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Comments

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Playing a Bad Character but Endorsing a Good Cause:

Actor-character Fundamental Attribution Error and Persuasion

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Abstract

The study examines the implications of fundamental attribution error, wherein viewers misattribute qualities of the fictional characters onto the actors who portray them. In an experiment, individuals watched an actor playing a role of either a hero or a villain. Then, participants watched the same actor in a public service announcement. In line with the attribution theory, viewers rated the actor's personality less positively, reported weaker parasocial relationship with the actor, and listed more negative thoughts about the advertisement after exposure to the actor playing a villain.

Keywords: Fundamental attribution error, parasocial relationships, counterarguing

Playing a Bad Character but Endorsing a Good Cause: Actor-character Fundamental

Attribution Error and Persuasion

Past research suggests that viewers do not always strictly maintain the distinction between actors and the fictional personalities they assume on screen. For instance, viewers hold actors accountable for attitudes expressed by them as part of portraying fictional characters (Tukachinsky, 2015); and attribute characteristics of the fictional characters to the actors that play them (e.g., Tal-Or & Papirman, 2007). The current study takes this line of research a step further by exploring whether this attribution bias can have implications for the actor's persuasiveness. Specifically, the goal of the study is to examine whether exposure to an actor playing either a hero or a villain character in a fictional movie can attenuate audiences' subsequent response to an advertisement starring the same actor.

Fundamental Attribution Error and Fictional Characters

Little is known about how discrepancies between actors and the fictional characters they play can impact viewers' perceptions of the actors and whether such incongruences have implications for persuasion. According to the fundamental attribution error (FAE) theory and research, individuals make generalizations about others' personalities based on their actions, while ignoring alternative explanations for that behavior (Ross, 1977). FAE stems from individuals' tendency to assume a correspondence between people's behaviors and their mental states (Andrews, 2001) and underplaying of the importance of situational factors (e.g., Gilbert & Malone, 1995). For example, experiments consistently found that participants tend to assume that an attitude expressed in an essay reflects the writer's actual position even though it was indicated that the author was forced to express this opinion (e.g., Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Snyder & Jones, 1974). It has been later suggested that similar perceptual biases attenuate

viewers' inferences of actors portraying fictional characters (Fleming & Darley, 1993; Tal-Or & Papirman, 2007).

Evidently, adults are well aware of the distinction between fiction and reality and know that actors may depict personalities that substantially differ from their own real-life persona. Nonetheless, adult viewers incorporate the fictional character-based information into their schema of the actor playing the role. Specifically, viewers were more likely to rate the actor's personality in line with the behaviors of a character they play in a fictional film (Tal-Or & Papirman, 2007). The attribution error endures to some extent even if the fictional role is incongruent with prior-information about the actor's true personality (Fleming & Darley, 1993). Taken together, research suggests that viewers consider multiple sources of information about the actors across different media encounters, regardless of whether the actor plays a fictional character or represents him/herself (Tukachinsky, 2015). Whereas past research only examined the effects on actor perceptions, the current study also considers the implications of FAE for processing subsequent persuasive messages.

Implications for Persuasion

Several theoretical mechanisms explicate the potential effect of mis-attribution of character's behavior to actor's personality on persuasion in subsequent media exposure.

Brand incongruence. According to the match-up hypothesis, consumers expect congruence between the values represented by a spokesperson and the product being advertised (Kamins, 1990). Thus, if an actor is associated with a fictional role that is inconsistent with the values represented by the product that the actor endorses, the persuasiveness of the campaign might be undermined. Moreover, a discrepancy between the actor's actual stance and the

position supported by their fictional character might be interpreted as hypocrisy (Tukachinsky, 2015) and possibly antagonize the viewers from the message.

The match-up hypothesis is particularly relevant when the actor plays a role of a character that negates the values, attitudes or beliefs represented by the actor in real-life. More broadly, an overall positive disposition towards the actor, rather than specific congruence dimensions, can create a "halo effect," transferring the positive affect from the celebrity to the endorsed product (Fleck, Korchia & Le Roy, 2012). Indeed, attitudes towards the celebrity are critical for the effectiveness of the celebrity's endorsement (e.g., Silvera & Austad, 2004). By extension, when viewers associate the actor with the attributes of a negative fictional character, these negative values can be subsequently projected onto the advertised product.

Parasocial relationships (PSR). The effect of celebrity appeal in advertising is driven, to a large extent, by viewers' PSR with the celebrity. PSR are defined as a sense of semi-friendship and psychological intimacy with liked media personalities (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). In turn, this sense of kinship can facilitate modeling and persuasion effects (e.g., Kosenko, Binder, & Hurley, 2016) at least in part because PSR reduce reactance to the persuasive message and foster compliance (Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016).

Media figures' misbehavior can be detrimental to this parasocial bond. For example, in considering a hypothetical scenario, college students reported that a moral or social misbehavior of their favorite media figure will impede their feelings of closeness with that media persona (Cohen, 2010). In fact, misbehaviors of a media figure was found to be more damaging to the relationship than misbehaviors of a real friend. If PSR buffer reactance, then diminished PSR should also result in a more critical response to the persuasive message.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives suggest that negative information about a celebrity can damage his or her persuasiveness in another context. Indeed, experimental research revealed that exposure to information about a celebrity's misbehavior resulted in negative attitudes toward the celebrity and the endorsed brand (Edwards & La Ferle, 2009). On a macro level, media coverage of a celebrity's transgression as well as the volume of online searches for information concerning the celebrity-related scandal were negatively associated with the endorsed product's stocks performance (Knittel & Stango, 2014) and sales (Chung, Derdenger & Srinivasan, 2011). Misbehaviors that negatively impacts others are particularly likely to undermine endorsement efforts (Money, Shimp & Sakano, 2006). Perceived societal damage plays a critical role in shaping the celebrity's moral reputation, attitudes towards the celebrity, and ultimately attitudes towards the advertised brand endorsed by the celebrity (Zhou & Whitla, 2013).

Whereas past studies examined the detrimental effect of misbehavior of a liked celebrity on that celebrity's persuasive appeal, the current study expands this notion and asks whether misbehavior of a fictional character played by the actor will have a similar effect and diminish that actor's subsequent influence.

The Current Study

Bringing together notions from social psychology, marketing, and media psychology, a model of the FAE effect on persuasion is proposed. Replicating past research, it is first hypothesized that FAE leads to misattribution of ***character behaviors*** to ***actor's dispositions***. It is then posited that once the character's negative behavior taints the perception of the actor, it will have the same effect as the anti-social behavior of the celebrity him or herself, reducing PSR and fostering counterarguing, ultimately hindering the celebrity's endorsement impact. In other

words, when audiences observe the actor perform anti-social behaviors as part of the fictional character, viewers will attribute the behavior to the actor him or herself. In turn, perceiving the actor as immoral is likely to undermine that actor's subsequent brand endorsement efforts by reducing PSR with that celebrity and increasing counterarguing with the persuasive messages featuring the celebrity. Figure 1 presents the theoretical model tested.

Participants in the study watched a movie featuring an actress playing a role of either a positive or a negative character and then watched a public service announcement (PSA) featuring the same actress endorsing a charitable children's research hospital. Based on FAE theory and research, it is posited that viewers will project the attributes of the character onto the actor that plays the character. Thus, if the actor plays the role of the villain, the actor's own personality will be perceived as less positive compared to when the same actor plays a positive character (replicating Fleming & Darley, 1993; Tal-Or & Papirman, 2007). Specifically:

H1: Viewers will make less favorable attributions about the actress' personality after watching this actress playing a role of a fictional negative character compared to a fictional positive character.

It is postulated that projecting the villain character's negative attributes to the actor presents incongruence between these negative values and the values of the advertised charitable organization. Such incongruence can potentially elicit dissonant responses to the message (Tukachinsky, 2015) and hinder the advertisement's effectiveness (Kamins, 1990) as a function of a halo effect (Fleck, et al., 2012). The effect of attributions on subsequent persuasion can also operate indirectly through cognitive responses to the persuasive message (i.e., counterarguing) and through diminished PSR, thus subtracting compliance and promoting counterarguing (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016). In sum, as a result of the halo effect

projecting the negative attributes from the actor onto the persuasive message, and due to increased counterarguing and lower PSR with the actor, viewers will be less inclined to support the charitable hospital endorsed by the celebrity:

> H2: Negative attributions of the actress' personality will (a) reduce PSR with the actress and (b) increase counterarguing with the advertisement featuring that actress.

> H3: Viewers' interest in supporting the charitable hospital depicted in the advertisement will be (a) positively predicted by PSR with the actress, and (b) will be negatively predicted by counterarguing with the hospital advertisement featuring that actress.

Combining these theoretical propositions combines the theoretical mechanisms outlined in H1-H3 using a path model. Exposure to a negative character on persuasive outcome due to brand-inconsistency, such that:

> H4a: Exposure to the actress playing a role of a villain character compared to a positive character will reduce viewers' support for the hospital advertised by the actress.

> H4b: The effect in H4a will be mediated by negative attributions of the actress and counterarguing with the advertisement.

Method

The study has been approved by the author's institution's IRB. Four to six students were scheduled at each lab session. The researcher reviewed the consent information sheet and then the participants worked individually at separate computer stations equipped with headphones. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: watching a movie featuring a negative character ($n=50$), watching a movie featuring a positive character ($n=61$), or a control condition ($n=63$) where participants were shown a photograph of the actress but did not watch a movie. After watching one of the two versions of the film (or seeing the photo in a control

condition) participants responded to questions about the actress (FAE and PSR measures and whether they knew her name and/or other work she did). Those who watched the movie also responded to other narrative-related questions (not reported here). Next, all the participants watched a public service announcement (PSA) in which that same actress endorsed a charitable children's research hospital. Participants were asked to list their thoughts (coded for counterarguing), completed measures of attitudes toward the hospital, and answered demographic questions.

Sample

Seven participants have been removed from the dataset because they did not recognize the actress and reported never seeing her in any movies or TV shows prior to the study. The remaining sample (n=174) was comprised of 75% women, aged 18-26, ($M = 20.08$, $SD = 1.77$), 70.5% White, 12.7% Latinix, 8% Asian (the rest were Black, Native American, and "other"). The composition of participants' race/ethnicity, sex and age was equivalent across all the conditions.

Stimuli

Positive/negative character. The valence of the character was manipulated using scenes from the movie *Derailed* (2005) starring Jennifer Aniston. This movie has been chosen because it offered a storyline that could be used to create both the positive and negative conditions; the movie is largely unknown (indeed, none of the participants reported seeing it prior to the study); and it features an actress who has participated in philanthropic public service announcements.

Both versions of the movie ran for approximately 25 minutes and maintained a consistent theme and sequence of events, but depicted the female character as either a positive, empathy-provoking victim or as a morally repulsive villain. In the good character condition, a man and a

woman meet on a train and become romantically involved. A stranger breaks into their hotel room, assaults and robs the man, and while the man lies unconscious, proceeds to rape the woman at gunpoint. The negative character condition includes the same scenes, but the dialogue divulges that the female character is married and has a child, thus depicting her affair as less moral. Additional scenes included only in the negative character condition reveal that the female character is not an innocent victim, but is actually part of a criminal ring. As part of a scheme, she seduced men leading them to a trap in the hotel. Then, her partner in crime (who is also her romantic partner) mugs the male victims. Afterwards, the two criminals enjoy rough sex that is intended to further induce guilt in the helpless male victim to the criminals' enjoyment.

PSA. Participants watched a PSA for the St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in which Aniston interacts with pediatric cancer patients and addresses the audience to solicit their support for the hospital. Thereby, the study manipulates an incongruence between the fictional role the actor plays in the negative condition and the actor's role as a spokesperson.

Measures

Attributions about the actress' personality. Participants were asked to identify the actress and list any movies and/or shows in which they have seen her in in the past. Then, similar to the procedures used in past research in this area (Fleming & Darley, 1993; Tal-Or & Papirman, 2007), participants were asked to make a series of judgments about the actress herself using a seven-point semantic deferential scale. The test items (good/bad, hating/loving, and evil/kind) were embedded within a list with foil items (e.g., "punctual"). The responses were averaged and scaled such that higher figures represent attribution of more positive traits (M = 5.70, SD = 1.42, Cronbach's α=.94).

PSR. Parasocial engagement with the actress was assessed using an adaptation of the parasocial friendship scale (Tukachinsky, 2010) that taps into a sense of intimacy and liking of the media figure (e.g., "I could disclose a great deal of things about myself to Jennifer Aniston" with responses averaged across items $M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.19$, Cronbach's α=.88). This scale specifically captures relational (rather than interactional) aspects of parasocial experiences (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016).

Counterarguing. Following procedures typical to studies investigating elaboration and counterarguing (e.g., Niederdeppe, Kim, Lundell, Fazili & Frazier, 2012), after watching the PSA, participants were instructed to list the thoughts they had while watching the PSA. Respondents were provided with response boxes to list up to 10 thoughts ($M=4.01$, $SD=1.98$, Cohen's Kappa = 1.0).

The thoughts were then coded by two trained coders. The training was conducted on thought listings on a different sample and then 15% of the final sample was coded by both coders to ensure continued reliability. Only eight thoughts were related to the *issue,* evaluating the attitude object and the arguments made in the commercial, (e.g., "I like that the children don't have to pay for their treatment in the hospital"). Four thoughts were *tangentially related to the message* (e.g., "my sorority fundraised for St. Jude"). Almost all of the thoughts were coded as *meta-narrative* thoughts evaluating the commercial narrative and its impact (e.g., "Jennifer Aniston has a very sweet interaction with the kids") (Cohen's Kappa = .91).

Issue-related and meta-thoughts were coded for counterarguing. *Pro-message* thoughts conveyed overall positive evaluation of the message or the attitude object (e.g., "Jennifer Aniston sincerely tries to help"). Conversely, *anti-message* thoughts expressed criticism of some aspect the message, its effectiveness, quality or authenticity (e.g., "Jennifer Aniston just does it for the

money", "the commercial was cheesy"). Finally, thoughts were coded as neutral if they reiterated the content of the advertisement without making any positive or evaluative inferences (e.g., "Jennifer Aniston appears in the commercial") (Cohen's Kappa = .90). For the current analyses, the number of anti-message thoughts listed was used as a measure of counterarguing (*M*=.62, *SD* = .96).

Support for the hospital. Persuasion by the commercial was assessed using mean agreement on a 7-point scale with four items, such as "I would consider donating to St. Jude Hospital" (*M* = 5.93, *SD* = .71, Cronbach's ɑ=.79).

Past PSA exposure. While none of the participants recalled ever seeing the movie prior to the study, a considerable number of participants recalled seeing the PSA in the past. Some 44% of the participants in the control condition reported seeing the PSA compared to 29-30% of the participants in the experimental conditions (29-30%). Given this discrepancy, past PSA exposure was dummy coded (1 = *yes* vs. 0= *no*) and used as a control of counterarguing with the PSA and attitudes towards the hospital.

Results

Preliminary results of an ANOVA comparing endogenous variables by condition are presented in Table 1. As shown in the table, compared to viewers exposed to a positive character or participants in the no-exposure control group, those who watched the actress playing a role of a negative character reported lower PSR with that actress and made less favorable attributions about her. Viewers of the villain clip also reported more counter-message thoughts. There was, however, no significant difference in their attitudes towards supporting the hospital.

A path analysis using Amos 24.0.0 was used to examine the effect of condition (dummy coded with the control condition serving as the reference group) on attributions about the actress

(H1), the effect of attributions on PSR and counterarguing (H2), and the effect of these responses on support for the hospital (H3). Then, bootstrapping with 95% C.I. was used to compute indirect effects of condition on support for the hospital are examined (H4).

The model fit indices ($\chi^2(7)$=6.60, p=.47, χ/df=.94,CFI=1.00, NFI=.97, RMSA =.00 [.00-.09]) exceed the threshold for a good fit (χ/df<2, RMSEA $\leq$.05, CFI>.90, NFI>.95, Kline, 2005). Exposure to the actress playing a positive character did not attenuate the attributions about the actress (β = .01, p = .98). However, in line with the prediction in H1, exposure to the actress in a villain role significantly reduced favorable attributions (β = -.47, p = .01). Next, in line with the predictions in H2, positive attributions about the actress increased PSR (β = .57, p = .01) and marginally reduced counterarguing (β = -.16, p = .049). In turn, as predicted in H3 counterarguing with the PSA reduced support for the hospital (β = -.17, p = .039) whereas PSR had a significant positive direct effect on support for the hospital (β = .34, p = .01).

Finally, H4 suggested that the character's valence will have indirect effect on support for the hospital through attribution, PSR and counterarguing. Exposure to a negative character did have a significant indirect on PSR (β = -.27, p = .01) and counterarguing (β = .08, p = .01). However, contrary to the hypothesis, the indirect effect of exposure to a negative character on hospital support was not significant (β = -.04, p = .34).

Discussion

The study examined whether exposure to an actor playing either a positive or a negative fictional character can attenuate viewers' perceptions of the actor and reduce persuasion from subsequent messages featuring the actor as a spokesperson. The results of the experiment offer a novel replication of prior research on FAE in the context of media (Fleming & Darley, 1993;

Tal-Or & Papirman, 2007). In line with the FAE theory, viewers' perception of the actress'

personality was tainted by seeing her portray a villain in a fictional film.

Next, the study extends past theory and research. While previous studies only examined

the effects on perception of the actor, the current study demonstrates that FAE carries over to

counterarguing with a philanthropic message delivered by the actress (e.g., thinking that the

actress is not authentic and is only representing the hospital for the money). These findings also

resonate with the affective disposition theory (Raney, 2004), demonstrating knowledge of the

actor and the character can inform each other in forming dispositions and guiding expectations

and comprehension of media messages. The study, thus, merges two seemingly distinct bodies of

literature on processing fictional entertainment and the mismatch hypothesis in marketing

research, uncovering the interdependence between perceptions of the actor and the roles they

play as viewers use character-information to subsequently counterargue with the spokesperson

(e.g., stating the actress is not genuine).

Moreover, that FAE weakens PSR with the actress expands understanding of how PSR

are formed and maintained. Anecdotal evidence shows that viewers' parasocial relationships

with actors are intertwined with their knowledge of the characters (e.g., viewers referring to an

actor as a doctor because of his part in a television hospital drama, Tukachinsky, 2010);

however, the current findings offer concrete insights into the process by which this confusion

occurs and how it feeds into the relationship with the actors themselves.

Some of the study results were unexpected. Surprisingly, there was no direct or indirect

effect of condition on persuasion. A closer examination of the data reveals that (contrary to the

halo effect), the direct path between positive attributions and hospital support was negative and

not significant ($\beta = -.14$, $p=.22$). This may suggest a suppression process through some

unmeasured mediator, such as negative affect or eudemonic enjoyment. This interpretation of the data suggests that while negative attributions about the actress promote counterarguing and reduce PSR (thus reducing compliance with the PSA), exposure to a malicious character can also create a need to compensate for this evilness by engaging with the philanthropic cause. Perhaps, unexpectedly, as viewers feel bad and reflect on the human condition, they have an urge to act more altruistically, though this urge is undermined by counterarguing and lower PSR. Such simultaneous opposing forces, in turn, can explain the lack of significant indirect effects of exposure to the villain movie on attitudes toward the cause. To fully unpack the complexity of the effects of attributions, it is vital for replication to examine affect and eudemonic enjoyment as suppressors of the effects of counterarguing and PSR.

In addition to expanding FAE theory, the study contributes to the field more broadly. First, media effects research typically focuses on the effect of a single message at a time. However, the current study demonstrates that the same persuasive message can work differently depending on the context of other messages surrounding it. Thus, rather than treating viewers' prior encounters with the actor as a control variable, it is valuable to examine the interactive effects of these different experiences.

Second, the study poses potential implications for strategic communication practitioners and talent managers. If fictional roles performed by the actor can have detrimental effect on the PSR with the actor and increase counterarguing with them as a spokesperson, perhaps the nature of fictional roles should be taken into consideration when seeking celebrity endorsement. For instance, conceivably, celebrity endorsement should be deemed less desirable if the popular and acclaimed actor becomes associated with a role of a villain. In the same vein, the actors may be mindful of how the choices of roles they pick can come at the cost of their endorsement power.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

Additional replications and design variations for boundary-testing are needed to further validate and explicate the findings of the current study. First, the current study uses a well-known and liked actress. It would be valuable to see how the results might be different without prior familiarity with an actor. Since the actress used in the present study is typically associated with playing positive, likable characters (which would be consistent with the persuasive message), it is logical to assume that using an unfamiliar actor would have yielded even stronger effect sizes. Thus, the single exposure to a villain role trumping prior dispositions adds to the strength of the study findings, but does not reveal the full potential of this effect.

Second, it would be beneficial to replicate these results with a range of media stimuli. To our knowledge, this study is the first to demonstrate FAE in actor-character congruence impacting persuasion and more research is needed to advance a more nuanced understanding of this effect. For example, conceivably, non-significant effects on persuasive outcomes resulted from participants' overall high support for the philanthropic cause. A controversial topic could perhaps offer a more definitive test. Moreover, in the current study, the actor-character (in)congruence was manipulated broadly as a generally positive/negative personality. However, it would be important to replicate this question in the context of a specific controversial attitude object. Presumably, if an actor publically takes a stand on a social issue (e.g., gun control), but plays a fictional character in a narrative that promotes the opposite stance (gun rights), that role will likely paint the actor as a hypocrite and compromise the actor's persuasive potential. Furthermore, it would be interesting to examine how these effects translate to other contexts of contradictory information about the actor (e.g., media reports about the actor vs. the actor's own statements on social media). Arguably, if viewers incorporate clearly fictitious information into

their mental-model of the actor, viewers would be even more susceptible to influences of information that is assumed to be true.

Lastly, it is important to examine the longevity of the effect. Following the procedures in past research in this area (e.g., Tal-Or & Papirman, 2007; Tukachinsky, 2015), participants in this study were exposed to the two incongruent messages during a single lab session. While this is naturalistic (e.g., commercials appear alongside entertainment messages), it is also important to further investigate how viewers manage inconsistencies between messages over time. In sum, although many questions remain open for further investigation, the study makes an important first step by addressing the fascinating phenomenon of media perception and media psychology in a multi-message environment.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations by Condition

	Negative character		Positive character		Control		F (2,171)
	M	Sd	M	Sd	M	Sd	
PSR	4.00_a	1.37	5.02_b	.95	4.82_b	1.04	12.50**
Attributions	4.65_a	1.99	6.14_b	.74	6.12_b	.84	24.71**
Counterarguing	$.90_a$	1.22	$.42_b$	.74	$.60_{ab}$	.96	3.40*
Hospital support	5.83_a	.75	5.99_a	.65	5.93_a	.74	.74 (p=.47)

Note. * $p <.05$, ** $p < .001$

Means in each row sharing the same subscript letter are not significantly different from each other (Bonferroni, $p >$
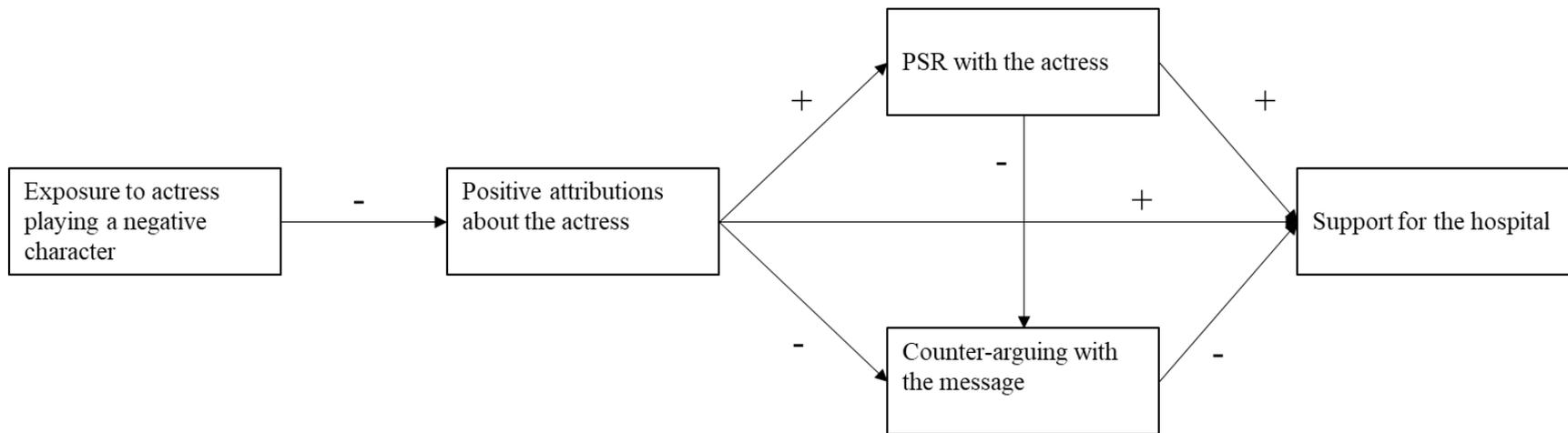
.10).

Figure 1. Theoretical model of effect of exposure to character on FAE and response to the persuasive message.