

EXPLAINING CELEBRITY MATCH-UP: CO-ACTIVATION THEORY OF DOMINANT SUPPORT

Lawrence Ang, Macquarie Graduate School of Management
Chris Dubelaar, Monash University

ABSTRACT

The match-up hypothesis has been used as a general guide for selecting celebrity endorsement. However, beyond the general principle of congruence, this theory does not specify how and why match-up works. Previous theoretical frameworks have also been critiqued, and a new theory is offered to fill this theoretical gap in the literature. It revolves around the idea of finding dominant associations that support the celebrity and brand juxtaposition, and minimizing any contradictory ones.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern era, the use of celebrities to endorse products is widespread. In the U.S., this has been estimated to be for 20–25% of ads (Motavalli 1989; Shimp 1997), and has accounted for about 10% of all TV advertising budgets (Advertising Age 1987; Sherman 1985). This paper will critique a prominent theory, called the match-up hypothesis, often suggested as a guide in selecting celebrities, and then propose a better theoretical framework, called the co-activation theory of dominant support. The paper will end with some preliminary findings based on qualitative research of 10 respondents.

MATCH-UP THEORY

This theory was born out of the observation that using an attractive model is not universally effective for all products. They tend to work better for products that are beauty related (Baker and Churchill 1977; Joseph 1982; Kahle and Homer 1985). In other words, the characteristic of the product must “fit” the image of the celebrity. For instance, Kamins (1990) found that using Tom Selleck as an attractive celebrity endorser is more effective (in terms of spokesperson credibility and ad attitude) for a luxury car which is attractiveness-related, than a computer which is not attractiveness-related. Telly Savalas, on the other hand, as an unattractive celebrity is not effective for either product.

The match-up effect is also found for products that are not beauty related. Using jeans (called Unitough) and a board game (called Funnybone), among others, Misra and Beatty (1990) found that if the products were matched with Clint Eastwood and Carol Burnett respectively, they would result in a higher brand attitude than the converse. Similarly, Kamins and Gupta (1994) found the match-up effect for computers (i.e., resulting in higher spokesperson believability, attractiveness, and brand attitude) but not running shoes, provided the computer was matched with “scientific” celebrity Leonard Nimoy. However, contrary to the theory, they did not find an effect for a fictitious CEO of an accounting company even though his image “fits” the computer equally well.

The match-up effect is also found in services and corporate sponsorship. Koernig and Page (2002) found that people have more trust in their hair dresser if he/she is highly physically attractive, but not so if he/she is a dentist. Stafford et al. (2002) found that Harrison Ford achieves a better result (i.e., higher expertise and trustworthiness) if he endorses a restaurant rather than a bank. McDaniel (1999) found that if Toyota Corporation were to sponsor the US

Olympic Team, the brand would achieve a better result (resulting in highest ad attitude) than if it were to sponsor the NHL Hockey or the PBA Bowler’s Tour. He claimed this to be due to the closer “fit” of Toyota to the US Olympic team.

In sum, the match-up hypothesis represents an improvement over the other theories because it clearly acknowledges the importance of contingency, and that a “one size fits all” theory is too simplistic. However, this theory has a number of problems. The following is a critique, and we will closely examine nine studies specifically designed to test this theory.

CRITIQUE OF THE MATCH-UP THEORY

Inconsistent Outcome: Mixed Results

The match-up hypothesis is not universally effective, even though it was meant to take various contingent factors into consideration. In our review of nine papers that directly test this theory, most of the results are mixed, especially when different dependent variables are used. Some support the theory, but many do not. This is summarised below:

1. Of the five studies that had purchase intention as the dependent variable (Kamins 1990; Kamins and Gupta 1994; Koernig and Page 2002; McDaniel 1999), only one study yields a significant result (Kahle and Homer 1985).
2. Of the five studies that had brand attitude as an outcome measure, two yield significant results (Kahle and Homer 1985; Misra and Beatty 1990), but two do not (Kamins 1990; McDaniel 1999), and one yields mixed results (Kamins and Gupta 1994).
3. In terms of ad attitude, three studies support the match-up theory (Kamins 1990; McDaniel 1999; Stafford et al. 2002), but one does not (Kamins and Gupta 1994).
4. In terms of trustworthiness and credibility measures, two studies are positive (Koernig and Page 2002; Stafford et al. 2002), but two are mixed (Kamins 1990; Kamins and Gupta 1994).

Lack of Ecological Validity: What about Brands?

Of the nine studies reviewed, almost all used product categories of unknown or fictitious brands. Only the study by McDaniel (1999) uses a real brand, Toyota. In other words, what is being manipulated in the majority of the cases is the congruence between different *product categories* (e.g., typewriter versus sports car) and the celebrities, and not brands. This does not constitute a strong test of the theory. Worse still, it is not ecologically valid since in the real world, the focus of the advertiser is on his *brand*. And very often, the key question in his mind is which celebrity he should use. But what is being manipulated in the laboratory is product categories, often in a factorial design. Compounding this problem is the fact that in all cases, the test of the match-up hypothesis relies exclusively on the use of students as the sample. Whilst the use of students can be justified on the grounds of theory testing (Calder, Phillips, and Tybout 1981), it is less valid if the theory is an applied one, as in the present case.

Lack of Refinement: What about Degree of Fit?

Match-up theory tends to be conceptualised as a binary notion, “match” versus “non-match.” However, a marketing manager is often faced with the issue of selecting the right celebrity among many to endorse the brand, some of whom may fit better than others. Thus it is not a simple binary notion but a continuum across different celebrities. The ability to assess the “degree of match” among many celebrities and then making trade-offs is the key. Furthermore, the relationship between the “degree of match” and ad effectiveness (e.g., trustworthiness) may not be a linear one. One study found both a curvilinear as well as a linear relationship, depending on the type of service. When the service is attractiveness-related (i.e., haircuts), the more attractive the service provider (hairstylist), the more effective the ad (i.e., more trustworthy, and perceived to be more of an expert). On the other hand, when the service is not attractiveness-related (e.g., dentistry), the more attractive the service provider (dentist), the worse the ad. In the latter case, having a moderately attractive dentist is the most effective (Koernig and Page 2002).

Logically Flawed: What about Brand Repositioning or Reverse Transfer?

One of the key reasons for using celebrity endorsements is to be able to reposition a brand (Kaikati 1987). In this regard, a certain level of incongruity is necessary (Sujan and Bettman 1989) in order to change the perception. However, if one were to strictly adhere to the concept of “match-up,” then it would imply that using a celebrity to reposition a brand would never be successful. Yet, we know this is not true because inevitably the image of a brand changes when a celebrity is used (Langmeyer and Walker 1991a, 1991b). Some brands, of course, may be more resistant than others to being repositioned. Thus, any theory of celebrity-fit must also be able to explain and predict the differential ease with which a celebrity can facilitate the repositioning task.

To add to the complication, the theory must also explain the phenomenon of reverse transfer. This means that the endorsed product can also influence the perception of the celebrity. A celebrity can lose his caché very quickly if he/she were to endorse a negative product (e.g., cigarettes) (Carbonneau and Garland 2004; Till 2001). Current match-up theory does not help explain why reverse transfer occurs. In terms of research, all these imply that symbolic overtones of both celebrities and brands should also be measured (DeSarbo and Harshman 1985) to assess any changes, besides measuring the usual ad-related effectiveness measures, like purchase intention or brand attitude.

No Explanation of “Fit”

The match-up hypothesis also does not explain what “fit” actually means. Understanding this is fundamental to managing celebrity endorsement effectiveness, and yet this is not discussed at all in the celebrity endorsement literature. However, in other marketing literature, the issue of “fit” does arise, although still in a cursory manner. For example, in the brand extension literature, “fit” is conceptualised as the “similarity” between the product categories of the existing brand and its extension (Park, Milberg, and Lawson 1991). Aaker and Keller (1990) argue that perceived “fit” is more likely to occur if people think that the “transferability” of the firm’s skill in creating the extension is high. In the co-branding literature, “fit” is

conceptualised as the degree to which the two brands are “complementary” and “consistent” with each other (Simonin and Ruth 1998). Thus, beyond this simplistic view, very little is discussed about the actual mechanism and dimensions. As Simonin and Ruth (1998) concluded, “Our measures of product fit were relatively generic...still much would be learned from investigating the underlying dimensions of product category fit...[this] would add to our understanding of brand alliances and their effectiveness” (p. 40).

Asymmetric Effects

The match-up hypothesis also cannot explain one peculiar observation: that endorsement effects do not always work symmetrically. If an attractive celebrity (e.g., Tom Selleck) is juxtaposed with an attractive product (e.g., luxury car), an image enhancement is seen for this attractive product more so than for an unattractive product (e.g., typewriter) (Kahle and Homer 1985). However, for an unattractive celebrity (e.g., Telly Savalas) he/she does not in any way influence the unattractive product (i.e., type writer) even though he/she matches this product better (i.e., typewriter). This asymmetric effect is also found in Parekh and Kanekar’s work (1994) where an attractive model (though not a celebrity) results in higher product quality evaluation for beauty-related products (e.g., shampoo) than non-beauty-related products (e.g., ballpoint pen). However, for the non-attractive model, the quality of the non-beauty-related product (e.g., ballpoint pen) did not result in higher quality ratings compared to the beauty-related product (i.e., shampoo) even though the non-beauty-related product (i.e., ballpoint pen) “fits” the non-attractive model better. Finally, Kamins and Gupta (1994) found that the fictitious CEO, George Thompson, did not significantly increase the endorsement effects of a computer over that of running shoes even though his image “fits” the computer better than the running shoes. Thus, it is not a simple match-up, or else one would not see asymmetrical effects like these.

Weak Theories: Social Adaptation? Schema?

Notwithstanding the inconsistencies above, one may ask: Why should a match-up work? What is it in the match-up that makes an ad effective? One theory suggested is the social adaptation theory (Kahle and Homer 1985). This theory states that a person will continue to process an ad until no new information is added; therefore it is the acquisition of new information that helps us adapt to our environment. Thus, an attractive celebrity is more effective for endorsing a beauty-related product because an attractive celebrity can add more information about the product than an unattractive celebrity. However, Kahle and Homer (1985) never tested this underlying assumption. For instance, what is this new information being added, and if so, how much information is added? Furthermore, wouldn’t an unattractive celebrity also add extra information to a beauty-related product because of its incongruence? This notion of more information was never assessed or verified in any of the match-up studies of which we are aware.

Another theory advanced to explain the match-up phenomenon is the schema theory. First proposed by Bartlett (1932), the schema theory says that we possess a set of knowledge structures that guide our attention and behavior, and assist us in the reconstruction of our memories. The word “schema” is therefore a generic term, and over the years, other terms like “script” (Schank and Abelson 1977), or “frame” (Minsky 1975), have been used to explain more specific circumstances.

In the context of the match-up theory, a number of researchers (Lynch and Schuler 1994; McDaniel 1999; Misra and Beatty 1990) have enlisted the concept of schema to help explain the match-up phenomenon. Misra and Beatty (1990) argue that if a product is congruent with the celebrity, it will receive the affect linked to that celebrity. On the other hand, if it is not, the transfer of affect will not occur. They found evidence for higher ad attitude when there is congruency, thus supporting the schema explanation. However, they also tested recall. They argue that if a product and a celebrity are incongruent, then respondents can either reject the whole ad (called the filter theory) leading to poor recall, or engage in extra processing, where the incongruity is “tagged” and stored uniquely (called the schema pointer + tag model). This should lead to better recall. Interestingly, Misra and Beatty (1990) did *not* find support for the schema theory, but instead found the filtering theory to be more compelling. Thus, there is mixed support for the schema explanation.

Lynch and Schuler (1994) wanted to see if an endorser who is perceived to be muscular is also perceived to be more knowledgeable about exercise equipment. Consistent with the schema theory, they found this to be true in their first experiment. However, in their second experiment they failed to find support for the schema explanation. It follows that if an endorser is perceived to be muscular, then according to the schema theory, respondents should also use related adjectives (e.g., strengthly or powerful) to describe strength-related products the endorser uses, like weight-lifting equipment, but not for a product like laundry detergent. But the expected interaction between muscularity and product type interaction was also not found for any of the adjectives used. The authors explained this non-match-up effect by saying either (i) that the way the ad is constructed did not trigger the right target attribute properly, or (ii) perhaps no match-up was necessary.

...that no match was required to bring about changes in the perceived durability of the products...it would appear to imply that information can be transferred indiscriminately from the spokesperson to product without regard to inherent product attributes or characteristics. In this interpretation, it would be possible to give any product any meaning if endorsed by the right spokesperson. (p. 442)

In this regard, Lynch and Schuler (1994) are echoing the same sentiments as McCracken (1989) who suggested that advertising is powerful enough for any meaning to be transferred.

Finally, McDaniel (1999) reported what he believed supported the schema theory, but on closer examination, it is actually confounded with involvement. In his study, he wanted to show that the match-up effect is observed in corporate sponsorship. The reasoning is that prominent sports events can act like celebrities in that they help draw attention to the sponsoring company which will then benefit from the goodwill. So, in testing this basic idea, he used three sporting events and juxtaposed them with Toyota as the sponsoring company. These sponsorship events were PBA bowling tour, NHL hockey, and the Olympics. What he found is that Toyota best “matches” with the Olympics, which yielded the greatest ad attitude effect. From this he concluded that matching is important. But the study is confounded with involvement level because, of the three events, the Olympics had the highest

level of involvement. Thus it is not clear if it is the degree of involvement or the degree of match that is responsible for the effects. Finally, contrary to the schema-expectancy theory, he also found a gender difference where females turned out to be more interested in sports sponsorship than men.

In summary, the critique above highlights the inadequacy of the match-up hypothesis and its explanations. A new theory is thus required, but one which is sensitive to the brand level (and not just to the product category level); can explain the inconsistencies of the above theory; and elucidate what “fit” means and the mechanisms behind the matching process.

CO-ACTIVATION THEORY OF DOMINANT SUPPORT: A THEORY OF FIT

Our theory makes the following assumptions. Just like a brand, a celebrity possesses a set of associations (McCracken 1989). When a respondent sees a celebrity and a brand juxtaposed together, associations are spontaneously activated from the nodes of both entities. We call these co-activations. The dominant nodes from both entities are always activated first; the more dominant these nodes, the faster the activations (Burroughs and Feinberg 1987).

Activations that are consistent in both entities are called “supporting” activations. Those that are not are called “opposing” activations. For example, Sharon Stone will be a good endorser for cosmetics brands since she is attractive, which is consistent with using cosmetics (i.e., “supporting” activations). However, the fact that she had plastic surgery may act in “opposition” to the endorsement. The co-activation theory is thus similar to the notion of spreading activation (Anderson 1983), but we also hypothesised the notion of “supporting” and “opposing” activations. The “degree of fit” can then be conceptualised as the amount of “supporting” to “opposing” activations; the greater the former compared to the latter, the greater the degree of fit. When there are too many of the latter, negative reverse transfer occurs. This is a sign of severe misfit. Finally, not all activations are equally important. Some may be more influential than others in influencing purchase intention. One should note that neither the schema nor social adaptation theory postulates the notion of such activations; and it may be the varying ratio or importance of these two types of activations that can account for the inconsistent results observed in the past.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

As it is impossible to test all aspects of our new theory, we decided to explore just three aspects: the different types of activations (i.e., “supporting” and “opposing”), the bases of these activations, and the role they play for negative reverse transfer. Neither the schema nor social adaptation theory can easily explain the negative reverse transfer phenomena.

METHOD

A total of 10 respondents were interviewed in-depth for this study; they were six female and four males aged between 26 and 55 years old. Each interview lasted about 40 minutes. Four simple questions were asked, and extensively probed:

- Q1. I heard a rumour that Tom Cruise is advertising for Mazda. What do you think of that?
- Q2. Do you think Tom’s image will be damaged by advertising for Mazda?

- Q3: Which brand of cars will enhance Tom Cruise's image if he were to advertise for it?
- Q4: Which brand of cars will damage Tom Cruise's image if he were to advertise for it?

The rationale for deliberately starting with a less prestigious brand like Mazda, and couching it in terms of a "rumour" is to give the respondents more opportunities to suggest different brands. By continually probing, it helps to uncover the boundaries of the "fit" between the two entities (i.e., celebrity and brand).

RESULTS

Supporting and Opposing Activations

All subjects were surprised by the rumour. This is because they felt that Tom's image did not fit that of Mazda. Instead they suggested more prestigious brands like Porsche and Ferrari. Below is a brief summary of the verbatim evidence of these activations:

Opposing Activations (Mazda)

- I can see a famous sportsperson endorsing Mazda, but not for a *classy* person like Tom Cruise; Mazda is an ordinary car.
- Tom can *buy any car* he wants, why would he want to endorse a Mazda?
- He is just an *actor*, what would he know about cars? If he is a professional *race driver*, yes.
- Tom's involvement with Scientology does *not* *endear* him to his fan base who may drive Mazda.

Supporting Activations (Sports Car, Porsche, Ferrari, BMW, Jaguar)

- Tom Cruise is *unattainable*; thus Ferrari or Porsche is better, cos' they are also *unattainable*.
- He is in *Top Gun*; hence the car he endorses must be a *top* car.
- Porsche fits better...It is a sex symbol...like Tom...I hear that he is *infertile*, and so it fits the image of the *sports* car...no kids, and sports car have *no room for kids*.
- BMW and Jaguar...because it is *expensive* and *exclusive*. I wouldn't have thought that he would drive a mass-market car. Instead he should drive something that *says money* and *prestige*.

Negative Reverse Transfer

We also hypothesised the existence of negative reverse transfer when there is severe misfit. Below is some verbatim evidence of this:

- He is *classy*, has *finesse*, a *lady's man*. For him to endorse Mazda is really *bad*. He must be getting *desperate* or on *the way down*.
- An old car—I mean a 10-year-car...one that is not in good condition. Or Ford Falcon. People will be amazed and astonished. They will say, "My god, he is *lowering* his image", and this will damage this image.
- I think it will *take away* some of his glamour. He will be associated with a traditional middle-of-the-road small car. I guess it will be O.K. if he wants to become more stable. But if he wants to maintain a high glamour, Mazda will not fit.
- I cannot imagine him driving a South Korean car...I can see him owning a few top end European cars...but I cannot imagine him having a Hyundai or Kia in his garage...endorsing these will *damage his credibility*

because people are saying, "What is he doing?" He is selling out...that he just sold his name...a *blatant grab for money*...he would just be *prostituting* himself.

- I think Tom endorsing dangerous products like cigarettes or environmentally damaging products will be worse...This will damage his image even more because it says he is *immoral*.

DISCUSSION

The qualitative research, although exploratory, revealed the following insights:

Insight #1: Reverse Transfer, Supporting, Opposing Activations Do Occur

The results above lend preliminary support to our notion of different types of activations, some of which are "supporting" while others are "opposing." We also found evidence for negative reverse transfer when misfit occurs, something which the schema or social adaptation theory cannot easily explain. For instance, people say that if Tom were to endorse Mazda, it means that he is "desperate" or "on his way down"...and that it will only "take away his glamour." Why does this occur? This occurs because of the misfit between his status and lifestyle as a movie star with the dominant associations of the brand, Mazda ("an ordinary car"). This creates both negative attribution (see insight #2) and affect.

Furthermore, one should note that McCracken's (1989) symbolic transfer only postulated a forward transfer, that is, the image of the celebrity "spills over" to that of the product. Here we found evidence that the transfer can also work the opposite way, that is, the image of the brand (i.e., Mazda) is "transferred" to the celebrity; previously, this reverse negative transfer was only observed for negative products like cigarettes (Carbonneau and Garland 2004; Till 2001).

Insight #2: Surprise and Lack of Clear Image as a Sign of Misfit

In our interviews, we also found that respondents were all surprised by the "rumor" that Tom Cruise was endorsing Mazda. Their initial reaction sometimes bordered on disbelief as they scratched their heads wondering, "Why?" This is because people expect him to drive a prestigious car, given his earning power. They also say that they cannot *see*, in their mind's eye Tom Cruise driving a Mazda, or *imagine* Tom having a Mazda in his garage. When probed, they further say that there is no logical reason why he should *own* a Mazda since he can buy any car he wants. Furthermore, they say that to do otherwise would be to invite suspicion and one common suspicion is that he must be only doing it for the money. They then infer that Mazda must be paying him lots of money for this endorsement, which then implies that Tom Cruise must be getting "desperate" (i.e., in need of money). This insight implies that one way of assessing fit is to ask respondents whether they are surprised by the celebrity's endorsement, whether it is sensible, and whether they can imagine the celebrity owning and using the brand.

We speculate that when there is a fit, consumers may be more likely to attribute the endorsement to stable internal-based factors about the celebrity (e.g., his/her talent); however, when there is no fit, consumers may do one of two things: (i) continue to co-activate more nodes from both entities to try to see a link, or (ii) denigrate the celebrity attributing the endorsement to external-based reasons (e.g., "a blatant grab for money," "prostituting himself").

Insight #3: Fit is Multidimensional

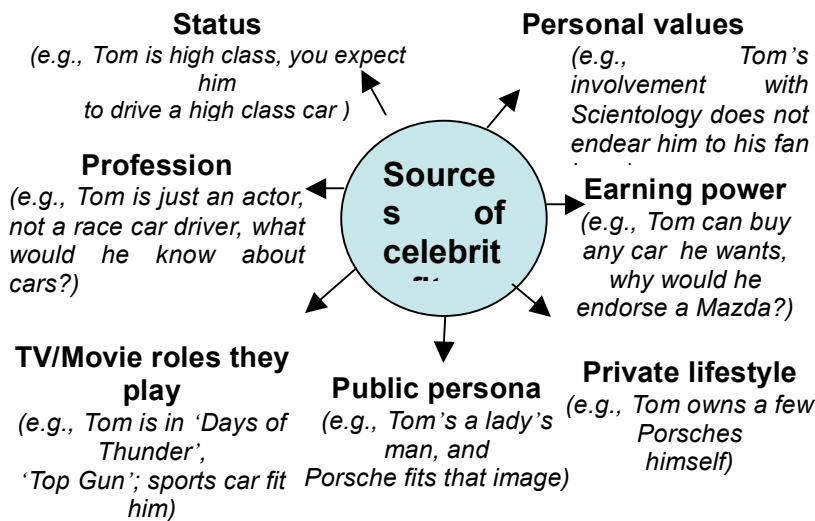
One of the perplexing questions is: Where do these “opposing” or “supporting” activations come from? For a theory to be useful, it must be able to predict *a priori* the likelihood in which such activations would occur, and this means understanding the sources of these activations. Furthermore, simply saying that there is greater similarity or dissimilarity between a particular celebrity and a brand is also not helpful because it is too vague. For instance, one may ask in what ways the two entities are similar? And if one were to take the word “similar” literally, then celebrities will always be *dissimilar* from products since they are human beings!

Our research uncovers many potential sources in which fit (or misfit) can occur between a celebrity and a brand, resulting in supporting (or opposing) activations. Below is a model which shows the various memory nodes of a celebrity that may be activated when juxtaposed with a brand, including (though not limited) to (i) his/her status, (ii) his/her profession, (iii) the TV or movie roles he/she plays, (iv) his/her public persona, (v) his/her private lifestyle, (vi) his/her earning power and (vii) his/her

personal values (see figure 1).

“Fit” can then be conceptualised as the absence of any “opposing” activations on any of the celebrity nodes activated during the endorsement process. The converse will be true for “supporting” activations. For example, in the memory node of “TV or movie roles,” people say that Porsche, being a “top” car fits better because of Tom’s previous character as a maverick in the movie “Top Gun.” Conversely, in the memory nodes of “private lifestyle” and “earning power,” people say they cannot imagine Tom Cruise owning or driving a Mazda, but can imagine him with a Porsche because the latter is more consistent with his lifestyle and earning power (i.e., “supporting” activations). To put it another way, misfit occurs when the juxtaposition creates conflict in the mind of the consumer due to “opposing” activations. This model thus implies that “fit” is not a single dimension but multifaceted in nature. The “degree of fit” can then be conceptualised as the extent to which more “supporting” activations are found in the various memory nodes vis-à-vis “opposing” ones activated during the juxtaposition.

FIGURE 1
SOURCES OF CELEBRITY FIT



Insight #4: Relationship between Sources of Fit and Purchase Intent

Finally, the above model helps us speculate about the relationship between fit and purchase intention. One can theorise that some of these nodes may be more important than others in influencing purchase intention, and it is these important ones that drive purchase intention. Furthermore, one can also theorise that there may be two levels of fit, one at the product level, and the other at the brand level. Perhaps a celebrity’s talent (e.g, profession) may be more important in convincing consumers about what product to buy (e.g., cars versus cameras), but once the consumer is in the market for that product, it is the celebrity’s other “supporting” activations (e.g., lifestyle)

that will convince us about the brand. For instance, people say that they do not trust Tom Cruise’s endorsement of cars because he is just an actor, and not a racing driver. But people also say that they are more convinced of him driving a Porsche than Mazda. In other words, a celebrity’s talent may be more influential for purchase intent at the product category level (e.g., Smidts and Rossiter 2002), but it is his/her lifestyle that is more influential at the brand level. The former speaks directly to the celebrity’s technical expertise, while the latter his/her genuineness (of usage).

LIMITATIONS

There are a number of limitations to this study. First,

being qualitative, it can only be exploratory. We might be accused of being subjective and seeing only what we want to see. We recognise this, but we also argue that with any new theory, one has to start somewhere, and in our case we choose to explore a small part of the theor— namely, the existence of different types of activations, the sources of these activations, and the observations of reverse negative transfer. Our model is only tentative, but we hope to extend this research with more rigorous quantifiable data which will give us more confidence. Second, only one celebrity (i.e., Tom Cruise) is explored in this study. To the extent that other celebrities may yield different sources of fit, the current conceptualization (see figure 1) may prove incomplete. Finally, no ads were used in this exploratory study. We merely talk about the “rumors” of Tom Cruise’s endorsement. Although this might be criticised for lacking external validity, it has one distinct advantage, and that is by couching it in terms of a rumor, it allows a fuller, unrestricted exploration of the different aspects of the celebrity fit. A mock up ad may, in fact, detract from this.

CONCLUSION

The motivation for our theory arises from the dissatisfaction with existing explanations for the “match-up” hypothesis. Much of the dissatisfaction occurs because of the lack of explanation of what constitutes “fit”. In summary, our theory is a theory of fit, one which tries to elucidate both the mechanism as well as the structural element required for this to occur. We argue and show (albeit exploratory) that there are two main types of activations—“supporting” and “opposing”—that occur whenever a brand and a celebrity are juxtaposed. The source of celebrity activation can be traced to our memory nodes about the celebrity (e.g., his/her status or his/her lifestyle). A “fit” can be conceptualised as the ease with which the dominant associations of the brand when activated do not contradict those of the celebrity’s, but instead support various aspects of the celebrity’s life (e.g., through usage). Hence, there are no surprises. The associations of the celebrity come from various dominant memory nodes we have of the celebrity. Thus, “fit” is multifaceted, and the “degree of fit” is the extent to which more “supporting” activations occur at these nodes vis-à-vis “opposing” ones.

Such a theory can help explain inconsistent results in the past. For instance, asymmetric effects and equivocal results found in the match-up experiments may be nothing more than the varying ratio of “supporting” to “opposing” activations found across various memory nodes. And because some of these nodes may be more important than others, this can also help account for the inconsistency in purchase intention. We speculate, for instance, that a celebrity’s talent may be more influential in influencing our purchase of the product category, but his lifestyle or status more influential in purchasing the brand. Finally, we also found evidence for the phenomenon of reverse transfer which previous theories could not easily explain. Furthermore, we found preliminary evidence that this can occur at the brand level. Our explanation is that the presence of too much “opposing” activation across the different nodes results in a negative affect, and it is this that causes the negative reverse transfer. In summary, our theory represents an improvement to the existing ones in explaining celebrity match-up because it is more explicit.

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