On the other hand, a celebrity who is shallow rose to fame based on superficial characteristics, such as good looks. To clarify, an athlete, for example, may be known for his/her special on-field talents and abilities but have serious personal shortcomings off-field. However, from the perspective of shallowness, he/she came to be known and recognized by broad audiences for his/her special athletic talents. In other words, the individual achieved celebrity status through a unique talent that is not shallow rather than for his/her flawed behavior. In a similar vein, a celebrity may be known for her beauty and appearance and may also have a high moral character. However, the celebrity obtained fame in diverse

places through her good looks and figure, and not through her high moral character.

The contention here is that the shallowness dimension has a counterpart in the celebrity literature in terms of researched source effects of celebrity endorsement, such as credibility or attractiveness. For example, an analysis of the celebrity literature revealed that celebrities may be famed for a range of distinct characteristics, such as their unique performance capabilities (i.e., competence in music, acting, athletics, etc.), credibility, attractiveness, familiarity, expertise, or trustworthiness (Amos et al., 2008). Although each of these dimensions is uniquely different in nature and influence, some are arguably related to depth of character, such as trustworthiness, while others are not, such as attractiveness. Given that Amos et al. demonstrated that the range of celebrity characteristics is generally associated with important measures of advertisement effectiveness, one could assume that level of perceived shallowness is associated with attitudes toward celebrities. Thus, the first research question asks the following:

RQ1: Does level of perceived celebrity shallowness relate to consumer attitudes toward celebrities in advertising?

The Flawed Celebrity/Hero Counterpart: Meaning Transfer

Celebrities not only possess certain characteristics that place them in the media spotlight, but that same media attention has the potential to expose their flaws. Thus, the constellation of celebrity meaning may encapsulate not only the very characteristics that made the celebrity famous but, through the phenomenon of *schadenfreude*, their flaws as well. Tiger Woods, famed for his extraordinary golfing abilities that place him squarely into the competence dimension for both celebrity and hero, may now discredit a company or product because of his exposed extramarital indiscretions. In fact, endorsement deals with Accenture, AT&T, Gatorade, Gillette, Proctor & Gamble, and Tag Hauer were all either allowed to expire or were cancelled in the wake of his 2009 infidelity scandal. Over the years, a number of other celebrities (e.g., Mel Gibson, Michael Phelps, and Britney Spears) have experienced similar consequences as a result of bad behavior that affected their public perceptions.

The association between the use of celebrities in ads and typical ad response variables has long been recognized (Atkin & Block, 1983; Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995). Likewise, the association between negative information about celebrities and important measures of advertising effectiveness has been established (Till & Shimp, 1998). For example, consumers may associate the revealed negative information or flawed characteristic of the celebrity in the ad with the attributes of the product that contain important points of meaning for them (Till & Shimp, 1998; Tenser, 2004). Thus, the

higher the level of perceived celebrity flaws, the lower the attitudes toward their appearance in ads should be. Stated differently, the more perceived congruence between heroes and celebrities, the more positive should be attitudes toward celebrities in ads. Therefore, the following research question is posed:

RQ2: Does perceived level of flawed celebrity/hero relate to consumer attitudes toward celebrities in ads?

Compartmentalization Counterpart: Match-Up

The notion of compartmentalization captures the ability of a celebrity to appeal to a specific target audience as opposed to a general audience. Indeed, celebrities may be selected to match diverse audiences that are narrower in scope than broad audiences, with advertisers determined to pick credible and attractive celebrities who match both their brand and the needs of the ads' target audience (Maciak & Shanklin, 1994). When the celebrity in an ad is appropriately matched with the brand image and the target audience, attitude change and formation are influenced (Shanklin & Miciak, 1997; Till & Busler, 2000; Costanzo & Goodnight, 2005). This "match-up" hypothesis has been tested in various contexts with fairly consistent results: a match-up between the celebrity in the endorsement and the brand (Friedman & Friedman, 1979; Kahle & Homer, 1985; Till & Busler, 1998; Kamins, 1990) or between the celebrity and the product (Kamins; Till & Busler, 1998; Stafford, Stafford, & Day, 2002) produces more positive advertising responses. Yorkston, Nunes, and Mata (2010) found that perceptions of fit are affected by the characteristics of the product as well as the characteristics of the consumer. Thus, because of the unique ability to match up and appeal to specific audiences (i.e., compartmentalization), the extent of appeal may influence attitudes toward celebrities in ads. The following research question captures this idea:

RQ3: Does perceived celebrity compartmentalization (i.e., celebrity-specific audience match) relate to attitudes toward celebrities in ads?

Controlling for Attitude Toward Advertising in General

Attitude toward advertising in general should be controlled for two reasons. First, attitude toward advertising in general has been found to influence attitudes toward specific ads (Lutz, 1985), while Mehta (2000) found that attitude toward advertising in general is associated with liking to look at ads and with the amount of attention given to ads. Building on these findings, attitude toward advertising in general may associate with a preference for a match between the ad spokesperson and the consumer. The reason for this

expectation is based on the presumption that consumers who generally have a positive attitude toward ads also have a positive attitude toward a celebrity who matches the audience to which they belong. Second, an important implication of Mehta's study is that attitude toward advertising in general is associated with attitudes toward particular creative aspects of ads as well, such as a celebrity image. If attitude toward advertising in general relates to perceived audience match and with attitudes toward celebrities in ads, then it is important to control for attitude toward advertising in general in determining predictive valence. While there is precedent for anticipating these relationships, the question of the influence of attitude toward advertising in general in the flawed celebrity/hero context is largely exploratory.

STUDY 1

The first study was designed to explore the capability of the set of specified independent variables (shallowness, compartmentalization, and flawed celebrity/hero) as well as the control variable (attitude toward ads in general), in predicting attitude toward using celebrities in ads and to assess and interpret these relationships. This is accomplished by determining the relative importance of each independent variable in the prediction of the dependent variable through simultaneous assessments of the selected variables.

Method

To address the research questions, a survey was developed that contained measures of the three independent variables (shallowness, compartmentalization, and flawed celebrity/hero), the control variable (attitude toward ads in general), and the dependent variable (attitude toward using celebrities in ads). The survey was administered to students in a university environment. The Millennial generation cohort—typically defined as those born after 1980 (Norum, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2010)—was selected because celebrities have the greatest influence in this segment (Morton, 2002). Although Cunningham, Thomas, and Murphy (1974) and Park and Lessig (1977) argue that students respond differently from most household consumers, students were deemed appropriate for the study because they are homogenous (Sternthal, Tybout, & Calder, 1994), and other researchers (e.g., Lamb & Stern, 1980; Bergmann & Grahn, 1997) argue that student subjects generally respond in a similar fashion to the population overall.

Participants and Procedure

Two hundred fifty-two students enrolled at a large Midwestern university participated in the study for class credit (age $M = 24$, gender distribution = 51% male). The ethnic mix was largely Caucasian (74.1%), with additional

ethnic groups consisting of African-American (11.1%), Hispanic (7.4%), Asian (1.9%) and “other” (3.7%).

Measurement

Following previous research methodologies measuring key advertising variables, a subset of commonly used items was selected (Lau-Gesk & Meyers-Levy, 2009). The items for attitude toward using celebrities in ads included three bipolar items: bad/good; negative/positive; and unfavorable/favorable. For attitude toward advertising in general, three items were employed: bad/good; negative/positive; and unfavorable/favorable. Five items were adapted from the Harris (1994) conceptualization to measure compartmentalization and measured using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Items in the scale included: (a) Most celebrities appeal primarily to a narrow audience (e.g., teens, seniors, etc.); (b) Most celebrities appeal to a broad range of people (reverse coded); (c) Most celebrities appeal only to a certain type of person; (d) Most celebrities are popular with all kinds of people (reverse coded); and (e) Most celebrities have mass appeal (reverse coded).

Because scales did not exist to measure shallowness and flawed celebrity/hero, the conceptual definitions of the Harris (1994) framework guided two pre-tests. These pre-tests were designed to develop items to measure these constructs. One hundred and three business students at a large Midwestern university were recruited to participate for class credit, with students randomly assigned to either pre-test 1 or pre-test 2. Guided by our conceptual framework, in pre-test 1, participants were asked to describe a celebrity (i.e., athlete, actor, actress, musician, politician, etc.) whose image is primarily based on superficial qualities. They were then asked to describe a celebrity who is known for depth of character and other things beyond superficial qualities. Building upon the most commonly mentioned bipolar themes, a 5-item scale was developed to measure celebrity shallowness (sincere/insincere; honest/dishonest; dependable/not dependable; trustworthy/not trustworthy; credible/not credible).

Building on the conceptual definitions of celebrity/hero, it is anticipated that commonly held ideas about hero and celebrity would reveal a combination of famed characteristics as well as potential flaws. In pre-test 2, respondents were asked to describe the attributes of a hero. They were then asked to describe the attributes of a celebrity to which they had recently been exposed (i.e., athlete, actor, actress, musician, politician, etc.). Responses revealed the complex nature of the celebrity and hero. For example, some of the items listed for hero and celebrity—such as talented, skilled, and leader—were congruent with definitions for both and can be found in the dimensions on either list (e.g., competence and leader). However, other items were related only to celebrity and pointed to flaws, such as vanity, uncaring, and money motivated. Thus, celebrities apparently not only possess

some of the characteristics of heroes but may also be associated with flaws more readily. Having established that the terms “hero” and “celebrity” elicit a combination of famed characteristics and possible flaws, and supported by previous research (Allison & Goethals, 2011; North et al., 2005) demonstrating congruence of dimensions shared by both terms, four Likert items were developed to tap ideas about celebrity and hero simultaneously. Directions asked respondents to rate their extent of agreement with each statement (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) for the following items: (a) I believe that today’s celebrities are modern day heroes; (b) I look to celebrities as role models; (c) Today’s celebrities should be regarded as modern day heroes; and (d) I believe that most people see celebrities as modern day heroes.

Results

Using the 20 items measuring attitude toward celebrities in ads, compartmentalization, celebrity shallowness, flawed celebrity/hero, and attitude toward ads in general, an exploratory factor analysis ($n = 252$) was conducted via maximum likelihood extraction method and varimax rotation. This analysis indicated that five factors should be retained. The five factor solution accounted for 71.8% of the variance in the data set and yielded eigenvalues ranging from 1.5 to 5.2. The three items measuring attitude toward celebrities in ads loaded on that factor, and the three items measuring attitude toward advertising in general loaded on that factor. Likewise, the items designed to measure compartmentalization, shallowness, and flawed celebrity/hero loaded on the appropriate factors, respectively. No evidence of cross-loading was apparent. Table 2 presents the means, standard deviation, reliability estimates, and number of items in each scale. The alphas resulting from this analysis ranged from .76 to .96.

Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between the dimensions of hero and attitude toward using celebrities in ads, with attitude toward advertising in general functioning as a control variable. This analysis approach was selected because it is the most appropriate method of analysis when the research objective is to examine a single dependent variable (attitude toward celebrities in ads) that is anticipated

TABLE 2 Study 1 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Reliability	Number Number of Items
Attitude toward celebrities in ads	3.22	1.35	.96	3
Attitude toward ads in general	3.85	1.34	.95	3
Shallowness	4.17	1.26	.83	5
Compartmentalization	3.64	1.15	.76	5
Flawed celebrity/hero	2.59	1.30	.76	4

TABLE 3 Study 1 Multiple Regression Results with Attitude Toward Celebrities in Ads as the Dependent Variable

Independent Variables	Standardized Estimates (<i>t</i> statistic)
Attitude toward ads in general	.43* (8.12)
Shallowness	-.18* (3.33)
Compartmentalization	-.19* (3.62)
Flawed celebrity/hero	.10** (1.95)

Model $F = 30.25^*$. $R^2 = .33$.

* $p < .01$. ** $p \leq .05$.

to be related to multiple independent variables (shallowness, compartmentalization, flawed celebrity/hero) (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). Additionally, multiple regression was selected because it permits us to determine the relative importance of each independent variable in the prediction of the dependent variable by making simultaneous assessments. In particular, regression provides an avenue for determining the direction (positive or negative) and the magnitude of each independent variable.

Shallowness, flawed celebrity/hero, and compartmentalization were modeled simultaneously, controlling for attitude toward advertising in general, with attitude toward using celebrities in advertisements as the dependent variable. Results of the regression model are summarized in Table 3. Shallowness and compartmentalization are both significantly and negatively related to attitudes toward celebrities in ads (shallowness: $\beta = -.18$, t -value = 3.33, $p < .01$; compartmentalization: $\beta = -.19$, $t = 3.62$, $p < .01$). The analysis also revealed positive relationships between flawed celebrity/hero and attitude toward celebrities in general as well as attitude toward advertising in general and attitude toward celebrities in ads (flawed celebrity/hero: $\beta = .10$, $t = 1.95$, $p \leq .05$; attitude toward ads in general: $\beta = .43$, $t = 8.12$, $p < .01$). Based on these results, attitude toward advertising in general is the most important predictor, followed by shallowness and compartmentalization, with flawed celebrity/hero being the least important predictor of attitude toward celebrities in ads. While significant as a predictor, flawed celebrity/hero does not warrant the same attention that should be allocated to the other variables in the model.

Discussion

These results indicate that the more celebrities are perceived as specific and narrow, the more negatively they are perceived in ads. Moreover, the findings reveal that regarding celebrities as modern day heroes is positively associated with using them in ads. Hence, the notion of celebrities as heroes exists in today's society—a factor that can be beneficial to practitioners if implemented appropriately. The idea of flawed celebrity/hero may imply that

today's celebrities are often considered heroes and may suggest that society is willing to accept celebrities as heroes with their flaws still intact, and with or without redemption. Gumpert (1994) argues that the scrutiny celebrities receive today through the media has fostered a desire by consumers to reveal celebrity flaws, the *schadenfreude*, but it may just be the flaw that makes them memorable, and perhaps even likable. This may indicate society's forgiving nature, at least to some degree, and was underscored when flawed celebrity/hero was the least significant predictor of using celebrities in ads.

Likewise, study results show that the more perceived shallowness (in terms of *not* being sincere, honest, dependable, etc.), the more negative the attitude toward celebrities in ads. Taken together with the findings of flawed celebrity/hero, these results suggest that while celebrities share some characteristics of heroes, if they are perceived as shallow, then celebrities may not be perceived positively in ads. Such findings have critical implications for advertisers because if a particular celebrity was perceived as shallow, then consumers may not view that celebrity positively, and hence, the attitude toward the ad may be negative as well. Finally, attitude toward ads in general is an important positive predictor of attitude toward celebrities in ads. This is hardly a surprising finding, in light of existing advertising research, but one that does suggest that consumers should at least feel positive toward advertising to view celebrities positively in ads.

STUDY 2

While Study 1 added to the understanding of celebrity as hero in terms of consumer attitudes toward ads with celebrities, Study 2 was designed to test whether celebrities who differ by level of perceived shallowness have an effect on ad response variables. More specifically, this second study was developed in an effort to further clarify the shallowness dimension of celebrities through an experiment. This choice was based on: (a) Harris's (1994) finding that the shallowness dimension had the most useful insights; (b) findings from our first study that indicate shallowness is an important predictor; and (c) personal observations about a dichotomy within this construct. The expectation is that level of shallowness does matter, but thus far, this anticipation remains untested.

Method

To test the hypotheses, an experiment was designed to examine the differences in advertising response variables based on perceptions of the two levels of celebrity character, shallow versus deep.

Participants and Procedure

Forty-five students enrolled at a large Midwestern university participated in the study for class credit (age $M = 22$, gender distribution = 80% female). The ethnic mix was largely Caucasian (75.6%), with additional ethnic groups consisting of African-American (8.9%), Hispanic (6.7%), Asian (4.4%), and "other" (4.4%).

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of two experimental treatments (shallow character or deep character) with manipulation created through scenarios. In one treatment (shallow) subjects were instructed to think about a celebrity (i.e., athlete, actor, actress, musician, politician, etc.) who is noted mainly for shallow features, such as their looks, body, wealth, or inheritance. In the second treatment, subjects were asked to think of a celebrity who is noted mainly for deep character features, such as special talents/abilities, desire to help others, or ability to give help successfully. Because the manipulation of shallow versus deep character celebrity features was established in the Study 1 pretest, and this manipulation information was used in Study 2's instructions, an additional manipulation check was not warranted. After reading the scenario, subjects were asked to assume that the celebrity of which they were thinking was featured in an ad for one particular brand of a product that they had been considering buying. They were also asked to assume that several brands exist in the particular product category, with each brand approximately equal on important attributes. As in Study 1, and following the pattern of others who have measured key advertising measures, a subset of commonly used items was selected (Lau-Gesk & Meyers-Levy, 2009). Subjects were asked to rate their feelings (bad/good; dislike/like; uninteresting/interesting; irritating/non-irritating) about an advertisement for the particular brand they were considering using the celebrity (deep vs. shallow) of which they had thought. Next, they rated their feelings (bad/good; negative/positive; unfavorable/favorable) about the advertised brand. Purchase intention was assessed using a three-item scale (unlikely/likely; impossible/possible; improbable/probable). Finally, demographic characteristics were collected.

Results

All scales had acceptable reliability estimates ($\alpha = .86$ for attitude toward the ad; $\alpha = .88$ for attitude toward the brand; $\alpha = .91$ for purchase intention). As shown in Table 4, the means for both attitude toward the ad and brand were significantly higher for celebrities noted for deep character as opposed to shallow character features. For purchase intention, however, the means were not significantly different ($F = 1.96$; $p < .10$).

Discussion

Results of Study 2 suggest that attitudes toward the ad and brand are influenced by whether the celebrity is known for deep vs. shallow character

TABLE 4 Study 2 Means and Test Statistics

Dependent Variables	Scenarios	
	Shallow Celebrity Character	Deep Celebrity Character
Attitude toward the ad <i>F</i> = 3.08, <i>p</i> < .05; two-tailed test	3.53	4.25
Attitude toward the brand <i>F</i> = 3.38, <i>p</i> < .05; two-tailed test	3.77	4.51
Purchase intentions <i>F</i> = 1.96, <i>p</i> < 10; two-tailed test	3.40	3.97

features. These findings are consistent with those of Study 1 and strengthen the assertion that perceptions of celebrity shallowness are an important factor to be considered when selecting an appropriate endorser for a product. However, it is interesting to note that while the results reveal that differences in celebrity shallowness do influence ad and brand attitudes, such differences do not result in more actionable purchase intention.

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The present research contributes to our current understanding of the impact of celebrities in ads by applying a meaningful heroic theoretical framework to explore distinctions and commonalities that bridge the gulf between hero and celebrity. The Harris (1994) framework provides three dimensions that are designed to account for the opposing viewpoints in the dialogue about the continuing existence of hero as celebrity, including perceived celebrity shallowness, media-exposed hero-like qualities and flaws, and the narrowness of celebrity appeal. The two-stage exploratory research indicates that attitudes toward celebrities in ads are most strongly influenced by attitude toward advertising in general, followed by shallowness and compartmentalization. Though significant, flawed celebrity/hero has the least influence on attitudes toward celebrities in ads. The strong impact of attitude toward advertising in general suggests that promotional strategies using celebrities should be aimed at audiences who like advertising – for example, people watching the Super Bowl. It is possible that audiences who like advertising and celebrities in ads appreciate the entertainment aspect of celebrity endorsements. While this is just speculation, the recent Super Bowl advertisement lineup featured numerous celebrity-endorsed brands (e.g., Justin Bieber, Ozzy Osbourne, Faith Hill, Eminem, Danica Patrick, and Kim Kardashian). Therefore, future research should attempt to understand the existence and nature of such a relationship.

The next most influential variables are compartmentalization and shallowness. From a managerial perspective, these variables have one thing in

common: they are controllable in that advertisers may selectively choose a deeper, less shallow celebrity to endorse their product as well as one who appeals to a broad audience. For example, Mariska Hargitay, known for her poignant portrayal of Detective Olivia Benson on *Law & Order: SVU*, demonstrates depth of character not just for her work on the drama, but for her efforts on behalf of victims of sexual assault. In contrast, Paris Hilton, who is known simply for being Paris Hilton, is an example of an electronically mediated celebrity hero known only for appearing in the media rather than for any intrinsic qualities (C. J. Choi & Berger, 2010). In fact, one of Hilton's most recent media appearances was a result of her August 2010 arrest for possession of cocaine. Based on the findings from both studies, it is likely that overall, Hargitay would be significantly favored over Hilton as a celebrity endorser. However, given the match-up hypothesis and the documented effects of congruency theory, it is possible that shallow celebrities may actually be preferred for products exhibiting similar shallow characteristics. This is also a topic that demands additional research.

Flawed celebrity/hero is the least important predictor, and, from a managerial perspective, is the least controllable in that a celebrity's actions may result in negative publicity. But, depending on the nature and severity of the problems that celebrities get into, people may be willing to accept flaws in the celebrity. As Gumpert (1994) points out, the flaw grips the imagination instead of an unblemished virtue. In this regard, perhaps such celebrities are seen as human, and less of a hero. For instance, Woods has seemingly lost all credibility and hero status—and countless endorsement deals—due to his marital indiscretions that dominated the media at the end of 2009 and the first half of 2010. The golfer then went about redeeming himself on both tracts toward redemption posited by Allison and Goethals (2011) by first making a moral turn via a public apology in February 2010, then focusing on his golf game to earn back his hero status. Nike continues to back the former top-ranked golfer, but will that be enough to restore his tarnished image? Contrast that with Downey, Jr. who spent much of the latter part of the 1990s in and out of court, prison and rehab for substance abuse. His current hero status was redeemed, however, again through moral change—a compelling admission of his problems on the Oprah Winfrey Show—and competence in performance. The actor, once the butt of celebrity scandal punch lines, is now a hero with critically acclaimed and top-grossing movies such as “Iron Man” and “Tropic Thunder.” While both celebrities focus on achieving redemption through moral choice and display of competence, perhaps there is a certain level or type of flaw that is acceptable in celebrities as heroes, and, in fact, may be the trait that is celebrated by consumers (Gumpert, 1994). Downey's case supports this claim, while Wood's redemption remains inconclusive.

While additional research should be conducted to examine this idea, the important implications for marketing practitioners require that future endorsement strategies go beyond simple concerns of matching the brand

characteristics with those of the celebrity, and ensuring that celebrities scored high on the dimensions related to source effects. Marketing managers may now want to examine their endorsement candidates in terms of flawed celebrity/hero for possible flaws that could either led to positive support for the celebrity and brand, or fallout that could adversely affect brand attitudes. In either case, a significant change in current strategies would require managers to precede any celebrity selection by examining spokesperson options that emphasize the dimensions exhibited by heroes.

Limitations and Future Research

The study is not without limitations. First, its findings may not generalize to the non-student population. However, this provides opportunities for future researchers to investigate these matters in different ethnic, religious, income, and age segments. Deep versus shallow celebrities were tested at a broad level. Future research should consider specific instances of celebrity endorsements within the hero framework. Likewise, the pencil-and-paper scenario is limited in its ability to account for responses to celebrities in ads within other media or social contexts, such as the context of television programming or visiting with friends. It may be that responses to celebrities in ads is tempered by the presence of social others, for example. While the present study did not aim to validate the scales developed from the Harris (1994) framework, future research should seek to validate the scales, strengthening our understanding of these constructs.

Future research should consider additional hero-celebrity dimensions and how they may relate to key attitudinal variables. From the perspective of the hero-celebrity optimists, traditional heroes have not ceased but have simply evolved into contemporary versions that display dimensions reflective of what the socio-cultural historical era deems to be heroic. Future research should consider those dimensions in a contemporary context. As a case in point, the temporal and/or the magnitude dimension of hero-celebrity should be investigated. Some heroic acts push unknown citizen(s) into the national limelight for a brief period, such as Captain "Sully" Sullenberger, the pilot who landed his disabled plane in the Hudson River,¹ saving 155 passengers. In this context, the temporal/magnitude dimension that accompanied such momentary heroic acts may influence attitudes differently, compared to hero-celebrity dimensions that are more characteristic of sports or Hollywood celebrities who appear in the limelight over a lifetime. An interesting but unexplored avenue for future research pertains to media-created celebrity-heroes that are in the spotlight for a moment. For example, the so-called octomom was catapulted to fame through mass mediated efforts.² This presents the possibility of identification and investigation of additional dimensions in the evolving hero-celebrity model that may

influence consumer attitudes through processes that are quite distinct from those previously studied.

In concert, the findings of the present study suggest a blending of pessimistic and optimistic viewpoints. It appears that consumers optimistically appraise celebrities for any hero-like qualities. At the same time, consumers seem to mirror the optimist viewpoint as they participate in and witness the mass mediated hero production, proliferation, destruction, and redemption. Similar to historic heroes, hero production and proliferation in the case of contemporary celebrities appears to occur through the same process—using the communications medium of the time (Cathcart, 1994).

The results also indicate that any overlap between the nature of hero and celebrity appears to be is restricted to depth of character. While some researchers (e.g., Brown, 2010; C. J. Choi & Berger, 2010; Strate, 1994) may be correct in claiming that today's celebrity heroes are famous simply for their media appearances rather than their intrinsic qualities, one potential implication of the findings of the present study is that consumers are influenced when their celebrities rise to the status of hero through depth of character, not merely by appearing in the media. The days of looking at celebrities for their celebrity value may be over. Consumers seem ready and willing to support spokespeople who present the characteristics of heroes as much as the dimensions of celebrity. In other words, in the world of endorsement, it is no longer enough to be famous for being famous, one must also be heroic.

NOTES

1. Special thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this insight.
2. Special thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

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