



Consumer, brand, celebrity: Which congruency produces effective celebrity endorsements?



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ABSTRACT

Celebrity endorsement research mainly focuses on celebrity–brand congruency, presented as a primary condition for the success of these marketing communications. In this view, the consumer functions as an outsider of the celebrity–brand dyad, even though endorsement efficiency depends on psychological processes by the consumer (i.e., identification, social influences). This study therefore proposes a model of celebrity endorsement to test the simultaneous effects of three congruencies among the brand, the celebrity, and the consumer. Data collected from samples of real French women (mean age: 43.36 years) ($N = 720$) indicate that only the brand–consumer match exerts a significant impact on brand attitude, brand commitment, brand identification, and behavioral intentions. Celebrity–brand and celebrity–consumer fits have a limited influence on the outcomes. These findings challenge the exclusive prominence of celebrity–brand fit as a research and practical consideration and confirm the consumer's active role in the endorsement.

1. Introduction

Brands invest heavily to gain endorsements from celebrities. For example, Nike signed a contract with Cristiano Ronaldo for £14.2 M per year until 2020; LeBron James is the NBA's current endorsement king, with estimated off-court earnings of \$48 million. However, despite this infatuation with brands for celebrity endorsement, the association with a celebrity does not automatically benefit the brands (Zhou & Whitla, 2013), and a clear understanding of the mechanisms that underlie endorsement effects remains an important goal for managers and researchers (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016).

This research is interested in understanding endorsement effectiveness, which is defined here as an endorsement's positive influence on consumer perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward the endorsed brand. Previous research offers two main explanations for the influence of an endorsement on consumers: celebrity characteristics, such as attractiveness and credibility (Pornpitakpan, 2003; Till & Busler, 2000) and the proximity between the brand and the celebrity, as summarized in the construct of congruency (Kamins & Gupta, 1994; Misra & Beatty, 1990). These studies offer good insights, but existing endorsement models cannot account for the entire system of influence associated with celebrity endorsements. In a recent meta-analysis, Knoll and

Matthes (2017) detail the mixed impacts identified in celebrity endorsement models on consumer perceptions, attitudes, and behavior. These varying results might reflect a common limitation of classical endorsement models: They tend to include consumers as passive spectators of the celebrity-brand association and only measure those consumers' ultimate attitudes and behaviors toward the endorsed objects (brands, products, services). In addition to celebrity-brand congruency, celebrity-consumer (Boon & Lomore, 2001; Choi & Rifon, 2012) and brand-consumer (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998) congruencies could influence brand attitudes and relationships. Yet these three types of potential fits or congruencies have never been investigated together in a single empirical framework; such a standpoint could offer new contributions to theory and practice.

Such research also might provide answers to some pertinent questions. For example, are consumers just passive observers or do they function as active, important contributors to endorsement outcomes? Might the congruencies involving consumers be even more influential than the one between the brand and the celebrity? To answer these questions, this study proposes a global model with three “elements” associated with any endorsement (i.e., brand, celebrity, and consumer). Using a comparative approach, this study investigates the effects of the congruencies across this triad on four outcomes of endorsement

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effectiveness: brand identification, attitude, commitment, and behavioral intentions. The results challenge prior literature, which relies on the celebrity-brand match-up as the primary explanation of the endorsement's impact on consumer attitude. In turn, they reveal that brand-consumer congruency exerts the strongest impact on all outcomes. Extending Knoll and Matthes's (2017) findings, this study suggests that researchers and managers must reorient their perceptions and practices when it comes to endorsements; they should acknowledge that celebrity endorsement involves three active entities and is not simply an alliance between a brand and a celebrity.

The next section details existing endorsement models and establishes a foundation for the argument that consumers may have a notable impact on endorsement effectiveness, along with the brand and the celebrity. After presenting the study methodology, this article details the findings. The last section contains a discussion of the results, a summary of the overall contributions, and some limitations and further research avenues.

2. Literature review

Three criteria (also called *endorsement models* in the literature) define a celebrity as an efficient endorser: attractiveness, credibility, and congruency with the brand (Erdogan, 1999). A more attractive celebrity delivers the message of the endorsed brand more efficiently (Till & Busler, 2000). Celebrity attractiveness might refer to physical attributes or to other characteristics, such as intelligence or lifestyle (Erdogan, 1999), all of which can affect purchase intentions, brand recall, and attitudes toward the brand (Friedman & Friedman, 1979; Till & Busler, 2000). Celebrity credibility also appears central to the endorsement's influence on consumers (Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000; Ohanian, 1991) and comprises various components (e.g., attractiveness, dynamism, and objectivity). However, a general consensus focuses on expertise and trustworthiness dimensions (Goldsmith et al., 2000; Ohanian, 1991; Pornpitakpan, 2003). Trustworthiness reflects an evaluation of the source's honesty and the objectivity of the information presented. Expertise corresponds to a consumer's assessment of the celebrity's knowledge and the believability of his or her recommendations. Celebrity credibility then influences many indicators of endorsement effectiveness, including brand, product, and advertising attitudes, as well as purchase intentions (Friedman & Friedman, 1979; Pornpitakpan, 2003; Silvera & Austad, 2004).

However, some studies also note the limited impacts of attractiveness or credibility on consumer attitudes (Goldsmith et al., 2000) and stress that these models are not universally applicable to all products (Till & Busler, 2000). A more integrative approach, designed to overcome these limitations, emerges in the form of congruency models, also referred to as fit, match-up, coherence, or similarity models. This approach acknowledges that endorsements usually pursue harmony between the brand and the celebrity endorser (Kamins & Gupta, 1994). That is, managers generally seek to ensure that the brand is consistent with the image portrayed by the endorser, which can reduce perceived risk (Erdogan, 1999) and also prompt positive perceptions by consumers. In particular, a congruent endorsement should be more efficient (match-up hypothesis), whereas the absence of congruency may imply that the celebrity has mainly financial motives for endorsing the brand, which could produce negative evaluations (Kamins & Gupta, 1994).

Most research captures congruency in one of three forms: holistic appraisals (Kamins & Gupta, 1994), scales with attractiveness or expertise items (Till & Busler, 2000),¹ or scales with items designed to measure the relevance and expectancy of the celebrity-brand

association (Fleck, Korchia, & Le Roy, 2012). Such models of endorsement commonly focus on celebrity characteristics (attractiveness, credibility) or brand proximity, leaving the consumer as a passive spectator of the association. But studies in various contexts that similarly include consumers, brands, and some third influential entity (e.g., another brand, a social cause, etc.) underline the notion that consumers always have an active role to play. For example, co-branding research highlights three congruencies that inform attitudes toward brand alliances: between the brand and its partner, the brand and the consumer, and the consumer and the partner (Broderick, Jogi, & Garry, 2003). In cause-related marketing contexts, both cause-consumer and brand-consumer congruencies influence the consumer's preference for a cause-supporting brand (Goldsmith & Yimin, 2014).

However, endorsement literature does not offer any such triadic framework. A few studies that include consumers largely base their arguments on balance theory (Mowen, 1980; Roy, Gammoh, & Koh, 2012). According to this reasoning, consumers prefer balance and harmony in the elements that surround them (Mowen, 1980). Their attitudes toward an endorsed brand thus depend not only on the celebrity-brand association but also on consumers' own connections with the two partners. The lone empirical study that applies balance theory to an endorsement context (Roy et al., 2012) is not sufficient to establish the role and importance of the consumer in the endorsement effectiveness clearly. Furthermore, by focusing on harmony across the three elements, balance theory cannot identify or compare the distinct effects of each congruency (brand-consumer, celebrity-brand, or celebrity-consumer) on attitudes toward the endorsed brand. Therefore, this research aims to integrate, in a single model, the congruencies across this triad of brand, celebrity, and consumer and then test and compare their effects on consumers.

Most previous studies focus on the influence of endorsements on attitudes toward the brand or toward advertising and purchase intentions. However, consumers also have more complex relationships with brands, so attitudes may not be sufficient to predict their comprehensive behaviors (Fournier, 1998). Accordingly, this research determines the measurement of endorsement effectiveness through four variables: brand identification, brand attitude, behavioral intentions, and brand commitment. Brand identification stems from information provided by the brand that applies to the consumer so that it reflects the degree of overlap between their images (Tuškej, Golob, & Podnar, 2013). Brand attitude implies a positive or negative disposition toward the brand (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). Behavioral intention refers to a consumer's willingness to perform difficult behaviors that benefit the brand (e.g., promoting and defending it; Park et al., 2010). Finally, brand commitment is a consumer's willingness to maintain a relationship with the brand (Fournier, 1998).

3. Hypotheses

3.1. Brand-consumer congruency hypotheses

Brands have personal and social meaning (McCracken, 1989), which people use to create, enhance, or communicate their own identity (Belk, 1988). Congruent images between the brand and consumers should lead to stronger brand identification. Brand-consumer congruency refers to the perceived similarity between the consumer's self-image and the brand's image (Tuškej et al., 2013). Brand identification is the degree to which the brand expresses the consumer's identity (Tuškej et al., 2013) and highlights the brand's integration into the consumer's self (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). The more the brand image will be perceived as similar to the consumer's, the more he or she will identify with the brand (Tuškej et al., 2013). Moreover, similar to other symbols, a brand also earns greater appreciation when it strengthens users' self-concepts (Belk, 1988). Thus a brand that is congruent with the consumer's own self-image tends to generate more positive attitudes (Belk, 1988).

According to self-consistency theory, consumers behave in ways

¹ These scales reflect, for example, the notion that congruency exists because an attractive celebrity should be a more effective endorser for products that promise to enhance consumers' own attractiveness.

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