(In)Congruity in the Evaluation of Celebrity Co-Brands

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This research demonstrates that consumers are more likely to purchase a celebrity co-branded product when the personality of the celebrity is incongruent with the parent brand compared to when it is congruent. The results show that incongruity increases elaboration, which has a positive effect on consumers’ evaluation of the co-brand.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Celebrity personalities are ubiquitous. Estimates suggest as much as 25% of U.S. advertising involves celebrities in one form or another (Erdog˘an 1999), and that figure is higher in many other countries (Crutchfield 2010). While the effect of celebrity endorsements on ad and brand evaluation are well documented (Ohanian 1990), the growing phenomenon of celebrity co-branding has receive little attention. When celebrities co-brand a product, they are not simply endorsing it; instead, they partner with a company to co-create a product that shares the identity of both the celebrity and the company. Celebrity co-brands are present in a diverse set of categories. They are perhaps most prevalent in the fashion and accessories industry. For instance, Scarlett Johansson partnered with Reebok to co-design a new line of clothing and footwear called Scarlett ‘Hearts’ Rbk. Madonna developed a line of sunglasses with Dolce and Gabbana under the brand MDG.

Recently, Monga and Lau-Gesk (2007) examined how consumers evaluate co-brands with two distinct brand personalities versus one personality. They argue that co-brands with dual personalities are considered to be more complex than single personality co-brands. As a result, when the complex self is activated consumers prefer co-brands that combine the benefits associated with two distinct brand personalities (i.e., glamour and trendiness) to those that combine benefits consistent with a single brand personality (i.e., only glamour).

This current research shows that consumers also prefer celebrity co-brands with dual personalities. However, we identify an additional process through which the evaluation of co-brands can be shaped by dual personalities. We propose that the effectiveness of celebrity co-brands depends on whether the personality of the celebrity is congruent or incongruent with the personality of the parent brand. Consumers are more likely to purchase celebrity co-brands when the personality of the celebrity is incongruent with that of the parent (i.e., there is a dual personality) compared to when the celebrity’s personality is congruent with that of the parent. Additionally, we demonstrate that the process underlying these findings is a difference in processing motivation. Specifically, we propose that incongruent personalities increase consumers’ processing motivation, which results in more favorable evaluations of the co-branded product.

In study 1, we demonstrate that people prefer a co-brand when the celebrity’s personality is incongruent with the parent brand (Kayne West and Louis Vuitton) compared to when it is more congruent with the parent brand (George Clooney and Louis Vuitton). We also show that the effect is unique to co-brands and reverses when the celebrity endorses a product by the same parent brand, which is consistent with previous research on celebrity endorsements (Escalas and Bettman 2011; Kahle and Homer 1985). Additionally, we show that the effect of incongruity on consumers’ evaluation of a celebrity co-brand is strongest for those that are low in processing motivation (i.e., those that are low in parent brand involvement).

Study 2 replicates the effects observed in the co-brand conditions of study 1 using a single celebrity. Specifically, we manipulated the personality of Daniel Craig such that his personality would be perceived to be more or less congruent with the parent brand (Louis Vuitton). We find that people evaluate the co-brand more favorably when incongruity is high compared to when it is low and that the effect emerges for consumers that are low in brand involvement. Additionally, we show that our findings are due to incongruity experienced while integrating existing information about the celebrity and parent brand; the effect does not emerge when consumers do not have existing information about the celebrity to integrate with the parent brand.

Study 3 provides direct evidence that processing motivation underlies our results. Specifically, we show that manipulating participants’ motivation to process a celebrity co-brand moderates the effect of incongruity on purchase intent. Specifically, we find that when participants’ motivation to process the co-brand is relatively high, participants prefer a co-brand that is incongruent compared to one that is congruent. However, reducing participants’ motivation to process the co-brand eliminates the effect.

The present work contributes to extant literature that explores the impact of celebrities on consumer behavior. The findings of Study 1 are consistent with previous research that indicates celebrity endorsers are often seen as a peripheral cue for evaluating a product or brand (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983). However, we demonstrate that unlike celebrity endorsements, the use of celebrities in co-branding is not based on peripheral processing, instead the image or personality of the celebrity is a central component of the brand. Our results indicate that celebrity co-branding is not simply an extension of celebrity endorsing, but a unique and yet unexamined area of study.

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