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### A risk of meaning transfer: Are negative associations more likely to transfer than positive associations?

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## A risk of meaning transfer: Are negative associations more likely to transfer than positive associations?

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Celebrity endorsement is a common influence tactic used by marketers. By linking their brands with cultural entities such as celebrity endorsers, marketers attempt to acquire positive meanings and personality traits associated with the entity. Entities, however, often have both positive and negative associations. For example, a celebrity can be both smart and arrogant, or sexy and ditsy. We highlight a risk of meaning transfer: negative associations are more likely to transfer to a brand than positive associations. Three studies show that brands are more likely to acquire the negative than the positive personality traits associated with a celebrity endorser and that negative associations transfer even under conditions that inhibit the transfer of positive associations.

**Keywords:** Brand meaning; Celebrity endorsement; Associations; Meaning transfer; Negativity bias; Brand personality.

Brand meaning is a critical component of brand equity, which is known to significantly influence consumers (Keller, 1993, 2003). Meaning contributes to brand attitudes, facilitates emotional attachment, and paves the way for successful brand extensions (Escalas, 2004; Grohmann, 2009; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). Keller (1993, 2003) conceptualizes brand meaning as the network of brand associations in consumers' minds. He proposes that

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brands acquire associations through links with other cultural entities, including people (e.g., endorsers), places (e.g., country-of-origin), products (e.g., brand partnerships), and events (e.g., sponsorships). The meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1986) similarly argues that when an entity is paired with a brand—for example, when a celebrity endorses a brand in an advertisement—consumers infer that the meaning associated with the other entity applies to the brand as well.

While a number of factors shape a brand's meaning and many of these are outside of the marketer's control, forging relationships with entities is one way in which a marketer can actively manage brand meaning to influence consumers (Allen, Fournier, & Miller, 2008). Marketers often link their brands to other entities in the hope that the entities' positive associations will become part of the brand meaning. We highlight a risk of this strategy. Cultural entities are often associated with undesired, negative meanings in addition to desired, positive meanings. In contrast with prior research, which has focused on the transfer of positive meaning, we suggest that an entity's negative associations are even more likely to transfer to a brand than its positive associations. Celebrities are an important part of the social fabric, and it is widely accepted that celebrity endorsements can influence consumers' preferences and choices. Because celebrity endorsements are a common means for attempting to influence consumer behavior (Stafford, Spears, & Hsu, 2003), we examine the transfer of positive and negative meaning from celebrity endorsers to brands. Although we focus on celebrity endorsements, we expect that our findings will extend to other sources of meaning transfer as well.

## CELEBRITY ENDORSERS AND THEIR ASSOCIATIONS

Historically, research on celebrity endorsers has examined their influence on consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions (McCracken, 1989). This research shows that celebrity endorsers can enhance brand attitude through liking (Weisbuch, Mackie, & Garcia-Marques, 2003) and by serving as credible and attractive sources (Baker & Churchill, 1977; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; McGuire 1968; Sternthal, Dholakia, & Leavitt, 1978). However, the meaning of celebrity endorsers cannot be reduced to likability, credibility, and attractiveness, nor are the effects of endorsers limited to brand attitude (McCracken, 1989). Practitioners rate the meaning of celebrities as one of the most important criteria for selecting celebrity endorsers (Erdogan, Baker, & Tagg, 2001), and academic research confirms that the effectiveness of an endorser depends not only on endorser likability, credibility, and attractiveness, but also on whether the meaning associated with an endorser fits the product (Batra & Homer, 2004; Kamins, 1990; Kirmani & Shiv, 1998).

Celebrity endorsers are complex cultural figures associated with a variety of meanings (McCracken 1989). While some associations are positive (e.g., in the 1980s Madonna was perceived as sexy and modern), others are negative (e.g., Madonna was also perceived as outlandish and nasty; Walker, Langmeyer, & Langmeyer, 1992). Despite the influence of the meaning transfer model, few studies have empirically examined how and when meaning associated with celebrity endorsers transfers to brands. The few studies that have empirically investigated meaning transfer have focused only on the positive meanings associated with the endorser (Batra & Homer, 2004; Kirmani & Shiv, 1998; Walker et al., 1992). For example, Batra and Homer (2004) investigated the extent to which an endorsement by a sophisticated (Barbara Walters) or a fun (Rosanne Barr) celebrity increased the perception of the endorsed brand as more sophisticated or fun.

We extend the literature by examining meaning transfer when a celebrity endorser is associated with both positive and negative traits. We identify a previously unexamined risk: brands can acquire the negative meanings associated with an endorser in addition to, or even instead of, the positive meanings. Furthermore, we find that negative associations transfer from endorsers to brands even under conditions that often prevent the transfer of positive associations, including incongruent and insincere celebrity endorsements. In the next sections we develop our hypotheses, which we subsequently test in three experiments.

### THE GREATER WEIGHT OF THE NEGATIVE

Research illustrates a tendency for negative information to have a larger psychological impact than positive information, an effect labeled the negativity bias (e.g., Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998). Negative stimuli tend to have a larger influence on impression formation, elicit more physiological arousal, command more attention, have a stronger effect on learning, be more contagious, and influence mood more than positive stimuli (Rozin & Royzman, 2001; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). While the negativity bias is well established, there is less agreement about why the bias exists (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2001). An evolutionary perspective suggests that, because negative events threaten survival more than positive events, greater attention and vigilance towards negative stimuli may provide adaptive benefits (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Consequently, Cacioppo and Berntson (1994) have suggested that people have separate motivational systems for positive and negative evaluations and that the negative motivational system is more sensitive than the positive. A different explanation is that negative information is frequently more diagnostic than positive information (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Given that marketing communications

primarily provide positive information about brands, negative information may seem especially diagnostic for celebrity endorsements.

Research has not yet explored the negativity bias in the domain of meaning transfer. Drawing on the widespread evidence that negative information has a larger impact than positive, we hypothesize that negative meanings associated with a celebrity endorser are more likely to transfer to a brand than positive meanings. Prior research shows that negative information about an endorser (for example, a newspaper article describing a celebrity scandal) can limit the positive influence of the endorsement (Louie, Kulik, & Jacobson, 2001; Till & Shimp, 1998). We address a different but related issue, proposing that when a celebrity is associated with both positive and negative traits, the negative traits are more likely to transfer to an endorsed brand than the positive traits.

- H1: Meaning transfer from a celebrity endorser to a brand will be greater for negative than for positive associations.

### THE INFLUENCE OF FIT ON MEANING TRANSFER

The “Match-up” hypothesis for celebrity endorsement proposes that positive celebrity meaning is likely to enhance consumers’ responses to an endorsed product when the celebrity meaning is congruent with the meaning of the product, but that celebrity meaning is unlikely to lead to more positive responses when the celebrity and product meaning are incongruent (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Lee & Thorson, 2008), at least when consumers are likely to think about the brand rather than the advertisement itself (Kirmani & Shiv, 1998). For example, one study found that an attractive endorser had a more positive impact on attitude toward the ad than an unattractive endorser for a product related to attractiveness (e.g., a luxury car), but not for a product unrelated to attractiveness (e.g., a personal computer; Kamins, 1990). Similarly, research on brand extensions demonstrates that existing brand equity transfers more when a brand extension is congruent, rather than incongruent with the parent brand (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Maoz & Tybout, 2002; Park, Milberg, & Lawson, 1991). Finally, and most relevant to the current inquiry, one study found that a celebrity endorser’s positive trait (classiness) was more likely to transfer to a congruent product (high-end cookies) than an incongruent product (chips; Batra & Homer, 2004). However, previous research has focused exclusively on positive meaning. As noted earlier, negative information may automatically attract more attention, has greater weight, greater evaluative impact, and is perceived to be more diagnostic than positive information (Baumeister et al., 2001; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Based on this we expect that negative meanings associated with a celebrity endorser may transfer even when the

brand and the endorser are incongruent. A lack of fit with a celebrity endorser should be more likely to prevent positive than negative associations from transferring to the brand.

- H2: Negative traits associated with a celebrity endorser will transfer to the brand irrespective of whether or not the endorser is congruent with the brand, whereas positive traits are less likely to transfer when the endorser is incongruent than when the endorser is congruent.

### THE MODERATING ROLE OF ENDORSER OPINION

Consumers may not be influenced by endorsements if they believe that the celebrity endorsers do not sincerely like or use the brands that they advocate in marketing communications, such as when Cybill Shepherd admitted to being a vegetarian while endorsing meat for the National Beef Council (Levenson, 2005). We label endorsements in which the endorser seems motivated by a desire for money or publicity, rather than a genuine liking for the product, “insincere.” Indirect evidence suggests that insincere endorsements may have less of an effect on the endorsed brand than sincere endorsements. For example, positive comments inferred to be motivated by a financial reward rather than a genuine belief in the product or service are less likely to positively influence attitudes and behaviors (Brown & Krishna, 2004; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Tuk, Verlegh, Smidts, & Wigboldus, 2009). Further, prior research has found that endorsements from celebrities who endorse many brands provide less influence than endorsements from celebrities who endorse fewer brands, presumably because consumers are likely to infer that celebrities who endorse a large number of brands are motivated by money (Mowen & Brown, 1981; Tripp, Jensen, & Carlson, 1994). Although the literature has not specifically investigated whether meaning transfer depends on sincerity, this evidence suggests that positive meaning is less likely to transfer when an endorsement seems insincere. Therefore we hypothesize that positive traits associated with a celebrity endorser are unlikely to transfer to the endorsed brand when the endorsement seems insincere. However, because of the potency of negative meaning, we propose that negative traits associated with a celebrity are likely to transfer to an endorsed brand even when the endorser does not sincerely believe in or like the brand.

- H3: Negative traits associated with a celebrity endorser will transfer to the brand irrespective of whether or not the endorsement appears sincere, whereas positive traits are less likely to transfer when the endorsement seems insincere than sincere.

## OVERVIEW OF THE STUDIES

We test whether negative meaning associated with a celebrity endorser is more likely to transfer to a brand than positive meaning. We test hypothesis 1 by measuring brand personality ratings (e.g., Aaker, 1997) after a fictional celebrity with both a positive and a negative personality trait either has or has not endorsed the brand. We test hypothesis 2 by comparing the transfer of positive and negative traits associated with a real celebrity endorser to a brand in a congruent or an incongruent product category. Finally, we test hypothesis 3 by examining the impact of endorsement sincerity on the transfer of positive versus negative traits associated with a celebrity. We conclude by discussing implications and possible mechanisms for the effect.

### STUDY 1

Our first study tests whether brands are more likely to acquire the negative as compared to the positive meaning associated with a celebrity endorser. Participants read about a watch brand that either was or was not endorsed by a fictional celebrity. We created an endorser in order to provide good experimental control and ensure that his meaning encompassed one positive personality trait (intelligence) and one negative personality trait (arrogance). This allows clear examination of our theory and the extent to which the brand gained a positive and a negative personality trait.

#### Method

We randomly assigned 80 undergraduate students to an endorser/positive attributes first, endorser/negative attributes first, or a no endorser condition. Participants read a news story about Slade, a (fictional) watch brand. In the endorser conditions the article reported that Slade had hired a star Austrian cyclist, Bernhard Davos, as their new spokesperson. The article described Davos as “smart and very knowledgeable” and as being, “full of himself.” We counterbalanced whether the article first described the endorser’s positive or negative traits. Since the order of the trait descriptions did not produce any significant differences, we collapse across order in all further discussion. A pretest ( $N=81$ ) confirmed that the participant population considered intelligence a positive trait ( $M = +2.5$ ,  $SD = .49$ ) and arrogance a negative trait ( $M = -1.7$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ; 7-point scales from  $-3$ : *very bad* to  $+3$ : *very good*). Participants in the control condition also read about Slade, but the article did not include any discussion of an endorser (see Appendix A for materials). After reading the article, participants read, “We would like you to think of Slade as if it were a person. We are interested in finding out which personality traits or human characteristics come to mind when you think about the brand.” Participants then rated Slade’s personality on seven

traits including positive traits associated with the endorser (clever, intelligent;  $r = .57$ ), negative traits associated with the endorser (conceited, arrogant;  $r = .81$ ), and separate traits unrelated to the endorser (sexy, rugged, boring). We used 7-point scales anchored by 1: *Not descriptive* and 7: *Very descriptive*. Finally we measured demographic variables including gender. Because males and females may judge celebrity endorsers differently, we tested for gender effects in this and in subsequent studies. Gender did not have any main or interactive effects in any of the studies, therefore we do not discuss it further.

## Results and discussion

We assessed meaning transfer by comparing both the positive and negative brand personality ratings in the endorser condition to the brand personality ratings in the no endorser condition. A 2 (endorser: yes, no)  $\times$  2 (trait valence: negative, positive) repeated-measures ANOVA revealed the predicted interaction,  $F(1, 78) = 10.4$ ,  $p < .01$ . Contrasts showed that the endorser's negative traits were more likely to transfer to the brand than his positive traits. Participants considered Slade more conceited and arrogant when endorsed than when not endorsed ( $M_{\text{Endorsed}} = 3.97$ ,  $M_{\text{NotEndorsed}} = 3.17$ ),  $F(1, 78) = 4.91$ ,  $p < .05$ . In contrast, if anything participants considered Slade to be less clever and intelligent when endorsed than when not endorsed by the celebrity ( $M_{\text{Endorsed}} = 4.32$ ,  $M_{\text{NotEndorsed}} = 4.91$ ),  $F(1, 78) = 3.41$ ,  $p < .10$ . The endorser manipulation did not influence perceptions of Slade on traits unrelated to the endorser, including sexy,  $F(1, 78) = .01$ ,  $p < .9$ , rugged,  $F(1, 78) = 1.86$ ,  $p > .15$ , and boring,  $F(1, 78) = .20$ ,  $p < .6$ .

The data suggest that it may be easier for brands to acquire negative rather than positive meanings from a celebrity endorser. Consistent with hypothesis 1, negative traits associated with a fictional celebrity endorser transferred to an endorsed brand while the endorser's positive traits did not. The fictional endorser used in this study allowed control to provide an initial test of our theorizing; in the next study we use a real celebrity endorser to generalize the findings to a richer environment and provide a stronger test of the theory.

## STUDY 2

Study 2 examines whether positive and negative traits transfer from a celebrity endorser to a brand when the endorser is incongruent with the brand. We propose that because negative meanings are more potent than positive meanings, negative traits are likely to transfer even to products that are incongruent with the celebrity endorser. In contrast, and consistent with

TABLE 1  
Study 2: Mean trait ratings

Trait	(Pretest) rait		Watch (Congruent)		Pocket Knife (Incongruent)		
	Valence <sup>a</sup>	Endorser <sup>b</sup>	Not End.	Endorsed	Not End.	Endorsed	
Pos.	Fun	2.6	1.4	-.64	-.04*	-.96	-.57
Transfer	Young	1.0	1.5	-.11	.56*	-.42	-.15
	Sexy	1.9	2.2	.56	.75	-1.2	-1.0
	Average	1.8	1.7	-.06	.42*	-.85	-.58
	Positive						
Neg.	Strong	1.9	-1.5	.55	-.25*	1.5	.87*
Transfer	Rugged	.57	-2.5	.31	-1.3***	1.8	1.1*
	Ditsy	-1.4	2.3	-2.0	-.35***	-2.7	-1.7***
	Average	-1.3	2.1	-.97	.40***	-2.0	-1.2***
	Negative <sup>c</sup>						

<sup>a</sup>Pretest data ( $N=81$ ) in which participants evaluated the valence of each trait on a scale from -3 (very bad) to +3 (very good). All means are significantly different than "0" ( $p < .001$ ).

<sup>b</sup>Ratings of the endorser that were collected after the brand personality ratings. All means are significantly different than the midpoint ( $p < .001$ ).

Because the endorser lacked the positive traits "rugged" and "strong" we reverse-scored these brand personality ratings to calculate the average negative meaning score for the brand. A higher score indicates that the brand was more similar to the endorser in terms of a negative trait possessed by the endorser (ditsy) and two positive traits lacked by the endorser (strong and rugged).

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Contrast between the "endorsed" and "not endorsed" conditions for either the congruent product (column 6 vs 5) or the incongruent product (column 8 vs 7).

prior research, we expect positive traits to be more likely to transfer to congruent, as opposed to incongruent, products.

Pretests<sup>1</sup> identified one particular pop singer and reality TV star as a familiar ( $M=5.5$ ,  $SD=1.31$ ) and liked ( $M=4.7$ ,  $SD=1.35$ ; scales 1-7) celebrity strongly associated with both positive (sexy, fun, young) and negative (ditsy, not strong, not rugged) traits (see Table 1). An additional pretest ( $N=37$ ) identified products seen as congruent—a watch ( $M=4.4$ ,  $SD=1.9$ )—and incongruent—a pocketknife ( $M=1.1$ ,  $SD=.41$ ),  $t(35)=10.7$ ,  $p < .001$ , (7-point scale anchored by *poor fit* and *good fit*)—with the celebrity.

## Method

We randomly assigned 225 undergraduates to one of four possible conditions in a 2 (endorsement/control)  $\times$  2 (congruent/incongruent)

<sup>1</sup>Details available upon request.

between-participants design. In the first part of the study participants read a series of “Popular Press Articles” (see Appendix B). The second article described how a brand recently hired the aforementioned celebrity as a spokesperson. In the endorsement condition the brand was either Slade watches (congruent) or Slade pocketknives (incongruent). In the control condition the article described the same celebrity endorsing an unrelated brand with a different brand name, such that participants in the control condition were exposed to the same celebrity, but not to the Slade brand.<sup>2</sup> We compared the brand personality of Slade when the celebrity endorsed Slade versus when she endorsed a different brand, which controlled for the mere presence of the celebrity as an endorser. Next, participants answered comprehension questions about the article and then completed an unrelated filler task that provided a break between the manipulations and brand personality ratings to clear short-term memory. Participants next rated the personalities of three brands, including Slade watches (congruent condition) or Slade pocketknives (incongruent condition) on the following traits: fun, young, sexy, ditsy, strong, and rugged. We measured personality traits using 7-point scales anchored by *Not at all descriptive* and *Very descriptive*. After the dependent variables, participants completed a manipulation check, rating their impressions of the celebrity on the same personality traits.

## Results and discussion

Consistent with pretest data, the manipulation check showed that participants viewed the celebrity as possessing the positive traits of fun, young, and sexy. They also viewed her as possessing the negative trait, ditsy, and as lacking the positive traits strong and rugged (see Table 1). Thus we calculated positive meaning transfer by assessing the extent to which the endorsement increased ratings of Slade on fun, young, and sexy ( $\alpha = .72$ ), and negative meaning transfer by assessing the extent to which the endorsement increased ratings of Slade on ditsy and decreased ratings on strong and rugged. We calculated the negative meaning score by reverse-coding the ratings of “strong” and “rugged” so that a higher score reflected a higher level of similarity to the celebrity, and then averaging the rating of “ditsy” with the reverse-coded ratings of “strong” and “rugged” ( $\alpha = .73$ ).

A 2 (endorsement)  $\times$  2 (congruity)  $\times$  2 (trait valence) repeated-measures ANOVA revealed both an endorsement by congruity interaction,  $F(1, 221) = 3.9$ ,  $p = .05$ , and an endorsement by trait valence interaction,  $F(1, 221) = 9.8$ ,  $p < .01$ . The three-way interaction was not significant,

<sup>2</sup> Participants in the control condition read about the celebrity endorsing either a clothing or snack brand; there were no main or interactive effects of the control product on perceptions of Slade so we collapsed across in further analyses.

$F(1, 221) = 1.34, p > .2$ . The two-way interactions indicated that meaning transferred more for negative traits ( $M_{\text{NotEndorsed}} = -1.60, M_{\text{Endorsed}} = -.27$ ) than positive traits ( $M_{\text{NotEndorsed}} = -.45, M_{\text{Endorsed}} = -.09$ ), and more to a congruent ( $M_{\text{NotEndorsed}} = -.52, M_{\text{Endorsed}} = .41$ ) rather than an incongruent product ( $M_{\text{NotEndorsed}} = -1.46, M_{\text{Endorsed}} = -.9$ ). To better interpret the data we contrasted the endorsement and no endorsement conditions for both the congruent and incongruent products. As in earlier research (Batra & Homer, 2004), the positive traits associated with the endorser transferred to the congruent (watch:  $M_{\text{NotEndorsed}} = -.07, M_{\text{Endorsed}} = .42$ ),  $F(1, 221) = 3.98, p < .05$ , but not to the incongruent brand (knife:  $M_{\text{NotEndorsed}} = -.86, M_{\text{Endorsed}} = -.58$ ),  $F(1, 221) = 1.30, p > .25$ . In contrast, the negative traits associated with the endorser transferred to the incongruent (knife:  $M_{\text{NotEndorsed}} = -2.03, M_{\text{Endorsed}} = -1.22$ ),  $F(1, 221) = 12.7, p < .001$ , as well as the congruent brand (watch:  $M_{\text{NotEndorsed}} = -.97, M_{\text{Endorsed}} = .39$ ),  $F(1, 221) = 36.0, p < .001$  (see Table 1).

Consistent with the literature, positive meaning associated with a celebrity endorser transferred to a congruent, but not to an incongruent brand. However, consistent with hypothesis 2, negative meaning associated with a celebrity endorser transferred irrespective of whether the brand was congruent or incongruent with the endorser. Incongruity reduces meaning transfer, but because negative meaning is more potent than positive meaning, it can transfer even when the endorser is incongruent with the product.

### STUDY 3

Our final study investigates whether the perceived sincerity of a celebrity endorsement moderates the influence of the endorser on the endorsed brand. As previously discussed, when consumers infer that an endorsement is motivated by financial gain rather than genuine liking for the brand, we hypothesize that the endorsement is unlikely to facilitate meaning transfer for positive traits. However, because of the relative potency of negative information, negative meaning may transfer even when an endorsement is perceived to be insincere. Our final study tests this hypothesis by investigating whether a brand acquires positive and negative traits associated with a celebrity endorser when the endorsement appears either sincere or insincere.

#### Method

We randomly assigned 103 undergraduates to one of three between-participants conditions: no endorsement, sincere endorsement, or insincere endorsement. Participants first read and answered basic comprehension questions about brief articles ostensibly published in a fashion magazine.

The second article in the endorser conditions described the same pop singer and reality star from the previous study wearing a Slade watch. In the sincere endorser condition the article quotes the celebrity as saying, “I just think the watch is right for me.” Conversely, in the insincere endorser condition the article quotes her as saying, “I only wear it because Slade pays me” (see Appendix C for materials). Participants in the no endorsement condition, which provided a control, read the other articles, but not the article about the celebrity wearing Slade. After completing a 10-minute, unrelated task, participants rated their impression of the personalities of four brands, including Slade watches, and rated their attitude towards Slade on three 7-point scales anchored by *dislike/like*, *bad/good*, and *favorable/unfavorable* ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

## Results and discussion

A pretest ( $N=65$ ) confirmed the effectiveness of the manipulation. Participants who read the sincere endorsement were less likely to agree that the endorser “wants to make money from the endorsement” and “wants the fame/publicity from the endorsement,” and were more likely to agree that the endorser “personally likes the brand” and “thinks that the brand fits her lifestyle” than participants who read the insincere endorsement (5-point scale; first two items reverse-coded;  $\alpha = .84$ ;  $M_{\text{Sincere}} = 3.60$ ,  $M_{\text{Insincere}} = 1.89$ ;  $F(1, 63) = 114.3$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

We calculated positive meaning transfer by assessing the extent to which the endorsement increased ratings of Slade on fun, young, and sexy ( $\alpha = .75$ ) and calculated negative meaning transfer by assessing the extent to which the endorsement increased ratings of Slade on ditsy and decreased ratings on strong and rugged. Since the three negative traits (reverse-coding “strong” and “rugged”) produced a low reliability ( $\alpha = .66$ ), we analyzed the traits individually as well as in aggregate.<sup>3</sup>

A 3 (endorsement: none, sincere, insincere)  $\times$  2 (trait valence) repeated-measures ANOVA revealed a significant interaction,  $F(2, 100) = 4.17$ ,  $p < .05$ . As in previous studies we assessed meaning transfer by contrasting the means in the endorsement conditions with the means in the no endorsement condition. As expected, negative meaning transferred irrespective of whether the endorsement was sincere ( $M_{\text{NotEndorsed}} = -.94$ ,  $M_{\text{Sincere}} = .29$ ),  $F(1, 100) = 13.5$ ,  $p < .001$ , or insincere ( $M_{\text{Insincere}} = .32$ ),  $F(1, 100) = 15.2$ ,  $p < .001$ . Negative meaning transferred just as much in the insincere as the sincere condition,  $F(1, 100) = .01$ ,  $p > .9$ . Positive meaning, on the other hand, only transferred when the celebrity

<sup>3</sup> For brevity, we report the results of the aggregate tests here since individual traits revealed a similar pattern. See Table 2 for mean ratings of the individual traits.

TABLE 2  
Study 3: Mean trait ratings (SD)

	Trait	No Endorsement	Insincere Endorsement	Sincere Endorsement
<i>Pos. Transfer</i>	Fun	-.74 (1.6)	-.15 (1.6)	.43* (1.6)
	Young	.63 (1.7)	.88 (1.6)	1.6** (1.2)
	Sexy	.74 (1.9)	.80 (1.8)	1.7* (.87)
	Ave Positive	.21 (1.3)	.51 (1.5)	1.2** (.92)
<i>Neg. Transfer</i>	Strong	.89 (1.7)	-.37** (1.8)	.20 (1.7)
	Rugged	-.26 (1.7)	-1.2* (1.8)	-1.3* (1.5)
	Ditsy	-2.2 (.79)	-.61*** (2.0)	-.26*** (2.0)
	Ave Negative <sup>a</sup>	-.94 (.92)	.32*** (1.4)	.29*** (1.4)

<sup>a</sup>Because the endorser lacked the positive traits “rugged” and “strong” we reverse-scored these brand personality ratings to calculate the average negative meaning score for the brand. A higher score indicates that the brand was more similar to the endorser in terms of a negative trait possessed by the endorser (ditsy) and two positive traits lacked by the endorser (strong and rugged).

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Indicates a significant difference from the mean in the “no endorsement” condition.

endorsement was sincere ( $M_{\text{NotEndorsed}} = .21$ ,  $M_{\text{Sincere}} = 1.24$ ),  $F(1, 100)$ ,  $p < .01$ . Positive trait ratings in the insincere endorsement condition ( $M_{\text{Insincere}} = .51$ ) were lower than the ratings in the sincere endorsement condition,  $F(1, 100) = 7.25$ ,  $p < .01$ , and not significantly different than the ratings in the no endorsement condition,  $F(1, 100) = .95$ ,  $p > .3$ . Finally, although a sincere endorsement marginally improved brand attitude ( $M_{\text{NotEndorsed}} = .60$ ,  $M_{\text{Sincere}} = .97$ ),  $F(1, 100) = 3.14$ ,  $p < .10$ , an insincere endorsement did not ( $M_{\text{Insincere}} = .46$ ),  $F(1, 100) = .48$ ,  $p > .4$ .

As in previous studies, the data suggest that brands are more likely to acquire the negative versus the positive meanings associated with a celebrity endorser. In support of hypothesis 3, positive meaning only transferred when the endorsement was sincere; negative meaning, on the other hand, transferred even when the endorsement was insincere.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Celebrity endorsement is a common social influence tactic by which marketers attempt to shape the meaning of their brands and their appeal to consumers. We extend the research on celebrity endorsement and on meaning transfer, both of which tend to focus on positive meaning, to examine the transfer of both positive and negative associations from celebrity endorsers to brands. Although brand managers hire celebrity endorsers in the hope of gaining the positive meanings associated with

the celebrity, we show that brands may also gain the celebrity's less-desirable meanings. Three studies demonstrate that brands are more likely to acquire a celebrity endorser's negative personality traits than positive traits. In study 1 the negative meaning associated with a fictional celebrity endorser transferred to a brand but the positive meaning associated with the endorser did not. In study 2 a familiar celebrity endorser's negative meaning transferred to a congruent brand and an incongruent brand, whereas the celebrity's positive meaning only transferred to a congruent brand. In study 3 the negative meaning associated with a familiar celebrity endorser transferred to a brand even when the endorser did not sincerely like the brand, whereas the positive meaning associated with the endorser only transferred when the endorsement appeared sincere.

### Theoretical implications

Using a fictional and a real celebrity, three studies support the idea that negative associations have particular potency such that they are more likely than positive associations to transfer, even when the product is not a good match with the celebrity or when the endorsement is perceived to be motivated by money rather than brand preference. These findings add to the negativity bias literature, providing an additional domain—transfer of associations—in which the negative has greater weight than the positive. These findings likewise contribute to the literature on endorsements, which typically focuses on when endorsements help brands, rather than on ways that an endorsement could potentially hurt brands (for exceptions, see Louie et al., 2001; Till & Shimp, 1998). Furthermore, our research adds nuance to understanding of meaning transfer by showing that not all types of meaning are equally likely to transfer.

Our research focuses specifically on meaning transfer from celebrity endorsers to endorsed brands. However, given the stronger weight of negative relative to positive across a wide range of domains (Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin & Roysman, 2001), we believe that negative meaning will be more likely to transfer than positive meaning irrespective of the particular type of meaning-carrying entity. Thus brands attempting to build meaning by connecting to another entity, whether through event sponsorship, co-branding, geographic associations, or other sources (Keller, 2003), need to be wary of acquiring negative meaning instead of or in addition to the coveted positive meaning.

### Practical implications

Even popular celebrities, like Madonna (in the late 1980s) and Jessica Simpson (in the mid-2000s) often have both positive and negative associations. Marketers need to recognize that their brands are at least as

likely to gain the negative as the positive associations. One effective strategy could be to employ endorsers who solely have positive meanings. This strategy, however, might be difficult to implement, because the meaning of many celebrities involves negative as well as positive aspects, and even if a brand succeeds in identifying a celebrity with only positive meanings, there is always a chance the celebrity's image will change for the worse (Till & Shimp, 1998). This leads some marketers to a second strategy of using a fictional celebrity, such as Garfield or Charlie Brown, whose image is unlikely to change. However, it can be difficult to find even fictional celebrities who only possess positive traits. For example, although they are both lovable, Garfield may also seem lazy and Charlie Brown may also seem wimpy. A third strategy could be to select an endorser whose negative meanings are inconsequential or unlikely to tarnish the brand. For example, although a lack of ruggedness may be damaging to a truck brand, it seems less likely to harm a fabric softener brand. A fourth strategy is to bolster the positive meanings and inhibit the negative meanings associated with a celebrity endorser by including other people, objects, contexts, and copy in marketing communications that share the positive but not the negative meanings with the endorser (McCracken, 1989). Another strategy is to develop a fictional brand character whose meaning the brand can carefully shape. However, even fictional characters may inadvertently transfer negative meanings. For example, some consumers might perceive the Pillsbury Doughboy to be lazy or the Geiko Gecko snooty. Whichever endorsement strategy a brand selects, it is important for marketers to recognize that endorsers often have negative as well as positive associations and that these negative meanings readily transfer to the endorsed brand.

### Limitations and opportunities for future research

An important goal for future research is to obtain better understanding of why negative meaning transfers more easily than positive meaning and how this impacts social influence. The literature on impression formation suggests that negative information is often more potent because it is typically more diagnostic than positive information (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Because marketers take great efforts to consistently pair their brands with positive information, associations between a brand and negative information may be more salient and seem more informative and, consequently, may transfer more readily to the brand than positive information. Another possibility is that negative information transfers more readily than positive because consumers are more likely to discount or resist positive brand meanings. Consumers possess persuasion knowledge, which they sometimes use to resist unwanted marketing influence (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Friedstad & Wright, 1994). Negative meanings may

transfer more easily to a brand than positive because consumers are less likely to be skeptical and resistant to the former. Consistent with this hypothesis, the only condition in our studies in which an endorsement increased positive meanings as readily as negative meanings (study 3 in the “sincere endorsement” condition) was also the only condition unlikely to arouse participants’ persuasion knowledge.

Additionally, it is important to understand both the boundary conditions and the downstream consequences of the documented asymmetry in positive and negative associations. If a difference in potency between negative and positive associations is driving the effect, then increasing the potency of positive meaning should improve the likelihood that positive traits transfer, even under difficult conditions such as low congruency. Conversely, if the effect is due to consumers being more likely to discount positive rather than negative brand information, then interfering with consumers’ persuasion knowledge should increase the transfer of positive traits. Another important investigation for future research is to increase our understanding of the extent to which the documented asymmetry in meaning transfer influences overall brand attitude and sales.

Another important direction for future research is to better understand the extent to which meaning transfer requires effortful processing. Some literature shows that cognitive involvement often facilitates inference making (Kardes, 1988), and several researchers have suggested that meaning transfer requires involvement and effortful inference (Batra & Homer, 2004; McQuarrie & Mick 1992; Scott, 1994). Other literature shows that associative learning can occur automatically (Olsen & Fazio, 2001; Sweldens, Van Osselaer, & Janiszewski, 2010), and recent research suggests that consumers infer brand meaning unconsciously (Galli & Gorn, 2011). The field would benefit from a better understanding of the interplay between controlled, effortful processing and meaning transfer. More generally, marketers need to acknowledge the entire bundle of meanings associated with an entity and recognize that the desired meanings are not necessarily the ones most likely to transfer to the brand.

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## APPENDIX A: STUDY 1 MATERIALS

### Endorser/Positive information first

Young Austrian phenom, Bernhard Davos, has taken the cycling world by storm. He has done increasingly well in the last two seasons, overtaking a number of veteran cyclists. His time of nine minutes and 12 seconds for the first stage of the Tour de Suisse was a record for the race. Some praise Davos. Defending champion Roman Kreuziger recently said, “He is a brilliant cyclist; he is smart and very knowledgeable.” Others, however, wonder whether he will be able to keep up his performance. A writer for a European sports magazine said, “Davos can do well if he can keep his ego in check. He’s a smart guy, but he’s also full of himself and not much of a team player.”

Slade, a watch brand, recently signed Davos as a spokesperson for the European market. Davos will be present to unveil a new ad campaign for Slade in Paris this coming weekend. “We are expecting about five hundred fans to come see Bernhard show off the new campaign and the newest line of Slade watches,” says Michael Sporott, the VP of marketing for Slade.

Slade has been producing watches since 1988. With its outstanding technological capabilities and design advances, Slade produces watches known for functional superiority and cutting-edge designs. Slade has done very well as a niche watchmaker in the last 10 years and now is poised to establish itself as a major player in the accessories market.

## Endorser/Negative information first

Young Austrian phenom, Bernhard Davos, has taken the cycling world by storm. He has done increasingly well in the last two seasons, overtaking a number of veteran cyclists. His time of nine minutes and 12 seconds for the first stage of the Tour de Suisse was a record for the race. Some wonder whether he will be able to keep up his performance. A writer for a European sports magazine said, “Davos can do well if he can keep his ego in check. He’s a smart guy, but he’s also full of himself and not much of a team player.” Others, however, praise Davos. Defending champion Roman Kreuziger recently said, “He is a brilliant cyclist; he is smart and very knowledgeable.”

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## Control

Slade has been producing watches since 1988. With its outstanding technological capabilities and design advances, Slade produces watches known for functional superiority and cutting-edge designs. Slade has done very well as a niche watchmaker in the last 10 years and now is poised to establish itself as a major player in the accessories market.

## APPENDIX B: STUDY 2 MATERIALS

### Article 1 (same for everyone)

Sometimes, just sometimes, someone comes up with a really great new product, one that actually lives up to all the hype. That’s how we feel about the new Adidas 1 Basketball shoe. It makes a crazy claim—that it senses an athlete’s needs and automatically adapts to them—and then actually backs it up. Using a magnetic sensor in the heel, the shoe measures your foot’s compression and relays that information to a tiny computer embedded in the arch. The processor, which takes one thousand readings per second, then instructs the heel to adjust its cushioning according to your playing style. So, if you are a lumbering, Shaq-like center who needs more cushioning for rebounds, the Adidas 1 will soften. If you’re more of an Iverson, varying

your heel pressure as you cut through defensive zones, it firms up. In other words, this shoe helps your game.

## Article 2 (varied by condition)

### *Endorser/Congruent*

In hopes of establishing itself as a major player in the market, Slade is promoting its new watch line with celebrity endorsers. The watch brand recently signed [name of celebrity endorser described in the text] as their new spokesperson. [The endorser] will appear in a series of advertisements for Slade's latest watch model. When asked if Slade watches would become this season's hottest accessory, [the endorser] answered, "I don't know, I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

### *Endorser/Incongruent*

In hopes of establishing itself as a major player in the market, Slade is promoting its new pocketknife line with celebrity endorsers. The pocketknife brand recently signed [name of the endorser] as their new spokesperson. [The endorser] will appear in a series of advertisements for Slade's latest knife model. When asked if Slade pocketknives would become this season's hottest accessory, [the endorser] answered, "I don't know, I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

### *Clothing control*

In hopes of establishing itself as a major player in the apparel market, Collier is promoting its new leather jackets/trench coats with celebrity endorsers. The coat brand recently signed [name of the endorser] as their new spokesperson. [The endorser] will appear in a series of advertisements for Collier leather jackets/trench coats. When asked if Collier would become part of this season's hottest outfit, [the endorser] answered, "I don't know, I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

### *Snack control*

In hopes of establishing itself as a popular snack, Toba beef jerky/chocolate is relying on promotions from celebrity endorsers. The beef jerky/chocolate brand recently signed [name of the endorser] as their newest spokesperson. [The endorser] will appear in a series of advertisements for Toba. When asked if Toba would become America's favorite snack, [the endorser] answered, "I don't know, I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

### Article 3 (same for everyone)

At a recent event in London, Renee Zellweger showed off her figure in a stunning backless Carolina Herrera dress. It was impossible not to notice her as she looked coyly over her shoulder at the cameras while walking the red carpet. Since then, the plunging back line has been showing up Stateside on everyone from Amanda Hearst to artist Hope Atherton and actress Maggie Gyllenhaal. The allure of a backless dress is always striking and seductive, no matter what the season.

## APPENDIX C: STUDY 3 MATERIALS

### Article 1

This was the same as study 2.

### Article 2

This varied by condition/not included in the no endorsement condition.

#### *Sincere endorsement*

The new Slade watch line has been appearing on famous wrists all over Hollywood. When seen relaxing in Malibu last week, [name of endorser] was spotted with a new Slade watch. When asked if Slade watches would be this season's hottest timepiece, [the endorser] answered, "I don't know about that – I just think that the watch is right for me."

#### *Insincere endorsement*

The new Slade watch line has been appearing on famous wrists all over Hollywood. When seen relaxing in Malibu last week, [name of endorser] was spotted with a new Slade watch. When asked if Slade watches would be this season's hottest timepiece, [the endorser] answered, "I don't know about that – I don't even like the watch. I only wear it because Slade pays me."

#### *No endorsement*

Participants in this condition only read articles 1 and 3 from Study 2.

### Article 3

This was the same as "Article 3" in Study 2; called "Article 2" in the no endorsement condition.