



## Who is the attached endorser? An examination of the attachment-endorsement spectrum<sup>☆</sup>

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### ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:**  
Celebrity endorsement  
Attachment  
Source credibility  
Human-brand

### ABSTRACT

While brand endorsement research has focused on endorsement effectiveness based on match-up and endorser's appeal, there is limited understanding of how the type of endorser and type of endorsement interact to create perceptions of attachment of the celebrity to the product. We also examine the effect of this interaction on the three elements of source credibility – Attractiveness, Trustworthiness and Expertise. Consistent with attachment and source credibility theory, we find significant main effects of message type on attachment, source credibility components and purchase intention.

### 1. Introduction

Celebrity endorsement has been a widely researched field of brand management (Friedman and Friedman, 1979; Ohanian, 1991; Fleck et al., 2012; McCormick, 2016). Celebrities are used to promote a range of products, as this leads to enhanced consumer attitudes and purchase intentions, especially when there is a congruence or match-up between the celebrity and endorsed product (Kamins, 1990; Kamins and Gupta, 1994; Till and Busler, 2000). Match-up implies consistency between the relevant characteristics of the endorser and relevant attributes of the brand (Misra and Beatty, 1990). A recent study on this topic published in this journal by McCormick (2016) extends the match-up hypothesis by focusing on consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions for both familiar and unfamiliar celebrities and reports significant effects of familiarity on endorsement effectiveness. While the study makes significant contributions in the match-up realm of endorsement, it falls short of explaining why positive attitudes towards the brand and advertisement do not translate into higher purchase intentions in the unfamiliar celebrity-product match. We propose here an explanation based on Bowlby's (1969) theory of attachment and argue that, when consumers are not familiar with an endorser, they are unlikely to perceive any attachment between the celebrity and the product. Consequently, this lack of attachment not only diminishes the endorsement's credibility but is also likely to act as a barrier to purchase behaviour. Similarly, in a literature review paper examining various aspects of celebrity branding and endorsement, Keel and Nataraajan (2012)

conclude that the level of involvement between the endorser and product has been ignored in many studies, and that this involvement could have moderated the findings in this area. They state “celebrities can be more or less involved in the development of their products, and it begs the question whether or not their involvement influences attitudes, purchase intent, sales, and longevity of the brand” (Keel and Nataraajan, 2012, p.695).

We heed this call for research by adopting the attachment theory from psychology and propose attachment as the key driver of endorsement effectiveness, thereby hoping to shed light on the disparate findings in endorsement studies. We look at the celebrity-product link as an attachment between these two entities, symbolic of the commitment of the celebrity to the endorsed product. We propose that the fundamental basis for creating a differentiation in endorser situations is the ‘attachment’ existing between the endorser and endorsed product. Attachment is important because it reflects the source credibility of the endorser — their perceived commitment to the product, and has been shown to create issues when ignored. For instance, the credibility of pop singer Jessica Simpson, who has endorsed several brands, was questioned in the media because she was found to have never worn her own clothing line and was not involved in the design of her collection. This was perceived as being a lack of attachment to her own product (Bhasin, 2015).

The purpose of this paper is to understand the basis of attachment in the context of product endorsements created by a combination of endorsement situations and its effect on source credibility characteristics and purchase intentions. To this effect, we first examine the role of attachment in the context of endorsement and introduce a framework of

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endorsement situations. We then examine the effect of these endorsement situations on source credibility characteristics such as attractiveness (A), trustworthiness (T) and expertise (E) and propose several research questions. Next, we describe an empirical study in which we test our propositions and conclude with theoretical and practical implications.

## 2. Review of literature

### 2.1. Relevance of attachment in endorsement

A closer look at endorsement research reveals manipulation of different variables such as the type of celebrity and product selections (Friedman and Friedman, 1979; Choi and Rifon, 2012), physical attractiveness of the celebrity and degree to which the usage of the product enhances the endorser's attractiveness (Kamins, 1990) and degree of celebrity-product congruence (Lee and Thorson, 2008). The general findings are that a celebrity endorser's physical attractiveness and an optimum congruence between the consumer and product can lead to positive consumer attitudes and high purchase intentions (Friedman and Friedman, 1979; Atkin and Block, 1983; Kamins, 1990; Ohanian, 1991; Erdogan, 1999).

Attachment between the celebrity and product can, however, explain why some celebrities who are valued for their appearance are perceived to be more attached to beauty-related products and why endorsers who are knowledgeable and expert-like are perceived to be attached to more complex products. When an endorser can relate to a product and what it stands for, attachment creates that 'match-up' or congruence. When consumers believe the endorser truly likes the advertised product, they have favourable attitudes toward the endorsed product (Silvera and Austad, 2004). Again, this reflects an aspect of the endorser's attachment to the advertised product that has not been explicitly examined.

Extant research has made indirect references to 'attachment' without actually using this term and has often confounded it with the construct of 'involvement'. However, involvement does not constitute a relationship; it is a function of an individual and product's characteristics and situational factors (Warrington and Shim, 2000). We argue that attachment is indeed an outcome of involvement. When there is high involvement, there is high attachment, and vice-versa. Attachments are a type of strong relationship that people experience in their lives. John Bowlby, the first attachment theorist, defined attachment as a "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" (Bowlby, 1969, p.194). Although the study of attachment originated in the context of interpersonal relationships, attachment between consumers and brands or celebrities is not uncommon. The basis of this relationship is centred on human needs for strong emotional attachments to others, which manifest in committed exclusive repurchase, consumer forgiveness to brands, and brand loyalty (Jimenez and Voss, 2010; Grisaffe and Nguyen, 2011).

As per attachment theory, the degree of emotional attachment to an object predicts the nature of an individual's interaction with the object, and consequently, the emotional and financial attachment to the object. Thomson (2006) extended this construct of attachment to human-branding and showed how consumers' emotional attachment to human brands results in increased levels of satisfaction, trust and commitment. As a construct that describes the strength of the bond connecting the consumer with the brand, attachment is relevant from an endorsement perspective. Celebrities and brands have numerous characteristics and, in many cases, it is unclear which attribute of a celebrity is valid for a particular brand (Lee and Thorson, 2008).

As a result of the above considerations, attachment is treated as a focus in our study and attachment theory is the primary theory underpinning this work.

### 2.2. Degree of attachment between the endorser and the product

Attachments vary in strength, and stronger attachments are associated with intense emotional feelings including connection, affection, love, and passion. Thomson (2006, p.105) describe the strength of attachment as "the intensity of a person's target-specific emotional bond with a human brand". It could be argued that the degree of attachment is likely to vary when a human-brand merely endorses a product as opposed to launching and owning a product. Existing research has already shown how the degree of attachment can predict a consumer's commitment to a brand, as it involves strong feelings about the brand and the brand's relationship to self (Thomson et al., 2005; Whan Park et al., 2010). The endorser, like the consumer, also has an attachment to the brand. Thomas and Fowler (2016) note that this level of involvement between the endorser and product could vary from mere advertising to using or creating the product. We therefore suggest that the attachment of an endorsement is likely to vary with an endorser endorsing the product versus an endorser launching and owning the product.

According to our knowledge, no study has described the degree of attachment between an endorser and product when the product is endorsed, spoken of or launched by an endorser. We have categorised this degree of attachment into low, medium and high. A low degree of attachment occurs when a celebrity or CEO is selected to endorse a product or service as a one-off endorsement with no further commitment. A medium degree of attachment exists when a celebrity or CEO is associated with a particular cause, initiative or a brand exclusively and for a significantly longer duration than a one-off endorsement. The noteworthy point of distinction between the low and medium degrees of perceived attachment is that in the 'medium degree of attachment' condition, the endorser endorses a single product exclusively for a long duration, unlike a celebrity or CEO who endorse multiple as also dissimilar products in the 'low degree of attachment'. When an endorser launches a product or service under his/her own name, there is a high degree of perceived attachment between the endorser and the product.

We could thus consider attachment on a spectrum, (Fig. A.1), by classifying the endorsers and endorsement situations on the basis of their degree of attachment.

### 2.3. The endorser type

Endorsement literature recognises four types of endorsers – typical consumer, expert, celebrity, and CEO (Friedman et al., 1976). The typical consumer is not portrayed by an actor, but is a real person: a consumer who would normally consume that product. The expert is a recognised authority on the product endorsed whose expertise, as the result of special knowledge or training, is superior to that acquired by regular consumers. Research has shown that celebrities are more effective than non-celebrities in advertising (Erdogan, 1999; Ohanian, 1991), even though non-celebrity endorsement could have a few benefits (Tom et al., 1992). A CEO is considered to possess characteristics of the professional expert, and is also more likely to use the endorsed product (Ohanian, 1991); while a professional expert could most likely include a non-celebrity (Friedman et al., 1976). This is why we have considered the two most popular and frequently used types of endorser to be associated with a product: the celebrity, and the CEO. Further, literature has also justified the importance of these persons in endorsement studies (McCracken, 1989; Ohanian, 1991; Erdogan and Baker, 2000).

We define a celebrity as a famous, physically attractive and glamorous person, such as movie stars, sportspeople and fashion models. CEOs are high profile figureheads for their organisations who possess relevant product and managerial expertise. Both these endorser types enjoy public recognition and are professionally managed like brands (Bendisch et al., 2013). The distinguishing characteristic between the two endorsers is the 'glamour characteristic', which is predominant in

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