



Brand trait transference: When celebrity endorsers acquire brand personality traits[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Using celebrity endorsers can be an effective way to influence brand perceptions and elevate the brand. However, although there is a significant amount of research investigating how endorsers influence brand perceptions, there is little research showing whether traits associated with the brand influence perceptions of the endorser. This article addresses this under-researched area and provides evidence for brand trait transference. Brand trait transference occurs when a trait transfers from a brand to people associated with that brand. Three studies demonstrate brand trait transference and identify a boundary condition for this novel effect. The article discusses the implications of these findings for effective marketing communications as well as the theoretical implications for the growing research on branding, association transfer, and endorsers.

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1. Introduction

Imagine a celebrity endorsing bungee jumping. Now imagine the same celebrity endorsing a children's charity to help fight childhood diabetes. Does your perception of the celebrity change based on the different products they endorse? Although considerable research reports that endorser traits influence brand perceptions (Huber, Meyer, Vogel, Weihrauch, & Hamprecht, 2013; Ilicic & Webster, 2012; McCracken, 1989; McGinnies & Ward, 1980), there is little research investigating changes in the opposite direction, that is whether the traits associated with the product brands influence perceptions of the endorser. The present research examines this phenomenon, referred to as brand trait transference (BTT).

BTT occurs when the traits that are connected with a brand transfer to individuals associated with that brand. For example, if a perceiver associates bungee jumping with the trait “exciting,” he might also view a celebrity that endorses bungee jumping as more exciting than he normally would. Similarly, when a celebrity is paired with a product or

brand that is associated with kindness (e.g., children's charity), the celebrity might be viewed as more caring and kind.

Given the critical role of endorsers in marketing communications as a way to capture attention, transfer meaning, provide relevant information, and produce favorable consumer perceptions (Friedman & Friedman, 1979; Ilicic & Webster, 2012; Kamins, 1990; Kamins & Gupta, 1994; McCracken, 1989; O'Mahony & Meenaghan, 1997), it is important to understand how brands influence the perceptions of endorsers. The present paper addresses this under-researched area and provides empirical evidence for BTT. Across several studies, we find that traits from a product can be transferred to people who associate themselves with the product. These studies provide evidence for BTT as well as identify boundary conditions under which BTT is less likely to occur.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

If you describe someone as lazy, does this description cause others to view you as lazy? Research on spontaneous trait transference (STT) shows that this is the case. STT occurs when perceivers attribute traits to informants based on behaviors they describe (Skowronski, Carlston, Lynda, & Crawford, 1998; Carlston & Skowronski, 2005). That is, if Sally describes someone as anxious, Sally will also be perceived as anxious.

Past research on STT has found that STT results from an associative process (Carlston & Skowronski, 2005). Associative processing has been characterized as an effortless activity that yields unlabeled

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linkages in memory that result from spatial and temporal proximity (Carlston & Smith, 1996; Carlston & Skowronski, 2005). When perceivers are exposed to a behavioral description, they spontaneously infer the implied trait (Uleman, Newman, & Moskowitz, 1996). That is, if Tom states “John did not contribute to the team project,” people spontaneously think of the trait “lazy” and attribute it to the actor (e.g., “John is lazy”). However, due to associative processing, the inferred trait can also become linked with the informant. As a result, the informant is misremembered as possessing the very trait he informed about (e.g., “Tom is lazy”).

In STT, perceivers are largely unaware of their person–trait associations (Carlston & Skowronski, 2005). The process lacks the deeper more elaborative activity characteristic of attributional processing, which involves “attributional knowledge and rules, resulting in the formation of labeled associative linkages that designate one construct as a property of another” (Carlston & Skowronski, 2005, p.884). Associative processing results in “unlabeled links” that convey little information about the underlying relationship.

Evidence suggests that consumers spontaneously and effortlessly infer traits and transfer these traits to items in close proximity. For instance, several studies show that the characteristics associated with an endorser can transfer to the products they endorse. Huber et al. (2013) report that age of endorsers transfer to products, such that manipulating an endorser's age can change consumers' brand age perceptions. Additionally, celebrities possess cultural meanings, which can be transferred to the products they endorse (McCracken, 1989). These studies illustrate trait transference from traits associated with endorsers (e.g., youth) to the products they endorse.

Drawing on STT research, the opposite might also occur, such that the traits associated with products (e.g., “sophisticated”) can be passed to the people associated with those products (e.g., celebrity endorsers or salespeople). The brand based inferences about endorsers (once made) might emulate STT and occur spontaneously; however, unlike STT, which involves a person's behavior, BTT refers to a situation where traits that are connected with a brand transfer to an individual associated with that brand.

Like people, some brands possess a “brand personality,” which refers to a set of human characteristics or traits associated with the brand (Aaker, 1997). Similar to how the Big-Five traits represent human personality (Aaker, 1997; Briggs, 1992), brands can possess traits such as sophistication, ruggedness, competence, and sincerity (Aaker, 1997), which potentially can be transferred to individuals associated with the brand. Given that brands possess personality traits (Aaker, 1997), consumers might spontaneously activate traits related to products they are exposed to (e.g., the trait “exciting” from bungee jumping equipment) and transfer the activated traits to individuals associated with the product brand (e.g., endorsers).

Brands are vehicles for consumer self-expression. Consumers often choose brands to express who they are and/or who they want to be (Aaker, 1997; Swaminathan, Stilley, & Ahluwalia, 2009). However, unlike consumers, celebrity endorsers 1) fail to choose the product they endorse, 2) are paid to endorse the product, and 3) often endorse multiple products that exhibit competing traits (safety vs. adventure/risk). Thus, although products are diagnostic for consumers (Swaminathan et al., 2009), it is unclear whether products are diagnostic for celebrity endorsers.

This research explores this novel topic and provides evidence that traits associated with products transfer to celebrities associated with those products. That is, if a celebrity endorser is paired with a brand associated with the trait “sophistication,” such as Nordstrom boots, this association is expected to increase the perceived sophistication level of the endorser. Based on this reasoning, it is proposed:

H1. Endorsers paired with a product characterized by a specific trait are perceived as more strongly possessing that trait than when not paired with that product.

However, research suggests that strong attitudes are resistant to change (Zuwerink & Devine, 1996). In the case of BTT, a strong pre-existing trait associated with the communicator could conflict with a trait that might otherwise be transferred from a product, thus overriding BTT. For example, if the trait “selfish” is strongly associated with an endorser, this might interfere with the transfer of the trait “generosity” from a charity advertisement. To the extent that consumers' impressions of a celebrity are affected by the celebrity's prior endorsements, this could limit the celebrity's usefulness as an endorser for brands with opposing brand personalities. Thus, based on this reasoning, it is proposed:

H2. BTT does not occur for endorsers with a strong pre-existing trait that conflicts with the product's associated trait.

2.1. Overview of studies

Three studies provide evidence for BTT and show that brand traits may also transfer to people who are associated with the brand. Study 1 reveals that celebrity endorser's perceived attributes are influenced by the products they endorse. Study 2 uses the IAT (implicit association test) to establish evidence that the brand trait transference effect is spontaneous and requires little cognitive effort. Study 3 identifies a boundary condition by showing that strong pre-existing traits associated with the communicator undermine the brand trait transference effect. In each study, participants were presented with a brand that was associated with a specific target trait and asked to describe the degree to which the trait described the endorser associated with the brand.

3. Study 1

3.1. Pretest

In order to create advertisements that featured products strongly associated with specific traits, a pretest was conducted to select products that were significantly associated with three target traits: (1) adventurous, (2) generous, and (3) neat. A pretest on celebrity endorsers was also conducted to select endorsers who were relatively neutral on the target traits.

In the product pretest, participants were asked to view a variety of products (e.g., personal organizers) and indicate how much each of the target traits (adventurous, generous, and neat) described each product (1 = not descriptive at all ... 5 = very descriptive). Camping equipment was rated as the most “adventurous” product ($M = 4.9$), personal organizers were rated as the most “neat” product ($M = 4.5$), and a children's charity was rated as the product most strongly associated with the trait “generous” ($M = 4.7$).

In the endorser pretest, participants were presented with a list of female celebrities and asked to rate how much each of the target traits described each celebrity (1 = not descriptive at all ... 5 = very descriptive). Three celebrity endorsers, Elizabeth Banks, Rashida Jones, and Rachel McAdams, were chosen because the pretest indicated that they did not have any strong preexisting associations with the traits adventurous, organized, and generous.

Based on the results from the pretest, nine advertisements were created, featuring each of the three celebrity endorsers (Elizabeth Banks, Rashida Jones, and Rachel McAdams) paired with each of the three products (camping equipment, children's charity, and personal organizers). See Appendix A for the three advertisements featuring Rashida Jones.

3.2. Participants and procedure

One hundred and sixty one undergraduates (52% male; age: 19–26) at a large university participated in this study for course credit.

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