



THE STRATEGIC VALUE OF ATTRACTIVE INFLUENCERS FOR ADVERTISING COMMUNICATION: THE INFLUENCE OF PARASOCIAL INTERACTION PROCESSES ON THE PERSUASIVE EFFECT OF BRAND PLACEMENTS

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ABSTRACT: *Although brand placements can be seen more and more frequently in social media channels of so-called “influencers”, current brand placement research has rarely focused on the persuasive influence of these media characters. The “Balance Model of Product Placement Effects” of Russell and Stern (2006) began to integrate both, the recipient and the recipient’s specific perception of the media context, into brand placement research. The result of these considerations is a triadic connection between the recipient, the acting media characters and the placed brands. Addressing this, the following study investigates the mediating influence of cognitive phenomenon of parasocial interactions to an influencer of a YouTube make-up tutorial as well as her specific attitude/valence towards the brands in her immediate context. Brand perception, purchase intention and actual purchase of the presented brand were measured as dependent variables of advertising effectiveness.*

KEY WORDS: *Strategic advertising communication, Social media, brand placements, Parasocial interactions, Balance model.*

1. PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

The purpose of this piece of research is to find out if brand placements in online formats such as YouTube channels have a positive advertising effect on the placed product (Gröner, 2020).

This paper also attempts to integrate the effect of other media-psychological influencing variables (character attractiveness and physical addressing style of the media character as well as the valence between brand and media character) into this

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field of research (Knoll et al., 2015; Gröner, Raul & Bayram, 2018) and to support them empirically.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to empirically examine the strategic value of attractive influencers for the advertising industry with regard to the communication instrument of brand placements (cf. Gröner, 2020) in the sense of Russell and Stern (2006), one must deal with two relevant aspects. How do the recipients perceive the influencer and what is the relationship between the influencer and the brand presented?

In response to the first question, the media-psychological phenomenon of parasocial interactions, or PSI for short, offers a substantial explanatory approach. Klimmt et al. (2006, p. 302) conceptualize PSI as the “viewers’ responses to media personae as being composed of different cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral processes [...]. These processes follow on initial impression formation (or persona recognition), can emerge into different interaction patterns, can change dynamically within the course of media exposure, and are strongly influenced both by persona and viewer variables”. This differentiated conceptualization of the independent affective, cognitive, and conative PSI processes during the actual reception (Gröner, 2021) is thereby based on the two-level model of parasocial interaction (cf. Schramm & Knoll, 2015). According to this model, in addition to the obtrusiveness, persistence, and (physical, character or plot) attractiveness of the persona, the persona’s principal behaviors, such as direct addressing, have a major influence on the emergence of PSI. The stronger the addressing of the persona is perceived by the recipient, the more intense PSI the recipient should experience (Gröner et al., 2018) and the more attractive the media character should be perceived (Path *a* and *b*; Figure 1). In this context, several studies have already demonstrated that perceived character attractiveness has a positive influence on the emerging PSI (Knoll et al., 2015), which means that character attractiveness consequently has a mediating influence of perceived address on PSI (Path $a \times c$; Figure 1).

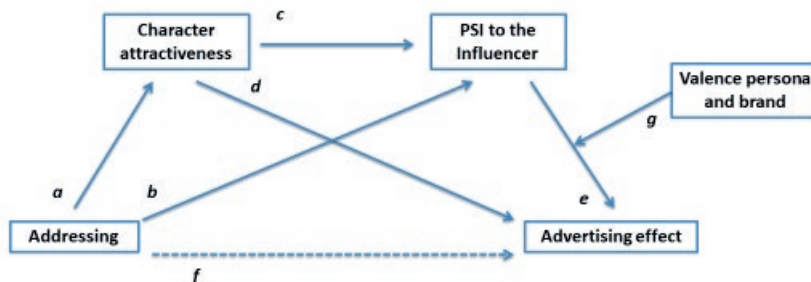


Figure 1. Assumed mechanism of action.

According to Knoll et al. (2015), the accumulated impressions and experiences with the persona are stored in the viewer’s memory as a relational schema in the form

of an individual PSI profile. In this context, a specific coupling of two stimuli (e.g., persona and brand) can lead to an association of both schemas (Knoll et al., 2015; Gröner, 2018) whereby strong PSI should have a positive effect on advertising impact (Pathbrand perception, purchase intention and actual purchase behavior; Path *e*; Figure 1) (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Knoll et al., 2015). Above all, actual purchasing behavior has hardly been analyzed in this field of research.

With regard to the question of the relationship between media character and brand, Russell and Stern (2006) name two relevant factors influencing advertising effects. One is the intensity of the relationship, i.e. whether both are strongly or weakly associated with each other by the recipient. Secondly, the valence of the relationship, i.e. whether the media character likes the placed brand or not. According to the “Balance Model of Product Placement Effects” (Russell & Stern, 2006), this means in detail that intensive parasocial interactions with a persona with positively evaluated character attractiveness have an advertising-promoting effect on the impact of brand placements above all when the connection between persona and brand is of positive valence (Path *g*; Figure 1) (Russell & Stern, 2006). “Following this reasoning, the media character – brand relationship (strength/valence) exerts a moderating influence on the described process depicted by a vertical arrow influencing the consumer’s reactions toward the brand PSI” (Path *g*; Figure 1) (Schramm & Knoll, 2015, p. 560). Figure 1 summarizes the predicted mechanism of action.

3. METHOD AND STUDY DESIGN

A 2×2 between-subjects experimental design with the experimental factors of physical addressing (high vs. low) and valence between persona and brand (positive vs. negative) allow for the investigation of the predicted mechanism of action.

The setting of a YouTube make-up tutorial was chosen as a stimulus for various reasons. On the one hand, branded products are an essential part of this social media setting, which minimizes reactance effects with regard to the brand message. On the other hand, in this media segment it is possible to produce an authentic stimulus oneself with comparatively little effort. In addition, the content can be adapted exactly to the research design and an unknown media character can be selected. During the 8 minutes and 23 seconds long self-produced YouTube make-up tutorial, the persona uses a foundation, concealer, powder, bronzer, watercolor powder, blush, eyebrow pencil and mascara of the Douglas brand and visibly interacts with the brand placements for 80 seconds (see Figure 2).

By filming the persona synchronously with two cameras from different perspectives throughout the entire film production (frontal vs. 35° offset to the side), it is possible to produce two identical tutorials that differ only in their physical addressing. In the variant with strong physical addressing, the camera is directed frontally at the YouTuber’s face, while in the condition with weak physical addressing, the persona can be seen in profile, offset by 35° to the side. Especially in the frontal camera perspective, the persona looks directly into the camera in order to address the recipient physically via eye contact.

Unlike in comparable studies, the experimentally varied angle is lower than 45° (cf. Dibble et al., 2016) or 90° (cf. Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011), because it is essential for the make-up tutorial of such a YouTube format that the recipients can see both halves of the face as well as the pair of eyes of the persona. Thus, the manipulation is less than in the studies Dibble et al. (2016) or Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011).

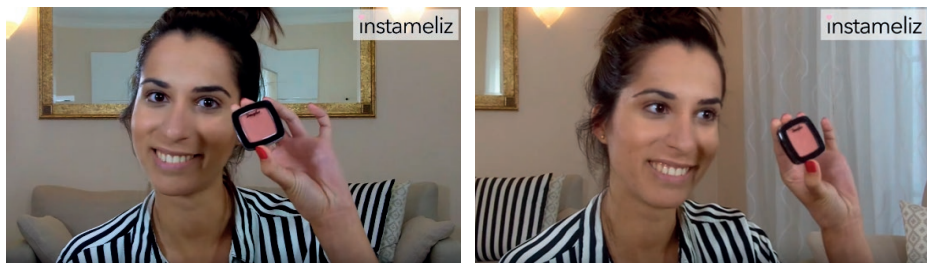


Figure 2. Experimental manipulation of physical addressing.

The frontal orientation of the camera on the face of the persona in the left picture is intended to make the recipients feel strongly physically addressed. The synchronously recorded scene in the right image shows the persona from a camera perspective that is shifted by 35° and is intended to lead to a weaker perception of physical addressing.

At the end of the video, the persona evaluates the Douglas products used. This evaluation represents the second experimentally manipulated factor, the valence between persona and brand. For this purpose, two different recordings were produced in which the YouTuber perceives the brand products in opposite ways. In the positive version, the persona praises both quality and price of the branded products. In the negative condition, the products are evaluated exactly the opposite way. Both scenes last 24 seconds and are also recorded from two perspectives. For the purpose of high internal validity, the physical addressing of the persona is kept as constant as possible in both versions. This results in four identically YouTube clips that differ only in the camera perspective and the valence between persona and brand.

After the reception of the make-up tutorial on the YouTube platform itself, all study participants were asked to complete an identical questionnaire. On the last page of the questionnaire, each participant received an original Douglas discount coupon worth 10% off their entire purchase as an incentive. The discount coupon could be redeemed once for a limited period of time at the local Douglas store in Ansbach and was valid exclusively for Douglas own-brand products. Due to a barcode on the back of the coupon, it was possible to link the purchase in the Douglas store with the questionnaires of the study participants.

4. PARTICIPANTS

In total, the sample comprises 460 women from the district of Ansbach aged between 16 and 46 ($M=24.39$, $SD=6.66$). From a geographical point of view, all participants had the chance to use the discount voucher at the Douglas store in Ansbach.

5. RESULTS

By using two manipulation checks (one-factor ANOVAs), a differentiated perception of the experimentally varied variables (addressing by the persona $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2=0.27$ and valence between influencer and brand $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2=.43$) can be statistically confirmed. In the following empirical results, the focus is on cognitive PSI. In all figures, the labeled effect sizes are set at the significance level of * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; and *** $p < 0.001$.

Data were analyzed using the SPSS macro PROCESS by Hayes (2013). To test the predicted model in a large context, multiple serial mediation is computed with the two mediators of character attractiveness and cognitive PSI (Hayes, 2013, Model 6). By multiplying the three path coefficients a , c , and e , one can calculate the indirect effect of addressing via character attractiveness to the cognitive PSI and finally on brand perception ($a \times c \times e = 0.01$) (Hayes, 2013). For the calculated indirect effects, a bootstrapping analysis for cognitive PSI results in a confidence interval of 0.003 to 0.024. As the calculated confidence interval does not contain the numerical value zero, the indirect effect is significant at a 95% confidence level (Figure 3) Based on a strong perceived addressing, a positive mediating effect via character attractiveness on brand perception could be proven ($a \times d = 0.03$; 95% $KI = [0.002, .067]$). Based on a highly rated addressing, this effect is furthermore mediated by the cognitive PSI ($b \times e = 0.02$; 95% $KI = [0.005, 0.041]$). Viewers with a low perceived addressing rated brand perception more negatively (.13) than recipients with a high perceived addressing ($[a \times d] + [a \times c \times e] + [b \times e] + f$). Moreover, this effect is due to the significant direct effect of addressing on brand perception (f).

The moderating influence of valence on the impact of cognitive PSI on advertising effectiveness was statistically tested using moderated mediation (Hayes, 2013, Model 14). For this purpose, valence between persona and brand acts as a moderator variable (g). The results of this analysis suggest an interaction with valence between persona and brand on brand perception. This means that recipients with at least moderate perceived valence between persona and brand experience a more intensive brand perception. This positive influence is additionally strengthened as the moderator becomes more pronounced (g).

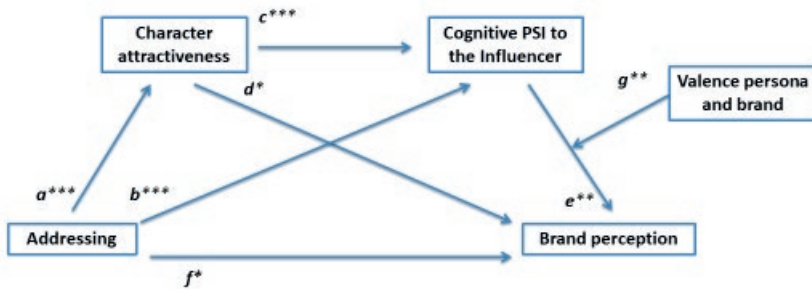


Figure 3. Empirically measured mechanism of action for cognitive PSI on brand perception.

Furthermore, participants who feel more strongly addressed by the persona have a higher purchase intention (0.21) than study participants with a low perceived addressing ($[a \times d] + f$). On one hand, this relationship is due to the direct positive influence of strongly perceived addressing (f). On the other hand, mediated by an increased character attractiveness, a more intensely addressing leads to a greater purchase intention ($a \times d = 0.10$; 95% $KI = [0.059, .158]$).

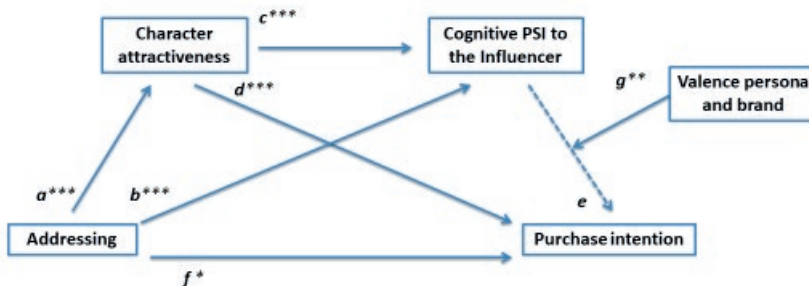


Figure 4. Empirically measured mechanism of action of cognitive PSI on purchase intention.

Once again, moderated mediation (Hayes, 2013, Model 14) is used to explore the moderating effect of valence (g). If the valence between persona and brand is judged to be negative (very low), cognitive PSI have a negative influence on perceived purchase intention. Under these conditions, the stronger the mediating cognitive PSI, the lower the purchase intention. However, if the valence is rated at least high (positive), recipients have an increased purchase intention. Consequently, a moderating effect can be confirmed.

A mediating influence of character attractiveness ($a \times d$) or cognitive PSI ($[a \times c \times e]$ or $[b \times e]$) on actual purchase behavior cannot be confirmed (Figure 5). Similarly, no moderating effect of valence on purchase intention could be detected.

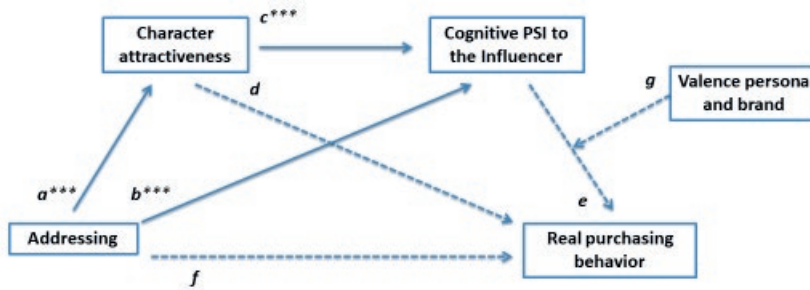


Figure 5. Empirically measured mechanism of action of cognitive PSI on actual purchase behavior.

6. DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The methodological orientation of the presented study and the findings generated by it succeed in expanding the state of brand placement research by integrating additional influencing variables and linking the effect to specific conditions. The results also illustrate the economic significance of brand placements (Gröner, 2020).

Thus, one focus of the presented study is on the exploration of physical address as an influencing factor on the persuasive effect of parasocial interactions. The comparatively small experimentally varied angle of 35° in the videos thus contributes to a high external validity. Accordingly, even smaller nuances in the physical orientation of the persona are registered by the recipients and generate significant differences in the perception of the media character and consequently a measurable influence on the advertising impact.

Here, brand perception proves to be resistant to a negative expression of the moderator. Only in the case of highly cognitive PSI a positive valence between the persona and the brand is likely to lead to a more intensive brand perception. Accordingly, the brand image built up over the long term is not damaged by one negative evaluations of the influencer. In the case of cognitive PSI, a positive relationship between persona and brand can only improve it.

Contrary to this, in the case of strong PSI, the valence between persona and brand can influence the purchase intention both positively and negatively. Obviously, the influencer here assumes the role of an expert, to whose judgment the consumer is guided depending on the polarity of the moderator. If, for example, the valence of the relationship is negative, strong cognitive PSI will lead to a reduced purchase intention; in contrast, a positive valence with strong cognitive PSI will intensify the purchase intention. Because the observed effect only occurs with particularly intensive PSI, the findings obtained confirm the underlying “Balance Model of Product Placement Effects” (Russell & Stern, 2006).

Compared to more easily detectable brand perception effects, the purchase intention is therefore based on a more detailed processing process that includes information about the nature of the relationship between persona and brand. Due to experimental design, however, it must be emphasized that the measured mechanisms of action are only based on short-term effects, which is why no statements can be made about any long-term effects. Although the study design meets the requirements of Schramm and Knoll (2015) and, in addition to purely cognitive effect levels with the research of actual purchase behavior also devotes itself to the strongly neglected conative effect levels of brand placements, an influence on actual purchase behavior cannot be proven.

Although the media context of a YouTube make-up tutorial proves to be particularly fruitful for the underlying research, there are also limitations and methodological criticism to the study design. First, cross-gender effects can be excluded due to the all-female sample. Although, recipients prefer to choose male personae for interaction, strong cross-gender effects between female media characters and male viewers or vice versa may lead to particularly intense parasocial interactions. In addition, the stimulus is comparatively short (8 minutes and 23 seconds), giving female viewers significantly less time to build strong PSI with the persona compared to a TV series. These conditions may lead to a limited variance of the measured PSI, which in turn may affect the persuasive mechanisms of action arising. Here, it would be interesting to observe the development of PSI to an influencer over a longer period of time using multiple YouTube videos.

Furthermore, the measurement of real purchase behavior leads to a number of problems. Although every test participant was able to use the voucher, only 15 women did so. This corresponds to only 3.3% of the total sample. There are several potential reasons for this reticence in purchasing behavior. Firstly, the discount vouchers issued competed with other Douglas discount campaigns throughout Germany, where discounts of up to 20% were offered. The discount level of the coupons handed out during the study was therefore significantly lower at 10%. An influence of the actual purchase behavior on part of these other discount actions is therefore very close. Furthermore, cosmetic products belong to a comparatively higher price segment, which means that not every participant in the study, which tends to be a student sample, possibly was able to afford the branded products.

Due to the stimulus selected, the persuasive effect mechanisms of the “Balance Model of Product Placement Effects” (Russell & Stern, 2006) can be extended to a previously unexplored non-fictional media format in the online sector. In doing so, current findings of reception and effects research are incorporated around important media psychological influence variables (Knoll et al, 2015).

For the advertising industry, it can finally be stated that brand placements of established brands in YouTube formats are suitable for influencing brand perception and purchase intention. This could possibly be due to the fact that YouTubers are perceived as more unbiased towards brand products than media characters in conventional advertising formats (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). Questions such as, “What is the speaker’s relation to the product? How authentic is it? Is the speaker’s intention to sell me the product for any material reason, or to help me with his true experience?” (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011,

p. 315) therefore play a rather subordinate role for the viewer during the reception of such media channels.

Due to the potential danger posed by negative reviews on part of the persona, it seems essential for modern brand communication to take the content created by popular YouTube channels seriously and to react to if necessary. If these potential risk factors are taken into account, YouTubers are ideally suited as contemporary brand ambassadors for influencing and further developing modern marketing strategies (cf. Gröner 2020).

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Patrick M. Gröner: Conceptualization, Investigation; Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing. Barbara E. Hedderich: Project Administration, Supervision, Review & Editing.

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