

The Use of Relevance Theory in Celebrity Advertisements

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Abstract

Celebrity advertisements can bring great benefits to the advertisers if properly handled. Otherwise they will not necessarily generate celebrity effects. We should conform to Relevance Theory when deciding whether we should choose celebrities, which celebrity to choose and how to design the lines of advertisements, etc. Also we should handle properly the relevance of celebrities and their popularity among target consumers, of celebrities and advertisement themes and of celebrities and products.

Key Words: Celebrity Advertisements, Relevance Theory, Consumers, Advertisers.

Introduction

What are celebrity advertisements? The answer is obvious. Famous people recommend certain products or testify the merits of them. It is a kind of voucher advertisements. Since Pan Hong and Li Moran (famous actress and actor of China respectively) made the first celebrity advertisement in the late 1980s, more and more celebrities followed suit. Nowadays, it has become quite common to see these kinds of advertisements on TV or on buses or on street posters. To give one example, Li Yuchun, the winner of the popular TV program "Super Girls" sponsored by Hunan TV station (a provincial TV station of China), appeared immediately on TV and other possible advertisements, advertising for Shenzhou Computer (a computer brand of China) right after she became famous. However, do celebrity advertisements really sound so magical as we have imagined? According to a survey of over 800 residents living in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou carried out by Chinese Economy Prosperity Inspection Center, 50.2% of them think celebrity advertisements will draw their attention, 10.5% of them think celebrity advertisements will spur them to purchase while 38.3% of them think they have nothing to do with them at all. Many of those advertisements don't have the intended effects.

Advertisements are language in actual use and we can refer to the study of them as a kind of pragmatics. As for pragmatics, the most important principle, I think, is the Relevance Theory. Thus in dealing with language use, especially when language is used for communication, we should strive to conform to this theory.

Relevance Theory

The Cooperative Principle is at the core of the conversational implicature proposed by Grice. The theory of conversational implicature has opened a new way of explaining the use of language, and caught the attention of linguists immediately after it was put forth. However, there is some inconsistency and

redundancy within the Cooperative Principle and its maxims. Linguists of the post-Gricean period, therefore, have sought to boil down the maxims to a set of principles, which are truly indispensable and do not overlap at the same time, of which Relevance Theory formally proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson is quite catching.

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson reduced all Gricean maxims to a single all-encompassing principle--the Relevance Theory. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson formally proclaimed it in their work *Relevance: Communication and cognition* in 1986. But the principle of relevance had already been around for some years through their articles written separately or jointly before then. Wilson in her book emphasized the crucial role played by judgments of relevance in the interpretation of utterance. In 1981, Wilson and Sperber published an article entitled "On Grice's Theory of Conversation". In it they proposed for the first time that all Gricean maxims, including the CP itself, should be reduced to a single principle of relevance, which is defined as "The speaker has done his best to be maximally relevant". They argued that this principle of relevance may subsume not only the second Quantity Maxim, but also the first Quantity Maxim (both of which were put forward by Grice) by providing a criterion for judging whether a given contribution is informative enough or not. In their 1986 book, Sperber and Wilson defined the principle of relevance as: Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance. (Sperber & Wilson, 1986: p158). To understand this definition, or this theory, let's look at the following example:

A: Are you going to John's birthday party?

(1)B: I have something urgent to do this evening.

(2)B: I've heard Mary is going.

The answer (1)B is unlikely to occur unless it in some way can be understood as relevant response to A. Similarly, if B's response is (2), it suggests that B will be discouraged to or, on the contrary, more willing to go because Mary is going, based on the background information shared by them, on the condition that it is construed as relevant answer to A's question. Thus the definition of relevance is:

A remark P is relevant to another remark Q if P and Q, together with background knowledge, yield new information not derivable from either P or Q, together with background knowledge, alone. Then we would come to the notion of Ostensive-Inferential Communication for it is very important for understanding the Relevance Theory. To understand the definition of Ostensive-Inferential Communication, we need to be clear about its two aspects. Sperber & Wilson, just like Grice, believe that communication is not simply a matter of encoding and decoding, which seems just a mechanical process. They all think communication involves inference. But the difference is that Sperber & Wilson maintain that inference only has something to do with the hearer. "From the speaker's side, communication should be seen as an act of making clear one's intention to express something. This act they call ostensive act." (Hu, 2001: p.263) We may simply call it ostension. To sum up, a complete characterization of communication is that it is ostensive on the speaker's side and inferential on the listener's side.

Sperber and Wilson are in favor of the inferential approach. For they argue that communication is successful not when hearers recognize the linguistic meaning of the utterance, but when they infer the speaker's meaning from it.

After a discussion of the human inferential abilities, Sperber and Wilson address themselves to the question of relevance in detail. They define it in relation to a context, an individual and a phenomenon successively. And the first definition of relevance is: An assumption is relevant in a context if and only if it has some contextual effect in that context. (Sperber & Wilson, 1986: p.122)

But relevance is also, and more importantly, a comparative concept. Some assumptions may be more relevant than others. What's more, "The assessment of relevance, like the assessment of productivity, is a matter of balancing output against input" (Sperber & Wilson, 1986: p.125). It not only has something to do with the effect produced by it but also with the effort required to process it. Since people generally assume that the assumption they are processing is relevant, and will naturally try to find a context in which its relevance will be maximized, otherwise they won't bother to process it at all.

Proper Handling of the Relevance between Celebrities and Advertisements

Although the Relevance Theory mainly deals with communications, which, in our minds, usually involves at least two persons, and in advertisements there are not necessarily two persons formally conducting a conversation. Sometimes we have monologues, sometimes we even have dumb shows, even a voice-over, or some other situations. However, we can regard advertisements as conversations between the actor(s)/actress(es) and the audience. And also in advertisements, the speaker (no matter it is the actor(s)/actress(es) or just a voice-over) will very likely make his/her/their information quite ostensive, fearing that the not-so-clever audience (the hearer) may not get the point, to the extent that we almost need no inference to get the information. Yet, we still need the Relevance Theory to instruct us, especially when we come across some not so ostensive occasions in advertisements, which, luckily for us, are quite rare. In a broad sense, with regard to celebrity advertisements, we should take the relevance between celebrities, products and consumers into consideration.

People usually think celebrity advertisements have great advantages in attracting people's attention, yet if not given sufficient relevance or dealt with improperly, celebrity advertisements will not function well in persuading people to purchase. Some enterprises favor celebrities for their own sake, regardless of whether those celebrities have anything to do with the contents publicized by advertisements. These practices are wrong, for they forget the original intention of advertising. Only when celebrity advertisements conform to relevance can they achieve the intended effects. The relevance of celebrities with other factors can be demonstrated as follows.

The Relevance of Celebrities and Their Popularity among Target Consumers

Advertisements aren't designed for all the people and they should be directed towards the target consumers. So it is with celebrity advertisements.

Different people have different tastes and all celebrities have their own admirers. In order to bring celebrity advertisements into full play we should select someone who is quite popular among the target consumers. With the attention attracted to those products and the influence of empathetic psychology, people would probably shift their affection towards the celebrities to the products they recommend. Thus advertisers can achieve the intended effects. Besides, with repeated playing of ads and the mentioning of celebrities in other places or channels, the audience will surely have a deep impression of those products. To illustrate, Zhang Wei, who became famous overnight by playing the role of "XiaoYanZi" (little swallow) in Qiong Yao's TV series, acted as the spokesman of "HaoChiDian"(meaning delicious) of Dali brand. This cooperation is appropriate, for Zhao Wei enjoyed a wide popularity in the kids and young people which are the target consumers for this product. So is the case with Angelababy for the Greek yogurt Ambpoeial (a brandname reserved by Yili Corporation, one of the largest dairy producers in China), who has lots of fans in teenagers after she participated in the TV reality show "Running Men". We can also feel the power of relevance in so many other celebrity advertisements such as Xie Tingfeng and Xtep (a brand dealing with sports shoes and bags), Chen Huilin and Sumsung, Tang Wei and SK-II, Tyler Swift and Covergirl, etc.

The Relevance of Celebrities and Advertisement Themes

It is not enough to invite celebrities to just make a show of themselves in celebrity advertisements. They should serve the theme of the specific advertisements. Only in this way can the audience understand the ultimate intention while paying attention to those celebrities. In this aspect, "Little Talent" has set us a good example. After participating in "Dad, where are you going?" (a popular reality show in China, featuring little adventures of fathers and their offsprings), Duoduo (the daughter of Huang Lei, who is a actor as well as a teacher in China) became quite famous. She later acted in the ad of a telephone watch for children, in which she met with some difficulties and then called his father, saying aloud "Papa!" with an exaggerated expression. This word is simple enough, yet it generates the optimal contextual effect, with little efforts we can get the information the advertiser intends to tell us. This ad impresses the audience a lot in that it not only correlates with the ad theme---we can always rely on our parents for help when in danger or trouble and with a "little talent" telephone watch, we can easily do that, but also makes us recall the programs which she once participated in.

The Relevance of Celebrities and Products

In celebrity advertisements, only when there exists the relevance between celebrities and products, the audience can pay attention to the products recommended by celebrities. The relevance of celebrities and products should be demonstrated by the following three aspects.

1) The Relevance of Celebrities and the Use of Products

In order to make the celebrity advertisements associate with audience's purchase behaviors, the key point is to make the audience believe that the celebrity is really using the product which he or she advertises. If the audience think that he or she is only acting, the advertisement effect will surely go down. Quite possibly the audience will remember the celebrity's performance which is entertaining but forget the contents of the advertisement itself. If so, the ad will have no effect on their purchase behaviors at all. For example, a quite wealthy movie star, especially someone who routinely spends money lavishly, advertises for a kind of cosmetic which costs only a dozen yuan per article and says it can make her more beautiful, how many of us would be so stupid as to believe her words? The actress' image and the product don't match each other, just like two sentences of totally opposite meanings, will not generate the optimal contextual effects for the audience (the hearer). However, Li Xiaoshuang and Liu Xuan (famous gymnasts) would be appropriate persons to speak for YunNanBaiYao (the brandname for a kind of medicine treating injuries). We also consider the advertisement of GaiErQi Calcium tablets by Lang Ping successful, because we do believe she is using the product for calcium supplement, especially after the team coached by her won the champion of Women's Volleyball in 2016 Rio Olympics.

2) The Relevance of Celebrities and Product Categories.

Different celebrities have different traits and they thus can have different information-spreading functions. Experiments have shown that if there are certain technology components in a product, it would be wise to choose someone who is an expert in this area for advertisement. Otherwise, the celebrities are good choices. When we choose Kissinger and Jordan as the spokesman for international current events magazine and sports shoes respectively, it would be perfect. Yet if we alter them one for another, the effect would be very bad or even can't match the advertisements made by ordinary people. One toothpaste advertisement impresses me a lot, in which the actress first declares her to be a dentist, sending us the information that she is an authority in her field, although we don't know her at first. Then through certain experiments she shows the advantages Crest toothpaste has over other toothpaste. We became convinced that the product she recommends does have the declared effects and is better than the products of other brands. As we have discussed earlier, every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal

relevance, although the actress doesn't say it aloud that Crest toothpaste is the best, the expert status she declares her to be, the experiments she conducts, all of them lead to this inference of the audience (the hearer). That's why we emphasize the importance of choosing the proper celebrity in specific advertisements or we would go for wool but come home shorn.

3) The Relevance of Celebrities and Product Images

The personal image of an individual celebrity has a somewhat solid model in the public and so does the product, which has an image orientation. There should exist between them a sort of relevance. Only when this happens can the public naturally associate celebrity with the product and reinforce their cognition, understanding and remembrance. For instance, in order to compete with Coca Cola, Pepsi Cola goes all out to create its image of "New Generation's Choice", and for one time, it chose Britney and Beyonce as the heroines of its advertisement, for they were both so popular and charming then, and their vigor and vitality was unmatched. In the advertisements they appear in the field of honor and sing aloud the song "We Will Rock You" and dance with it, a song noted for its power and high-spiritedness, and later reach for the Pepsi. We can feel the harmony of the actresses, the advertisement contents and the product. Since the actor(s) or actress(es) is/are only the agent(s) of the advertiser, we can safely say the advertiser has done his best to be maximally relevant, and the audience (the hearer) generally assume that the assumption they are processing is relevant, and will naturally try to find a context in which its relevance will be maximized, and that context is, while they (the audience) are still young, they should live passionately and cool, just like the actresses, besides singing and dancing, they should also drink Pepsi Cola. The earth-shaking power of the Pepsi Cola advertisement played by those actresses is closely connected to their similar images-image of the celebrities and image of the product.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we should pay attention to the relation between celebrities, products and consumers, and try to make use of the Relevance Theory to instruct us when deciding whether we should choose celebrities, which celebrity to choose and how to design the lines of the advertisements, etc.

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