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An Ethical Perspective on Necro-Advertising: The Moderating Effect of Brand Equity

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Abstract Necro-advertising refers to the use of deceased celebrities in advertising. This practice offers unique advantages to brands that seek to benefit from positive associations with timeless celebrities at a more affordable cost than celebrity endorsement. Nevertheless, how consumers actually respond to the use of deceased celebrities in advertising remains under-theorized. This research is the first to empirically examine consumers' ethical judgments about necro-advertising practices. In particular, drawing from the signaling theory, it demonstrates the impact of consumer inferences about the existence of a legal agreement for using deceased celebrities' images on brand ethicality. The results of two experimental studies show that a low-equity brand is more likely to be perceived as unethical when using necro-advertising since consumers have limited knowledge about these brands. Conversely, our findings confirm how a high level of equity prevents from the aforementioned adverse effects since these brands' assets send a credible signal about their capability to get approval from a deceased celebrity's estate for the use of its image. While deepening current knowledge on the perceived ethicality of necro-advertising practices, this research uncovers the moderating effect of equity on consumer inferences about brand ethicality. The results also suggest managerial caveats and guidelines for low-equity brands. In particular, while necro-advertising may have a negative impact on the perceived ethicality of low-equity brands, disclosing a statement about a contractual engagement with the deceased celebrity's estate can mitigate this negative effect by providing an unequivocal signal that the brand is acting ethically.

Introduction

The posthumous career of Albert Einstein is particularly active: since his death the scientist has appeared in advertisements for General Motors, Apple, Microsoft, Intel, Xerox and Chrysler, among others. With necro-advertising, i.e., the use of deceased celebrities (*delebs*) in advertising, late individuals increasingly compete with living celebrities (*celebs*) as product presenters. More importantly, in contrast to celebrity endorsement, necro-advertising is relatively inexpensive. D'Rozario and Bryant (2013) compare the £30 million deal between Gillette and David Beckham to the $20,000 license fee to use James Dean's image for 1 year. Therefore, it is not surprising that necro-advertising may be much more accessible to brands that could not afford an association with a living celebrity. Contrary to celebs, who are regularly associated with high-equity brands, delebs also appear in ads for low-equity brands. Illustrating this, Marilyn Monroe has appeared not only in ads for high-equity brands like Dior, but also in ads for less renowned brands like Sexy

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Hair, and the hair salons Red17 and Ryf Coiffeur. Similarly, various delebs have recently appeared in ads for low-equity brands: Michael Jackson, John Lennon and Jimmy Hendrix for the Brazilian bar Zapata Bar in 2014, Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King and Muhammad Ali for the South African library Bookdealers in 2011, and Lucille Ball, James Dean, Dean Martin and Marlon Brando in 2008 for Armstrong Laminate Flooring ("Appendix 1"). These examples show that delebs appear in ads for low-equity brands with which they may not have agreed to associate during their lifetime. As such, the role of brand equity may be questioned to assess how consumers perceive an association between a brand and a deleb.

Indeed, in contrast with celebrity endorsement, necro-advertising associates a brand with individuals (i.e., the delebs) who cannot give their consent for the use of their image. Although the vast majority of brands (low and high equity) using necro-advertising signed a legal binding agreement with the deleb's estate (D'Rozario and Bryant 2013), some companies use delebs' image without clearing the publicity rights, as illustrated by the 2010 lawsuit opposing General Motors and the estate of Albert Einstein over trademark infringement. Because the legal agreements between the brand and the deleb's estate are not explicitly disclosed to consumers, necro-advertising constitutes an ideal setting of uncertain information to investigate how consumers may make inferences regarding the existence of such agreements based on prior brand knowledge.

Until now, the literature on necro-advertising has focused on the legal protection of trademarks and copyrights (Petty and D'Rozario 2009) and made ethical recommendations to not cheapen or dilute the deleb's image (for a review of the main ethical issues pertaining to necro-advertising, see D'Rozario and Bryant 2013). Virtually no research has examined consumers' perception of the ethicality of necro-advertising, a crucial issue to understand the singularity of necro-advertising (vs. celebrity endorsement) as a marketing communication practice. To address this issue, we circumscribe our investigation to consumer inferences regarding the existence of a legal agreement between the two parties (no matter the actual existence of such agreement) so as to articulate the legal and ethical concerns of necro-advertising in a marketing approach. In particular, we investigate (1) how the level of equity of the brand may impact such inferences and (2) how these inferences may in turn affect consumer perceived ethicality of the brand (*brand CPE*) (Brunk 2010). As such, this paper answers the call of Petty and D'Rozario (2009) to empirically investigate the role of the publicity rights on consumers' perception toward necro-advertising.

Drawing upon the signaling theory (Rao 1994; Rao et al. 1999), the present paper shows that in an uncertain context—consumers do not know whether the brand actually contracted an agreement with the deleb's estate—consumers make inferences based on brand equity to assess the ethicality of necro-advertising and brand CPE. It shows that low-equity brands suffer from negative inferences as consumers may assume that such brands did not clear the publicity rights for using the deleb's image. In particular, this research finds that inference making against low-equity brands has an adverse impact on both ad and brand CPE as it ignites controversy through an inferred unauthorized use of a deleb's image.

This article is organized as follows. First, a conceptual background is given on necro-advertising and brand CPE. The signaling theory is introduced as the theoretical anchor for the development of research hypotheses. Then, the results of two experiments are presented. The research findings show that brand equity moderates the impact of necro-advertising on brand CPE and identify the mediating effects of controversy and ad CPE. This is followed by a discussion of how our results extend prior literature by uncovering the process of inference making to explain the impact of brand equity on brand CPE, as well as underscoring an efficient way for brand managers to mitigate these inferences through an explicit disclosing about the deleb-brand agreement. The article concludes with a call for future research that would help overcome the limitations of the present study, including the focus on print advertising as well as methodological issues.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

Necro-Advertising and Brand CPE

Recent research on corporate ethics has focused on potential determinants of how consumers form ethical impressions of brands (Brunk 2010, 2012). Consumers consider ethical a brand that acts with "honesty, integrity, diversity, quality, respect, responsibility and accountability" (Fan 2005, p. 347). The concept of CPE has been proposed to measure consumers overall perception of an entity's ethicality (Sierra et al. 2015). Brand CPE is influenced by six domains: employees, consumers, environment, local community and economy, overseas community and business community (Brunk 2010). This taxonomy underlines the difficulties consumers may have in judging brand CPE in a comprehensive and systematic way, i.e., by integrating all the information possible to formulate a judgment (Alcañiz et al. 2010). Indeed, consumers may be exposed to inconsistent brands' un/ethical behavioral cues across these domains (Brunk and DeBoer 2015), which makes it difficult to form a coherent aggregate ethical impression. This may be illustrated by the

inconsistent image of McDonald's, a company that is concurrently being accused of being exploitative toward its employees but perceived as environmentally friendly (Benwell 2016).

Prior research has showed that when individuals struggle in forming ethical judgments, they rely on heuristic processing (Sparks and Pan 2010), i.e., an orientation that involves the use of cues for making simple inferences. This is in line with the signaling theory, which states that in a marketplace characterized by imperfect and asymmetric information (Erdem and Swait 2004), consumers use external cues and inference making to evaluate a brand (Rao 1994; Rao et al. 1999). In this regard, marketing elements such as price, advertising expenses or warranty act as signals for product, brand and company quality (Erevelles et al. 2001; Kim et al. 2012). More specifically, under asymmetric information, consumers base their perception of unobservable elements (e.g., brand CPE) on observable signals such as the aforementioned ones (Kirmani and Rao 2000).

Hence, celebrity endorsement has been identified as a potent observable cue in the formation of brand evaluation by offering unambiguous information of brand capabilities (Rao et al. 1999). Indeed, celebrity endorsement may diminish information asymmetries between the brand and stakeholders since high-value activities reassure toward the capabilities of the brand (Clark et al. 2002). By analogy, in necro-advertising the deleb-brand association should favor similar positive effects on the brand. Indeed, the decision to use delebs in advertising lies in an effort to benefit from their everlasting attractiveness and notoriety (Hudak 2014; Petty and D'Rozario 2009). However, while it is most often assumed that consumers are taking for granted that a relationship of celebrity endorsement is ensuring the protection of the celebrity's publicity rights—an inference facilitated by the fact that the celebrity is alive—this is less certain for necro-advertising. Indeed, the nature of a posthumous association with a brand remains relatively ambiguous due to the general lack of consent surrounding the publicity rights of their images (D'Rozario and Bryant 2013; McCarthy and Anderson 2001; Petty and D'Rozario 2009). With the general uncertainty surrounding legal agreements between brands and delebs, we predict that consumers would formulate inferences about the existence of such agreement by drawing upon their prior knowledge of the brand.

Brand Equity as a Signal

Because consumers make inferences on the basis of knowledge accumulated from past experience with a brand (Kim et al. 2012), brand equity should act as a major signal and orient consumer inferences regarding a deleb-brand agreement. Brand equity has been conceptualized as the "differential effect that brand knowledge has on customer response to brand marketing activity" (Keller 2016, p. 3). Until now, the literature has, by and large, concentrated mainly on the positive impact of CPE on brand equity. Ethical commitment has been recognized as a major component of brand equity (Sierra et al. 2015). We take the reverse approach by investigating how brand equity may impact consumer perception of brand ethicality.

Spry et al. (2011) have demonstrated that the efficiency of a brand signal depends on its credibility, defined as how convincingly it can convey information.

Accordingly, prior knowledge would suggest that it is not uncommon for high-equity brands to obtain an endorsement deal with a well-known celebrity. In contrast, it would be more likely that a low-equity brand would not have the capability (i.e., tangible and intangible assets) to obtain a comparable endorsement deal (Roy and Cornwell 2003). Indeed, because endorsements are a two-sided high-risk association, celebrities select brands they want to be associated with based on their main assets, such as brand reputation, notoriety and personality (Zamudio 2016). This mutual selection process mainly results in matching the most high-profile celebrities and high-equity brands, such as Beyoncé and Pepsi, or Kanye West and Adidas. By extension, it is likely that a deleb's estate, whose mission is to manage the late celebrity's legacy (Thomson 2006), would consider the same strategic criteria to select brands. Consequently, from a consumer perspective, it could be expected that a high level of brand equity would convey more credibility to a deleb-brand association than a low level of brand equity. Consumers should infer that the brand legally, hence ethically, used the celebrities' image through a binding agreement between the brand and the celebrity's estate for both celebs and delebs.

Conversely, for low-equity brands, prior knowledge (i.e., the absence of previous endorsement agreements with well-known celebrities) or lack thereof would prevent the brand from sending any credible signal that it had the capability to get approval from the deleb's estate to use its likeness. This (inferred) potential unauthorized use of the deleb's image for advertising purposes is likely to be perceived as an unethical practice from low-equity brands. Based on the rationale that "socially responsible organizations only run responsible ads" (Hyman 2009, p. 199), we argue that necro-advertising may act as a potent diagnostic signal for brand CPE. Consequently, the inference of an unauthorized, hence unethical, image use should negatively impact the evaluation of low-equity brands.

H1 In the case of a low-equity (*high-equity*) brand, necro-advertising (vs. celebrity endorsement) should have a negative (*no*) impact on brand CPE.

The inferred absence of agreement would imply that low-equity brands used the image without the consent of the deleb's estate. Because such a practice would not respect the deleb's legacy and image by creating an unconsented association with a brand, consumers are likely to regard it as being controversial and unethical (Petty and D'Rozario 2009).

Controversial marketing practices have been defined as elements that elicit reactions of offense or outrage for decency or ethical reasons (e.g., Fam et al. 2004, 2008; Sabri 2015). While previous research on controversy has focused on executional elements of an ad (Huhmann and Mott-Stenerson 2008) or the degree of controversy of the product (Dahl et al. 2003), we propose that the unauthorized use of the image of an individual, all the more so a late individual, should ignite controversy.

In the case of low-equity brands, consumer inference that the brand may not have got the approval from the deleb's estate to use his image should thus create controversy, which in turn would negatively impact the perceived ethicality of the object of this unethical practice, i.e., the ad. Following the rationale for H1, the ad should play a diagnostic role in ethicality judgment because of the limited available cues and knowledge that consumers have regarding low-equity brands. As such, ad CPE should directly impact brand CPE. Because no impact of necro-advertising on brand CPE is expected for high-equity brands, these mediation effects are predicted for low-equity brands only.

H2 The impact of necro-advertising on low-equity brand CPE is serially mediated by agreement inference, controversy and ad CPE.

Agreement Cue

As developed, necro-advertising presents a much more affordable alternative to celebrity endorsements (Hudak 2014). However, if low-equity brands are easier targets to inference making, using delebs' images could be more damageable than beneficial. Previous research showed that it was possible for brands to mitigate inferences by deploying communication strategies accordingly (Ivens et al. 2015; Aaker et al. 2010). For example, the aforementioned studies investigated common negative inferences about nonprofit firms, such as lack of competence. They found that when using a subtle prime of endorsement, i.e., a for-profit firm endorsing a nonprofit firm, these inferences were suppressed, and hence, the nonprofit firm ended up being perceived as more competent (Aaker et al. 2010). Following a similar rationale, we posit that using an agreement cue, i.e., an explicit mention that the brand has signed an agreement to clear the publicity rights, should

mitigate consumer inferences about low-equity brands. Indeed, by explicitly mentioning that the brand got approval to use the deleb's image, an agreement cue should lower asymmetric information, and in turn decrease inference making. In contrast, since consumers already inferred that high-equity brands signed an agreement with the deleb's estate for the use of the image, an agreement cue is unlikely to modify consumer responses to necro-advertising. Consumer brand knowledge should already serve as a positive signal, hence generating "spontaneous" positive inferences without having to make explicit claims about the agreement regarding the publicity rights (Ewing et al. 2012; McQuarrie and Phillips 2005).

H3 In the case of a low-equity (*high-equity*) brand, agreement cue has a positive (*no*) impact on brand CPE.

By explicitly mentioning that the brand concluded an agreement with the deleb's estate, the brand reassures consumers that the use of the image is not illegal or unconsented. As such, while the inferred absence of payment of the publicity rights is predicted to increase controversy, an agreement cue should suppress such controversy. Consequently, because the use of the image by the brand is respectful toward the deleb's legacy, the ad should appear as more ethical, leading to better brand CPE. Indeed, as previously mentioned, brand CPE is expected to be directly impacted by ad CPE as the ad should play a diagnostic role in the ethicality judgment of a brand.

Hence, for low-equity brands, controversy and ad CPE should mediate the impact of an agreement cue on brand CPE. Conversely, because it is predicted that necro-advertising by high-equity brands would not ignite controversy nor affect ad CPE, no mediating effect of an agreement cue on brand CPE is expected.

H4 The impact of agreement cue on low-equity brand CPE is serially mediated by controversy and ad CPE.

In the next sections, the hypotheses are tested in two separate studies. Study 1 investigates the moderating effect of brand equity on the impact of necro-advertising on brand CPE as well as the mediating role of controversy and ad CPE (H1 and H2). Study 2 examines the effects of agreement cue on consumer responses (H3 and H4).

Study 1

Research Methods

Design and Sample

A total of 210 individuals were randomly assigned to conditions of a 2 (advertising type: celebrity endorsement

vs. necro-advertising) $\times$ 2 (brand equity: low vs. high) between-subjects design. Participants were recruited in undergraduate and graduate business programs geared toward adult students in exchange for extra course credit. Four questionnaires were excluded due to missing data, leaving a final sample of 204 participants ($M_{Age} = 37$; 93 men).

Pretests

The main objective pursued by the pretests was to create fictitious but realistic ads that would be comparable in regard to the selected brands, celebs and delebs. Real brands and celebrities were used to increase the ecological validity of the study (Fleck et al. 2012). An independent sample of 32 participants from the same general population as for the main experiment was recruited for the first pretest. For the celebs and delebs, we considered two measures from the celebrity endorsement literature: attitude and familiarity (e.g., Spry et al. 2011). The participants were asked to rate on seven-point scales their attitude (*I like*) and familiarity (*I am familiar*) with 17 delebs and 16 celebs (see results in "Appendix 2"). Consistent with McCracken's (1989, p. 310) definition of a celebrity endorser as "any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement," the celebrities were selected for their expected high level of notoriety. In addition, as our experimental manipulations required a celeb–deleb pairing, we tested participants' response to celebrities that were predicted to present similar levels of familiarity and attitude.

Based on the results, Johnny Depp and Elvis Presley were selected as, respectively, the celeb and the deleb. Familiarity and attitude toward the two celebrities were significantly similar (familiarity: $M_{Depp} = 6.06$ vs. $M_{Presley} = 6.12$, $\Delta = -.06$, $t(31) = -.32$, $p > .05$; attitude: $M_{Depp} = 5.28$ vs. $M_{Presley} = 4.90$, $\Delta = .38$, $t(31) = 1.37$, $p > .05$). Both deleb and celeb rated relatively high on familiarity and attitude.

Thirty-five adult individuals participated in a second pretest, which aimed to test if the selected brands and images were suitable for the stimuli. They were exposed to fictitious advertisements of two watch brands, Rolex and Sea-Gull, using Johnny Depp and Elvis Presley. We selected watchmaking brands since celebrity endorsement is a common practice within this product category and because a large proportion of the population is familiar with watches. Also, since watches may be functional or status products, they offer a good opportunity to contrast low- and high-equity brands. More specifically, real-world brands were used to ensure that participants would infer from their actual equity when evaluating the ads (Chien

et al. 2011). Rolex was selected as a notorious brand, also known for its use of celebrities in ads (e.g., David Beckham, Uma Thurman, Cameron Diaz, Brad Pitt and Martin Luther King). Conversely, Sea-Gull, a Chinese watch brand, remains relatively unknown by Western consumers, a situation that suited our manipulation purposes. The analyses confirmed these predictions: respondents rated the level of equity of Rolex significantly higher than that of Sea-Gull (familiarity: $M_{Rolex} = 5.37$ vs. $M_{Sea\text{-}Gull} = 3.20$, $\Delta = 2.17$, $t(34) = 5.36$, $p < .001$; attitude: $M_{Rolex} = 6.34$ vs. $M_{Sea\text{-}Gull} = 4.40$, $\Delta = 1.94$, $t(34) = 6.45$, $p < .001$). To ensure that Johnny Depp and Elvis Presley presented a comparable level of attractiveness and avoid potential biases, participants were asked to rate their images on five seven-point items from Erfgen et al. (2015) (*attractive, classy, beautiful, elegant, sexy*). Next, in order to control for the level of success for both individuals as well as the level of potential nostalgia associated with Elvis Presley, participants were asked to judge how successful both celebrities were ("Celebrity *is/was a successful celebrity*) as well as how melancholic their images made them feel (*this image makes me feel melancholic*). Results showed that Johnny Depp and Elvis Presley were similarly attractive and highly successful (attractiveness: $M_{Depp} = 4.89$ vs. $M_{Presley} = 4.68$, $\Delta = .24$, $t(34) = 1.06$, $p > .05$; successful: $M_{Depp} = 6.48$ vs. $M_{Presley} = 6.45$, $\Delta = .03$, $t(34) = .32$, $p > .05$). The two images induced the same (low) level of melancholy ($M_{Depp} = 3.45$ vs. $M_{Presley} = 3.77$, $\Delta = -.32$, $t(34) = -.96$, $p > .05$). Overall, the stimuli were deemed suitable for the study.

Experimental Procedure and Measures

The questionnaire informed the participants that the goal of the study was to learn more about their attitude toward an ad for a watchmaking brand. All items were drawn from prior research and measured on a seven-point scale, unless stated otherwise. Separate exploratory factor analyses were conducted on the items for each scale. All items loaded on a single dimension and internal consistency was satisfactory ("Appendix 3").

In the first part of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to rate initial brand CPE (Sierra et al. 2015), their familiarity with the brand (*I am familiar*), as well as brand and celebrity attitude (*I like*) and familiarity (*I am familiar*). These items were measured before exposure to the stimuli in order to control for their potential confounding effects and test the efficiency of the experimental manipulations regarding brand equity and celebrity notoriety and attitude.

In the second part of the questionnaire, the participants were exposed to a fictitious ad for a Rolex or Sea-Gull watch presented by either Johnny Depp or Elvis Presley ("Appendix 4"). Then, in the third part, participants assessed ad CPE (Reidenbach et al.

1991), final brand CPE (Sierra et al. 2015) and perceived controversy (Huhmann and Mott-Stenerson 2008). In addition, celebrity-brand congruence was measured with three items from Pappu and Cornwell (2014). In order to measure agreement inference, i.e., consumer's inferences about the existence of a potential agreement between the brand and the celebrity's representatives to use the image, participants answered three created items (*How likely did* celebrity's *representatives agree to have his image used by* brand?; *How likely has* brand *paid for using this image in an ad?*; *How likely does* brand *use the image of* celebrity *without his representative's consent?*).

It is important to mention that participants judged final brand CPE by answering the same questions as initial brand CPE, although bearing in mind the ad they had just seen (see Martinez et al. 2009). We did not opt for including a control group because it would have prevented us from controlling for potential confounding effects. Yet, because the procedure could increase participants' suspicion of the experiment's real goal, we added an item at the end of the questionnaire to control for this potential bias based on the debriefing procedure by Chartrand et al. (2008) (*According to you, what is the purpose of this study?*). This measure confirmed that none of the participants recognized the real purpose of the experiment. The questionnaire ended with socio-demographic questions.

Results

Manipulation Checks

A two-factor (advertising type and brand equity) MANOVA with brand attitude and brand familiarity as the dependent variables yielded a significant multivariate main effect of brand equity (Wilk's $\lambda = .39$, $F(2, 199) = 155.61$, $p < .001$). No other effect was significant ($p's > .10$). Univariate ANCOVAs yielded a statistically significant main effect of equity for both brand attitude ($F(1, 200) = 85.73$, $p < .001$) and familiarity ($F(1, 200) = 310.15$, $p < .001$). Rolex's equity was significantly higher than that of Sea-Gull (familiarity: $M_{Rolex} = 5.06$ vs. $M_{Sea\text{-}Gull} = 1.48$, $\Delta = 3.58$, $t(202) = 17.61$, $p < .001$; attitude: $M_{Rolex} = 4.86$ vs. $M_{Sea\text{-}Gull} = 3.02$, $\Delta = 1.84$, $t(202) = 9.26$, $p < .001$). These results confirm that the manipulation of brand equity was effective.

A two-factor (advertising type and brand equity) MANOVA with celebrity-brand congruence and initial brand CPE as the dependent variables yielded a significant multivariate main effect of brand equity (Wilk's $\lambda = .84$, $F(2, 199) = 17.87$, $p < .001$) but no main effect of advertising type (Wilk's $\lambda = .98$, $F(2, 199) = 1.08$, $p > .05$). The interaction was not significant (Wilk's $\lambda = .99$, $F(2, 199) = .29$, $p > .05$). Univariate results showed a significant main effect of brand equity on celebrity-brand congruence ($F(1, 200) = 31.16$, $p < .001$)

and initial brand CPE ($F(1, 200) = 18.53$, $p < .001$). Congruence and initial brand CPE were higher in high-equity conditions than in low-equity conditions (congruence: $M_{HighEquity} = 4.88$ vs. $M_{LowEquity} = 3.91$, $\Delta = .97$, $t(202) = 5.57$, $p < .001$; initial brand CPE: $M_{HighEquity} = 3.92$ vs. $M_{LowEquity} = 3.31$, $\Delta = .61$, $t(202) = 4.30$, $p < .001$). This is coherent with previous research that identified a positive relation between equity and congruence (Roy and Cornwell 2003) as well as equity and brand CPE (Sierra et al. 2015). Yet, in order to hold these differences constant and ascertain the robustness of the findings by statistically controlling for any potential contaminating or confounding influences, celebrity-brand congruence, initial brand CPE and participants' sex and age were used as covariates in the following analyses testing the research hypotheses.

Hypotheses Testing

An ANCOVA using final brand CPE as the dependent variable, advertising type, brand equity and their interaction as independent variables, was used to test H1 (Table 1). The analysis yielded a significant interaction effect ($F(1,196) = 10.75$, $p < .001$). As predicted by H1, in high-equity conditions there were no statistically significant differences in consumer responses in celebrity endorsement vs. necro-advertising ($M_{CelebAd} = 4.00$ vs. $M_{NecroAd} = 4.00$, $\Delta = .00$, $t(99) = .34$, $p > .05$). In low-equity conditions, necro-advertising led to lower final brand CPE than celebrity endorsement ($M_{CelebAd} = 3.89$ vs. $M_{NecroAd} = 3.22$, $\Delta = .67$, $t(101) = 3.49$, $p < .001$).

Also, it was predicted by H2 that the effects of necro-advertising on low-equity brand CPE were serially mediated by agreement inference (M1), controversy (M2) and ad CPE (M3). In this model, the mediators have a direct effect on each other (M1 on M2, and M2 on M3) and the advertising type is assumed to influence mediators in a serial fashion that subsequently influences final brand CPE.

Table 1 Study 1: ANCOVA results

Source of variation	Brand CPE		
	df	Mean squares	F statistic
Intercept	1	4.53	8.28**
Advertising type (A)	1	2.70	4.93*
Brand equity (B)	1	.13	.23
A × B	1	5.88	10.75***
Celebrity-brand congruence	1	15.23	27.85***
Initial brand CPE	1	29.51	53.94***
Age	1	1.19	2.18
Sex	1	.05	.09
Error	196	.54	

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

To provide evidence on this mechanism, serial mediation analyses were carried out using PROCESS Model 6 with 5000 biased bootstrap samples (Hayes 2013). Celebrity endorsement was coded "0" and necro-advertising "1." Brand equity was mean-centered (Aiken and West 1991). Celebrity-brand congruence, initial brand CPE and participants' age and sex were used as covariates.

In low-equity conditions, the analyses yielded two significant pathways [total indirect effects: $\beta = -.39$, CI 95% $(-.72; -.18)$] (Fig. 1; Table 2 panel a). One pathway runs serially from the advertising type to brand CPE through M1 and M2 [$\beta = -.05$, CI 95% $(-.17; -.01)$]. The second pathway runs serially through M1, M2 and M3 [$\beta = -.01$, CI 95% $(-.05; -.01)$]. Conversely, as expected, in high-equity conditions, no significant mediation effects (simple or serial) was evidenced [total indirect effects: $\beta = -.04$, CI 95% $(-.14; .04)$] (Table 2, panel b). These results confirm that necro-advertising led to an inferred unauthorized use of the image by low-equity brands, which in turn ignites controversy. Interestingly, this controversy has a direct and indirect (through ad CPE) detrimental impact on brand CPE. Such mechanism was not observed for high-equity brands. Hence, H2 was supported.

Additional Analyses

A two-factor (advertising type and brand equity) ANCOVA yielded a significant interaction effect on agreement inference $(F(1, 196) = 4.64, p < .05)$. In line with our predictions, for high-equity brands, the use of the celebrity's image was assessed as authorized at a similarly high level for both celebrity and necro-advertising [$M_{CelebAd} = 5.07$ vs. $M_{NecroAd} = 4.96$, $\Delta = .11$,

$t(99) = .43, p > .05$]. Conversely, in low-equity brands, the level of agreement inference was lower for necro-advertising than for celebrity advertising [$M_{CelebAd} = 4.04$ vs. $M_{NecroAd} = 3.35$, $\Delta = .69, t(101) = 2.56, p < .01$]. It is worth noting that the use of a celeb's image (i.e., celebrity advertising) resulted in lower inference agreement for low-equity brands than for high-equity brands [$M_{HighEquity} = 5.07$ vs. $M_{LowEquity} = 4.04$, $\Delta = 1.03$, $t(98) = 4.21, p < .001$]. This result is in line with the predictions that brand equity would impact consumers' inference toward celebrity-brand agreements.

Discussion

Study 1 identified a moderating impact of brand equity on the effect of necro-advertising on brand CPE. Specifically, a low level of equity was evidenced to favor negative effects of necro-advertising on brand CPE. Additional analyses confirmed the mediating role of agreement inference, controversy and ad CPE. In particular, the results indicate that in addition to its impact on ad CPE, controversy directly affected low-equity brand CPE. This direct effect may reinforce the detrimental impact of ad CPE on brand ethicality judgment. In contrast, a high level of equity may prevent from negative inferences regarding the use of the deleb's image.

Although these results are consistent with our hypotheses, the operationalization of the agreement inference in Study 1 (participants were asked to assess the likeliness of a potential celebrity-brand agreement) was based on the assumption that consumers were conscious of their inferential process. This is coherent with prior research that showed that consumer's inferences regarding brand attribute levels were conscious
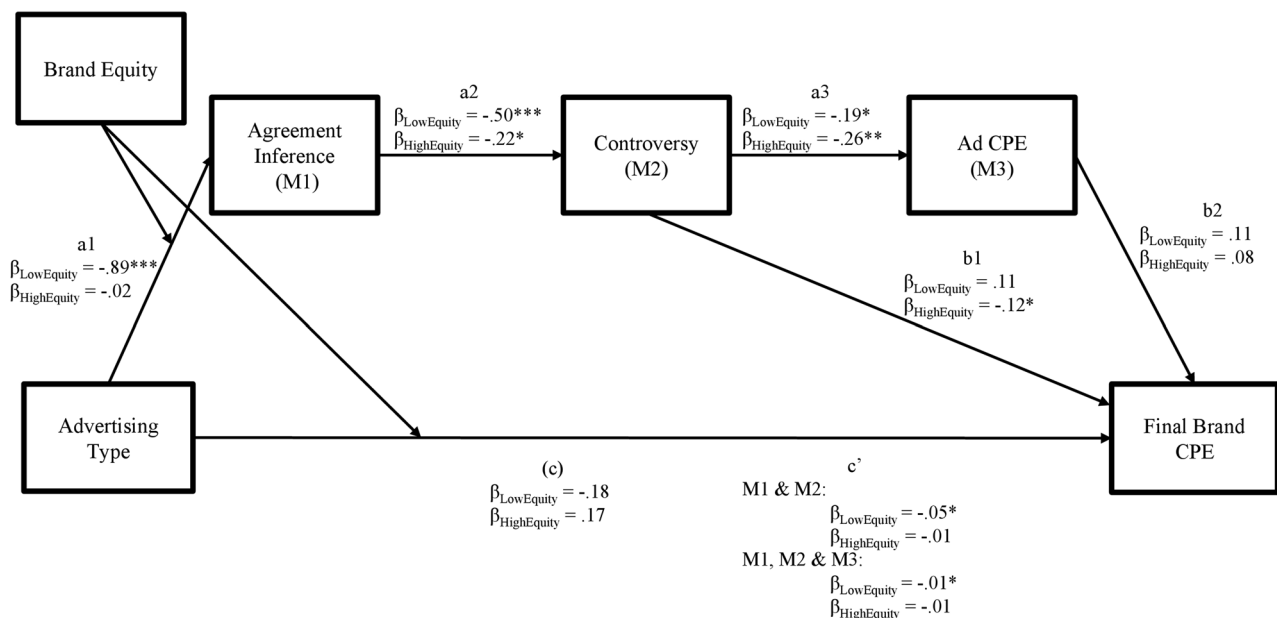

Fig. 1 Moderated serial mediation of advertising type on final brand CPE. *Note* Only predicted effects are represented. For complete results, see Table 2. ***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$

Table 2 Serial mediation results on brand CPE

Mediators	Agreement inference			Controversy			Ad CPE		
	β	SE	t	β	SE	t	β	SE	t
Panel a: Low-equity brands									
Constant	5.21***	.75	6.86	5.54***	.86	6.43	3.68***	.91	4.02
Advertising type	−.89***	.26	−3.34	.84***	.26	3.20	−.76**	.24	−3.11
Agreement inf.	–	–	–	−.50***	.09	−5.39	.07	.09	.74
Controversy	–	–	–	–	–	–	−.19*	.09	−2.14
Initial brand CPE	.06	.12	.51	.22	.11	1.88	.12	.10	1.13
Congruence	.13	.10	1.19	−.20*	.10	−2.02	.23**	.09	2.58
Age	−.02**	.01	−2.43	−.01	.01	−.89	.01	.01	.24
Sex	−.51*	.27	−1.87	.11	.26	.43	−.01	.23	−.06
Total R^2	.16**			.40***			.35***		

Dependent variable	Final brand CPE		
	β	SE	t
Constant	1.08	.69	1.55
Advertising type	−.18	.18	−1.02
Agreement inf.	.12	.06	1.86
Controversy	−.11	.06	−1.18
Ad CPE	.11	.07	1.54
Initial brand CPE	.24***	.07	3.25
Congruence	.17**	.06	2.56
Age	.01	.01	1.23
Sex	.19	.16	1.19
Total R^2	.47***		

Indirect effects	Final brand CPE			
Serial paths	β	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Total	−.39*	.13	−.72	−.18
M1	−.11	.07	−.31	.01
M1 and M2	−.05*	.04	−.17	−.01
M1 and M3	−.01	.01	−.06	.01
M1, M2 and M3	−.01*	.01	−.05	−.01
M2	−.10	.06	−.28	.01
M2 and M3	−.01	.01	−.08	.01
M3	−.08	.07	−.28	.01

Mediators	Agreement inference			Controversy			Ad CPE		
	β	SE	t	β	SE	t	β	SE	t
Panel b: High-equity brands									
Constant	4.03***	.79	5.08	6.36***	.91	6.94	1.84*	.96	1.91
Advertising type	−.02	.24	−.92	.31	.24	1.29	.07	.21	.35
Agreement inf.	–	–	–	−.22*	.10	−2.10	.27**	.09	2.99
Controversy	–	–	–	–	–	–	−.26**	.08	−3.04
Initial brand CPE	−.38**	.14	−2.70	−.29*	.15	−1.97	.06	.13	.50
Congruence	.50***	.11	4.39	−.26*	.12	−2.07	.42***	.11	3.85
Age	−.01	.01	−.08	−.01	.01	−.05	.01	.01	.32

Table 2 continued

Mediators	Agreement inference			Controversy			Ad CPE		
	β	SE	t	β	SE	t	β	SE	t
Sex	.05	.23	.24	−.01	.23	−.04	−.04	.20	−.21
Total R^2	.17**			.49***			.48***		

Dependent variable	Final brand CPE		
	β	SE	t
Constant	.46	.55	.84
Advertising type	.17	.11	1.43
Agreement inf.	−.01	.05	−.32
Controversy	−.12*	.05	−2.33
Ad CPE	.08	.05	1.44
Initial brand CPE	.66***	.07	8.94
Congruence	.09	.06	1.36
Age	.01*	.01	1.92
Sex	.03	.11	.28
Total R^2	.68***		

Indirect effects	Final brand CPE			
Serial paths	β	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Total	−.04	.04	−.14	.04
M1	.01	.01	−.01	.03
M1 and M2	−.01	.01	−.02	.01
M1 and M3	−.01	.01	−.02	.01
M1, M2 and M3	−.01	.01	−.01	.01
M2	−.03	.03	−.14	.01
M2 and M3	−.01	.01	−.05	.01
M3	−.01	.02	−.02	.08

LLCI lower limit 95% confidence interval, *ULCI* upper limit 95% confidence interval

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

(Kirmani 1990). Yet, in order to confer more confidence in our findings, Study 2 presents another operationalization of the potential celebrity-brand agreement. Indeed, in order to confirm that controversy results from inferences that low-equity brands did not get the authorization to use the deleb's image, Study 2 investigates the impact of an agreement cue, i.e., the explicit statement that the brand cleared the publicity rights, hence legally used the deleb's image, on consumer responses.

Study 2

Research Methods

Design and Sample

Study 2 employs a 2 (brand equity: high vs. low) × 2 (agreement cue: yes vs. no) between-subjects factorial design. A convenient sample of 143 participants were recruited through Clickworker, a crowdsourcing marketplace with a pool of 800,000 individuals. They received a fixed amount of monetary compensation of 2$. Four incomplete questionnaires were excluded leaving a final sample of 139. The participants presented overall similar characteristics to the general population in terms of age (M = 35) and sex (63 men). The amount of time each respondent took for completing the survey as well as the IP addresses was reviewed to control for data quality.

Experimental Procedure and Measures

The participants were exposed to a fictitious ad for a cosmetics brand presented by a deleb. In agreement cue conditions, background information indicated that the brand had paid for using the image ("Appendix 4"). Based on the first pretest of Study 1, Audrey Hepburn was selected as the

Table 3 Study 2: ANCOVA results

Source of variation	Brand CPE		
	df	Mean squares	F statistic
Intercept	1	40.76	40.52***
Agreement cue (A)	1	3.34	3.32
Brand equity (B)	1	.01	.01
A × B	1	5.46	5.43*
Celebrity-brand congruence	1	44.81	44.54***
Age	1	4.10	4.08*
Sex	1	.73	.73
Error	132	1.00	

*** $p < .001$; * $p < .05$

deleb appearing in the ad because of a high level of familiarity and attitude (familiarity: $M = 5.25$; attitude: $M = 4.81$). Cosmetic brands were selected as they commonly use celebrity endorsement in their communication efforts (e.g., Choi and Rifon 2012; Till and Busler 2000). The world-renowned brand L'Oréal and Tarte Cosmetics, a brand that relies on minimal advertising expenses, were identified as appropriate high- and low-equity brands, respectively. Analyses confirmed that their level of brand familiarity and attitude was significantly different [familiarity: $M_{L'Oréal} = 5.71$ vs. $M_{Tarte} = 2.40$, $\Delta = 3.31$, $t(31) = 7.93$, $p < .001$; attitude: $M_{L'Oréal} = 4.78$ vs. $M_{Tarte} = 3.25$, $\Delta = 1.53$, $t(31) = 1.53$, $p < .01$].

The measures followed the stimuli and were the same as those described in Study 1, excluding initial brand CPE and agreement inference. For each scale all items loaded on a

Fig. 2 Agreement cue × brand equity interaction on brand CPE

single dimension and internal consistency was satisfactory ("Appendix 3").

Results

Manipulation Checks

Brand familiarity, brand attitude and celebrity-brand congruence were analyzed in the context of 2 (brand equity) × 2 (agreement cue) ANOVAs. Attitude toward L'Oréal was more favorable than the attitude toward Tarte ($M_{L'Oréal} = 5.29$ vs. $M_{Tarte} = 2.85$; $F(1, 135) = 100.28$, $p < .001$). None of the other effects was significant ($p's > .10$). Familiarity of L'Oréal was significantly higher than that of Tarte ($M_{L'Oréal} = 5.66$ vs. $M_{Tarte} = 2.15$; $F(1, 135) = 188.22$, $p < .001$); again, none of the other effects was significant ($p's > .10$).

Similarly to Study 1, celebrity-brand congruence was higher in high-equity conditions than in low-equity conditions [$M_{L'Oréal} = 4.60$ vs. $M_{Tarte} = 3.91$; $F(1, 135) = 8.23$, $p < .05$]. The interaction and the main effect of agreement cue were not significant ($p's > .10$).

Hypotheses Testing

A two-factor ANCOVA was used to test the effects of brand equity and agreement cue on brand CPE when controlling for celebrity-brand congruence and participants' age and sex. The results are displayed in Table 3. In support of H3, the analysis showed a significant interaction effect [$F(1, 132) = 5.43$, $p < .05$]. Whereas in low-equity conditions agreement cue positively impacted brand CPE [$M_{PaymentCue} = 3.87$ vs. $M_{NoPaymentCue} = 3.11$, $\Delta = .76$, $t(66) = 3.11$, $p < .01$], in high-equity conditions no effect was observed [$M_{PaymentCue} = 3.68$ vs. $M_{NoPaymentCue} = 3.97$, $\Delta = -.29$, $t(69) = -.99$, $p > .05$] (Fig. 2).

To determine whether the effect of agreement cue was serially mediated by controversy and ad CPE in low-equity conditions (H4) when controlling for celebrity-brand congruence as well as participants' age and sex, PROCESS Model 6 was used with bias-corrected coefficients estimated from a series of 5000 bootstrap samples (Hayes 2013). Agreement cue was coded "1" and no cue "0." This model supports H4 by demonstrating that in low-equity conditions, the effects of agreement cue were (a) mediated by controversy [$\beta = -.12$, CI $(-.38; -.01)$], (b) mediated by ad CPE [$\beta = .43$, CI $(.14; .87)$] and (c) serially mediated by controversy and ad CPE [$\beta = .13$, CI $(.03; .40)$] (Table 4 panel a; Fig. 3). Conversely, in high-equity conditions, the 95% CI included zero for (a) mediation by controversy [$\beta = -.06$, CI $(-.33; .03)$], (b) mediation by ad CPE ($\beta = .02$, CI $(-.02; .19)$] and (c) serial mediation
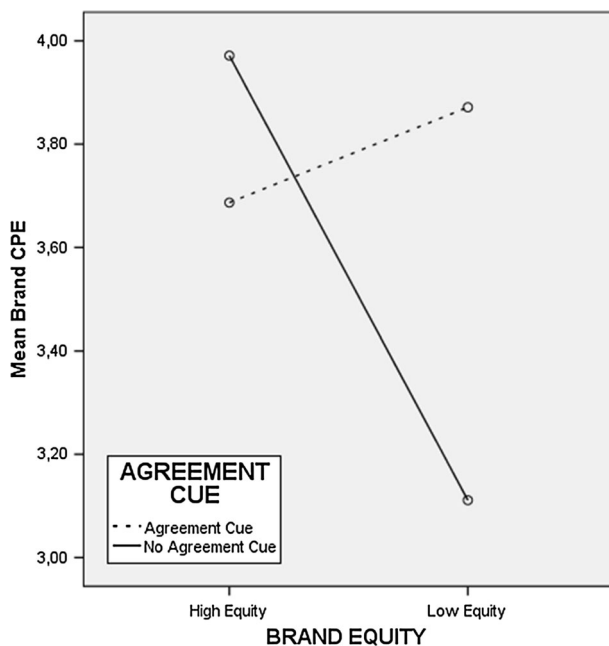
Table 4 Moderated serial mediation results on brand CPE

Mediators	Controversy (M1)			Ad CPE (M2)		
	β	SE	t	β	SE	t
Panel a: Low-equity conditions						
Constant	5.57***	.72	7.73	3.58***	.88	4.04
Agreement cue	−.78*	.31	−2.49	.94**	.29	3.21
Controversy				−.38***	.10	−3.51
Congruence	−.38**	.11	−3.38	.23*	.10	2.17
Age	−.01	.01	−.14	.01	.01	.50
Sex	−.07	.33	−.23	.13	.29	.45
Total R^2	.21**			.42***		

Dependent variable	Brand CPE		
	β	SE	t
Constant	.20	.73	.27
Controversy	.16	.08	1.83
Ad CPE	.45***	.09	4.95
Agreement cue	.29	.23	1.26
Congruence	.31***	.08	3.71
Age	−.01	.01	−1.12
Sex	−.26	.22	−1.18
Total R^2	.52***		

Indirect effects	Ad CPE			
	β	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Total	.44*	.19	.11	.91
M1	−.12*	.08	−.38	−.01
M2	.43*	.18	.14	.87
M1 and M2	.13*	.08	.03	.40

Mediators	Controversy (M1)			Ad CPE (M2)		
	β	SE	t	β	SE	t
Panel b: High-equity conditions						
Constant	5.07***	.80	6.26	3.22***	.82	3.90
Agreement cue	.31	.34	.91	.21	.27	.77
Controversy				−.29	.10	−2.90
Congruence	−.42***	.12	−3.46	.54***	.10	5.05
Age	.01	.01	.31	−.01	.01	−.43
Sex	−.21	.40	−.52	.48	.32	1.48
Total R^2	.18*			.46***		

Dependent variable	Brand CPE		
	β	SE	t
Constant	3.75***	.80	4.65
Controversy	−.21*	.09	−2.30
Ad CPE	.10	.11	.92
Agreement cue	−.02	.24	−.10
Congruence	.23*	.11	2.13
Age	−.02*	.01	−2.06

Table 4 continued

Dependent variable	Brand CPE		
	β	SE	t
Sex	−.23	.29	−.81
Total R^2	.39***		

Indirect effects	Ad CPE			
	β	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Total	−.05	.10	−.34	.11
M1	−.06	.08	−.33	.03
M2	.02	.05	−.02	.19
M1 and M2	−.01	.01	−.08	.01

LLCI lower limit 95% confidence interval, *ULCI* upper limit 95% confidence interval

*** $p < .001$; * $p < .05$

by controversy and ad CPE [$\beta = -.01$, CI $(-.08; .01)$] (Table 4 panel b; Fig. 3). These results confirm that the mediation effects of controversy and ad CPE on the relation between agreement cue and brand CPE were moderated by brand equity.

Discussion

Lending support to our predictions, Study 2 results indicate that brand equity moderates the impact of agreement cue on brand CPE. While in Study 1 it was found that necro-advertising (vs. celebrity endorsement) had a negative impact on brand CPE in low-equity conditions, Study 2 results shed light on the psychological process at work. The findings confirm that controversy emanates from the inference that low-equity brands did not sign an agreement for using the deleb's image for advertising purposes. As expected, the statement that low-equity brands paid for using the image prevented controversy and serially resulted in higher ad CPE and brand CPE.

General Discussion

Unbeknown to them, Marilyn Monroe, Audrey Hepburn, Steve McQueen and Gene Kelly, among others, recently presented products in ads for high- and low-equity brands. The goal of this paper was to investigate the effects of necro-advertising on brand CPE with brand equity as a potential moderator. To the best of our knowledge, this paper is the first to empirically investigate consumer responses toward necro-advertising practices and to uncover an underestimated risk related to consumer inferences about unauthorized uses of deceased celebrities' images.

Theoretical Contributions

Our paper offers three main theoretical contributions. First, across two studies, it provides valuable insights into the moderating impact of brand equity on brand CPE. Previous studies have mainly focused on brand equity building through brand ethical reputation (Fan 2005) and celebrity endorsement (Till 1998). The present findings suggest how in return brand equity impacts the efficiency of celebrity marketing and consumer perception of brand ethicality. More specifically, this research deepens current understanding of perceived ethicality by identifying the moderating impact of brand equity on brand CPE through ad CPE. It shows that under uncertainty and asymmetric information conditions, consumers may form ethical perception toward a brand based on what is perceived as a diagnostic cue, such as an advertising practice.

In particular, our results highlight that consumers infer different types of information depending on brand equity. Previous research states that consumers process new information in accordance with an initial disposition (Bond et al. 2007; Carlson et al. 2006). By extension, we show that analytical inferences to process new information may depend on the level of brand equity; in necro-advertising, consumer inferences influencing perceived ethicality (i.e., whether the brand signed an agreement for using the deleb's image) differ between high- and low-equity brands. As a result, only low-equity brands will suffer from asymmetric information as the low level of knowledge and reputation leads to negative inferences. Because prior knowledge underlines high-equity brand's capabilities to associate with expensive parties (i.e., well-known celebs), consumers assume that they cleared the publicity rights for using the deleb's image, and ultimately perceive their necro-advertising practices to be ethical. Conversely, as low-equity
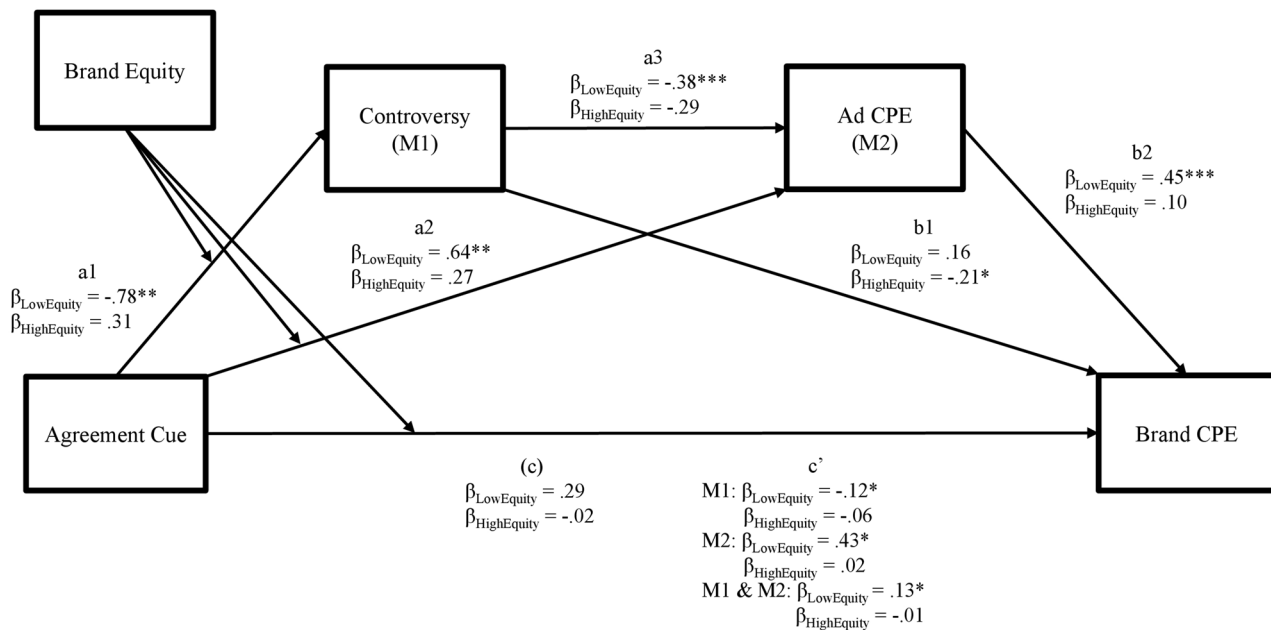
Fig. 3 Moderated serial mediation of payment cue on brand CPE. *Note* ***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05

brands show no track record of such expensive associations, consumers infer that they used the deleb's image without paying the publicity rights. Consequently, necro-advertising appears as an unethical practice for low-equity brands and acts as a negative signal for brand CPE.

Overall, in conjunction with the signaling theory, this research extends previous literature that showed that celebrity endorsement works as a positive signal of a brand's capabilities and reputation because the associated entities (brand and celebrity) are putting their equity at risk through a long-term and expensive engagement (Rao et al. 1999). Our research results show that consumers may process necro-advertising information in an inferential mode that may be detrimental for low-equity brands.

Second, this research extends knowledge on consumer responses toward death-related images in advertising. While previous literature has investigated the controversial effect of death imagery in advertising (Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes 2006), our research results show that the use of a deceased individual's image does not have an adverse effect on perceived ethicality for high-equity brands. We believe that this result enriches extant literature on the use of death in advertising. It indicates that contrary to death imagery, in necro-advertising controversy does not derive from advertising execution (Huhmann and Mott-Stenerson 2008) but rather from consumer inferences that brands made an unauthorized use of the deleb's image. As such, controversy increases under conditions of uncertainty, i.e., when a low-equity brand does not explicitly disclose the deleb-brand agreement. The high level of knowledge and reputation of high-equity brands decreases

uncertainty through an inferred legal agreement, and prevents controversy.

Finally, we show that brand CPE may be positively impacted by an ethical behavioral cue. While necro-advertising appears as an uncertain signal that leads to analytical inference processing, an observed ethical signal such as the agreement cue is shown to prevent controversy and positively impact ad CPE and low-equity brand CPE. Agreement cue increases the perceived ethicality of necro-advertising for low-equity brands, which in turn benefits to brand CPE. In contrast, because a high level of equity already acts as a positive signal that these firms have the means to obtain such consent from a deleb's estate, our results found no effect of agreement cue on consumer responses for high-equity brands.

Managerial Implications

These findings are also of particular relevance for marketing practitioners. First, it is important to note that no differences in the impact of celebrity endorsement *versus* necro-advertising on brand CPE were identified for high-equity brands. Over the past decades, celebrity misbehavior and transgression led to scandals potentially threatening to brands endorsed by celebrities (Till and Shimp 1998). Michael Phelps smoking marijuana, Kate Moss snorting cocaine, Tony Parker having marital affair or Tiger Woods involved in a car accident: we are not short of examples illustrating how celebrity endorsement may be a risky strategy for brands (Bartz et al. 2013). Conversely, a deleb presents the unique advantage for companies to present no risk of such behaviors. As such, our findings provide high-equity brands' managers with the confirmation that they

may use celebs' and delebs' image alike to derive positive associations regarding brand CPE (D'Rozario and Bryant 2013; Petty and D'Rozario 2009). By manipulating the type of advertising (i.e., necro-advertising vs. celebrity endorsement), our first study evidenced a similar level of brand CPE following the exposure to an ad using either a deleb or a celeb. Yet, it is crucial to mention that our manipulations followed the ethical recommendations provided by D'Rozario and Bryant (2013), such as avoiding cheapening the deleb's image. Consequently, although brands may be concerned with potential detrimental effects of necro-advertising on brand CPE (Petty and D'Rozario 2009), our findings indicate that by observing ethical precepts, necro-advertising should result in similar level of brand CPE as celebrity endorsement for high-equity brands. Also, because controversy associated with death imagery in advertising should not concern the use of delebs as product presenters, necro-advertising can be considered by high-equity brands as an effective marketing communication practice.

Second, this work carries caveats for low-equity brands, especially as necro-advertising could appear as a more accessible practice for low-equity brands. Indeed, current practices may indicate that celebrities who only associated with prestigious brands during their lifetime have appeared in ads for less prestigious brands since they passed away. As an illustration, while James Dean and Marilyn Monroe acted in ads in the 1950s for Pepsi and Coca-Cola, respectively, their image was used in ads for the watchmaking company Candino in 2013. In a recent article, Zamudio (2016) demonstrated that celebrity endorsement resulted from a two-sided (brand and celebrity) choice process. The appearance of delebs in low-equity brands, such as the use of Martin Luther King's image by the communications company Alcatel, regularly raises questions over the decisions of the delebs' estate to consent for such use (Kohn 2001). In addition, because delebs' images are substantially less expensive than celebs' (D'Rozario and Bryant 2013), necro-advertising may be more affordable to brands that do not have the financial capabilities to associate with a well-known celebrity. However, low-equity brands could suffer from a lack of sufficient previous associations with celebrities, which may favor negative inferences impacting brand CPE. Our results underline that managers of low-equity brands should present necro-advertising as a strategic alliance built around the (ethical) agreement with the deleb's estate (materialized by the payment of the publicity rights). The statement that the firm cleared the publicity rights appears as a simple and efficient way to prevent controversy and preempt the adverse effects of a low level of equity on consumer responses.

Limitations and Further Research

Notwithstanding the above, a number of limitations to our work should be noted. First, although we obtained statistically significant mean differences, we must acknowledge the small sample size of our studies. While this size is not unusual for an experimental design (see Atkinson and Rosenthal 2014; Besharat et al. 2013; Silvera and Austad 2004), it may reduce the generalizability of our findings. We sought to overcome this limitation by using samples of participants drawn from the same population but recruited in a different manner across the two studies. Another methodological problem confronting the paper is using fictitious ads for our experimental manipulations. Even though this method is fairly common in the advertising literature (e.g., Bakir and Palan 2010), it would be important to replicate this research using actual ads so as to confirm that real exposure to necro-advertising activates similar responses. Future research might also address this limitation by conducting observational studies or surveys regarding real necro-advertising practices, thereby increasing the external validity of our results.

Second, in the present article, the emphasis was on the use of delebs in print advertising solely. Future research should consider other commercial uses of delebs and their impact on brand CPE. For example, the digital resurrection of deceased celebrities has grown in popularity in the recent years (Hudak 2014). In our studies, we investigated real photographs taken by the deleb. On the contrary, digital resurrection raises additional issues from an ethical perspective because it involves the recreation of the deleb through CGI. Recently, Dior launched a TV and web ad that resurrected Grace Kelly, Marlene Dietrich and Marilyn Monroe in company with Charlize Theron to present the J'Adore perfume. Because digital resurrection may introduce a "creepiness factor" (Sherlock 2013) and as such may reinstate controversy and death imagery in necro-advertising, research in marketing should also investigate its impact on perceived ethicality.

Another potential avenue of research lies in time frame issues and whether brands should ensure that sufficient time has passed since the death of celebrities before considering using them for commercial purposes. Celebrities like Audrey Hepburn and Elvis Presley passed away decades ago. In contrast, with recently deceased celebrities, how much time would be required before consumers consider their commercial use respectful or appropriate (McCarthy and Anderson 2001)? Further research could also take into account consumers' attachment to certain deceased celebrities and whether this attachment might prompt a positive or negative response toward various deleb's images uses.

Finally, the findings of this research could also be extended through a consideration of the level of deleb-brand congruence, the amount of brands using the same deleb, or the endorsement (delebs and celebs) portfolios of a brand, and their impact on perceived ethicality as well as ad and brand attitude. These questions would offer important contributions to extend the results of this research by further investigating the effects of necro-advertising on consumer responses.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards o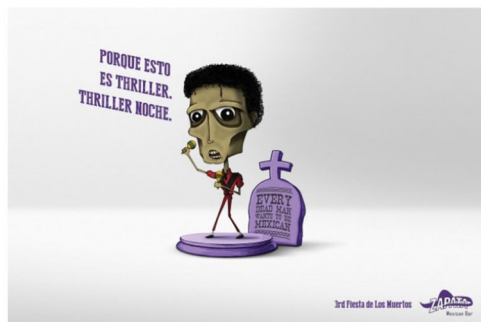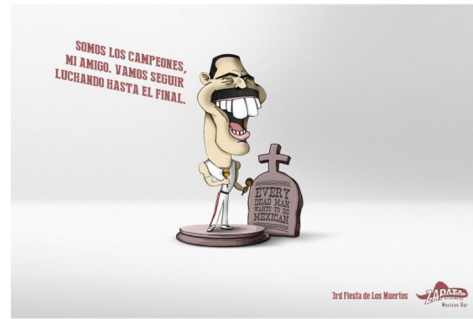f the in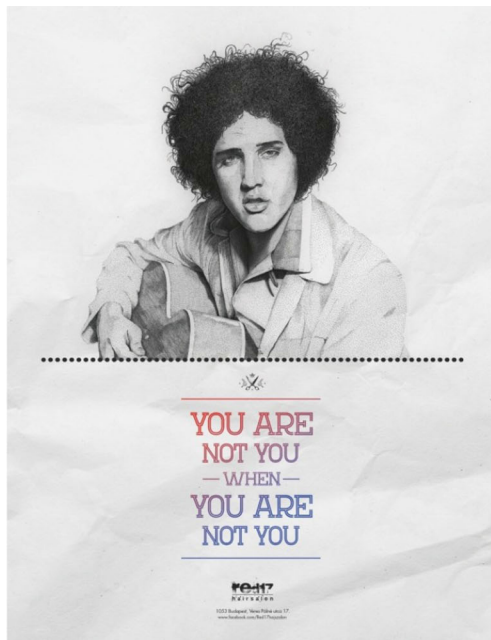stitutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

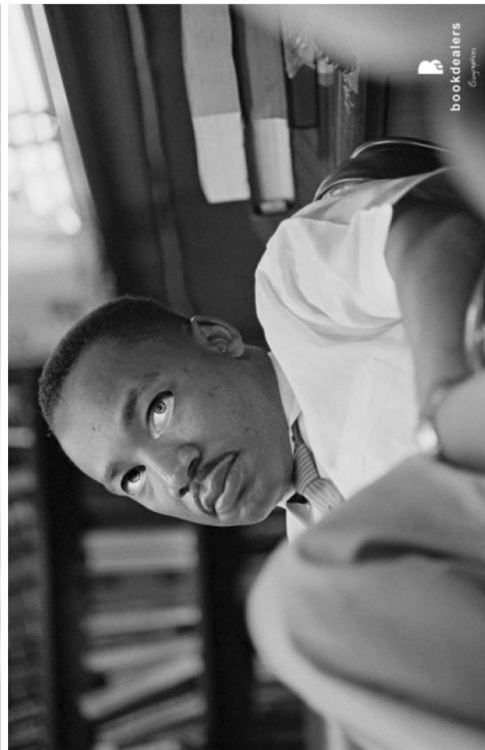**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Examples of necro-advertising by low-equity brands. *source* (www.adeevee.com)
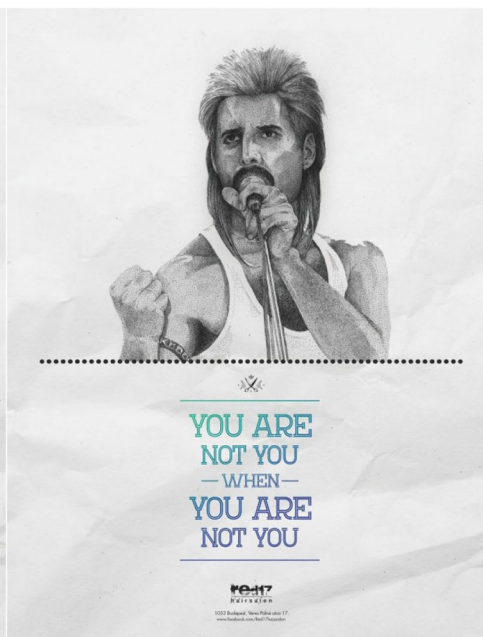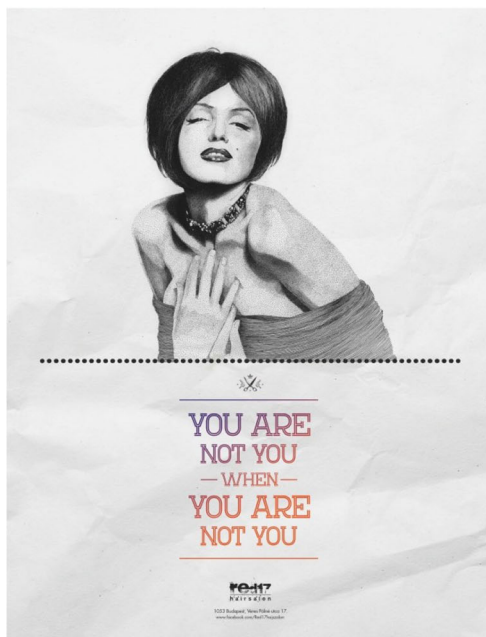
Source www.candino.com

Appendix 2: Pretest 1 results

Name of the celebrity	Attitude (mean)	Attitude (SE)	Familiarity (mean)	Familiarity (SE)
Delebs				
Amy Winehouse	3.43	1.83	4.93	1.94
Audrey Hepburn	4.81	1.83	5.25	1.95
Babe Ruth	3.84	1.70	5.40	1.58
Charlie Chaplin	3.93	1.94	5.09	1.83
David Bowie	4.56	1.72	5.75	1.39
Elizabeth Taylor	4.53	1.62	5.71	1.67
Elvis Presley	4.90	1.94	6.12	1.26
Humphrey Bogart	3.87	2.01	4.50	1.93
James Dean	4.34	1.73	5.06	1.77
Jimmy Hendrix	4.43	1.86	5.50	1.58
John Lennon	4.15	2.09	5.50	1.75
Kurt Cobain	3.71	1.90	5.12	1.71
Martin Luther King	5.53	1.62	6.03	1.46
Michael Jackson	4.71	1.80	6.59	.75
Patrick Swayze	5.12	1.49	5.78	1.60
Robin Williams	5.62	1.28	6.50	.80
Steve McQueen	3.62	1.75	3.84	2.09
Celebs				
Angelina Jolie	4.21	1.80	6.06	1.18
Brad Pitt	5.03	1.49	6.25	.98
Edward Snowden	2.56	1.75	4.03	2.27
Elton John	4.71	1.95	6.18	.99
Hugh Jackman	5.00	1.88	5.34	1.96
Jennifer Lawrence	4..87	1.75	5.71	1.54
Johnny Depp	5.28	1.59	6.06	1.18
Leonardo DiCaprio	5.59	1.41	6.43	.71
Michael Douglas	4.31	1.63	5.46	1.77
Michael Jordan	4.65	1.69	6.09	1.27

Name of the celebrity	Attitude (mean)	Attitude (SE)	Familiarity (mean)	Familiarity (SE)
Mick Jagger	4.28	1.52	5.59	1.52
Nicole Kidman	4.40	1.49	6.06	1.07
Pamela Anderson	3.53	1.48	5.93	1.26
Scarlett Johansson	5.00	1.60	5.65	1.59
Sharon Stone	4.15	1.46	5.09	1.80
Usain Bolt	3.59	1.88	3.93	2.24

Appendix 3: Measures

| Items	Study 1	Study 2
Ad CPE (Reidenbach et al. 1991)	80% (α .939)	81% (α .943)
Fair		
Just		
Culturally acceptable		
Traditionally acceptable		
Morally right		
Brand CPE (Sierra et al. 2015)	Initial CPE 77% (α: .941)	72% (α: .922)
Brand is a socially responsible brand		
Brand seems to make an effort to create new jobs		
Brand seems to be environmentally responsible	Final CPE 75% (α: .932)	
Brand appears to support good causes		
Brand is more beneficial for the welfare of the society than other brands		
Brand contributes to the society		
Perceived Controversy (Huhmann and Mott-Stenerson 2008)	86% (α: .923)	74% (α: .823)
Some consumers would likely be shocked to find this photograph of *celebrity* on this ad		
Some consumers would likely find offensive to find this photograph of *celebrity* on this ad		
Finding this photograph of *celebrity* on this ad might be controversial		
Celebrity-Brand Congruence (Pappu and Cornwell 2014)	86% (α: .922)	86% (α: .923)
The relation between *celebrity* and *brand*		
Makes sense		
Is high fit		
Is complementary		
Agreement Inference	79% (α: .866)	
How likely did celebrity's representatives agree to have his image used by brand?		
How likely has brand paid for using this image in an ad?		
How likely does brand use the image of celebrity without his representative's consent?"		
Attractiveness of the Celebrity (Erfgen et al. 2015) *Celebrity* is	Pretest 2:	
Attractive	Johnny Depp: 85% (α: .957)	
Classy		
Beautiful	Elvis Presley: 84% (α: .954)	
Elegant		
Sexy		

Appendix 4: Stimuli

STUDY 1
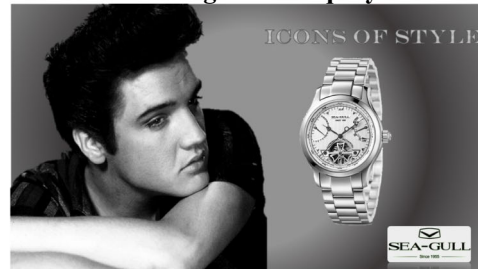
Celebrity endorsement - High equity
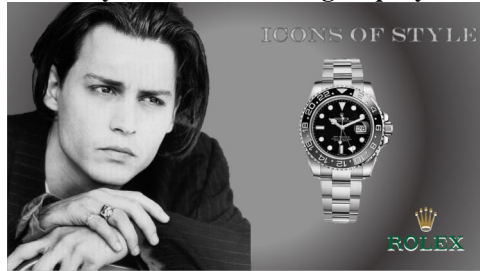
Celebrity endorsement – Low equity
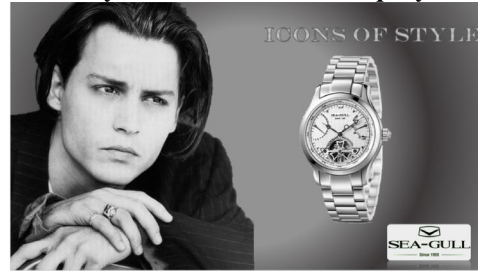
Necro-advertising – High equity
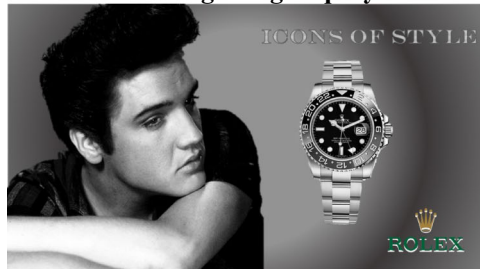
Necro-advertising – Low Equity

STUDY 2

High equity

Low equity

No payment cue:
Brand launched the following advertisement in magazines in January 2016. This is the first time Audrey Hepburn has appeared in an ad for *brand*.

Payment cue:
Brand launched the following advertisement in magazines in January 2016. The company paid the publicity rights to use the image of Audrey Hepburn.

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