The Appeal of Moderate Incongruence: Investigating the Impact of Product-Celebrity Mismatch on Consumer Intentions

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Abstract

Brands constantly use celebrities for their endorsements. However, which celebrity to choose is a crucial issue for the effectiveness of marketing campaigns. Extant research, focused on the "match-up hypothesis", which suggests a perfect match between the brand and the endorser on several dimensions, among which the attractivity dimension is particularly recurring, has recently been challenged as a result of multiple doubts about its real impact.

This study provides new insights showing that a maximum level of congruence is not always optimal for brands, as other factors, such as the category of the brand or the advertising format, can impact this choice. A 2x2x2 between-subjects design experiment involving 417 participants revealed that a "moderate mismatch" in the attractiveness between product and celebrity positively affects purchase intention more than a perfect match between product and celebrity. The effect is fully mediated by attitude toward the advertising, whose relationship with fit between the product and the celebrity is negatively moderated by whether the product belongs to a luxury vs. non-luxury brand (irrespective of the adv format utilized). This study advances extant knowledge in celebrity endorsements literature bringing to light new evidence related to choosing the "right" celebrity and the factors that should guide the choice and opens new avenues of investigations on the development of unifying theories on the "match-up" factor and its application into other domains (e.g. influencer marketing). Furthermore, it offers novel insights to marketers interested in utilizing endorsers in their advertising and in optimizing the choice of celebrities by organizations based on the fit with the product.

Keywords: celebrity endorsements, match-up hypothesis, luxury brands, advertising

Introduction

Celebrity endorsement has always been a widely used practice by organizations, even recently. According to a Kantar research (2021), celebrities feature in 16% of ads worldwide. Despite the steady increase recorded over the past years (Erdogan 1999; Pringle & Binet, 2005), its effectiveness is decreasing, when compared to other forms of endorsement. Knoll & Matthes (2017) show in a meta-analysis that celebrity endorsements performed worse compared to endorsements of quality seals, awards, or endorser brands. Furthermore, the choice of celebrities is increasingly becoming replaced by content creators and influencers, even micro or virtual (Gräve & Bartsch, 2021; Kim & Park, 2024). As budget invested is high, and with ever more new forms of initiatives to make value available to the consumer (Giorgino & Mazzù, 2024), it is mandatory then both for managers and researchers to overcome the current lack of clarity in what is truly driving effectiveness. In this regard, Jain & Roy (2016), summarized the most important research in: the study of the effects of credibility on consumers (Ohanian, 1990; Goldsmith et al., 2000), the "Meaning Transfer Model" (MTM) (McCracken, 1989; Langmeyer & Walker, 1991) and the "Match-up Hypothesis" (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Misra & Beatty, 1990). The latter has proved to be prominent among others, stating that a congruence between

the celebrity and the product can lead to better results in terms of endorser effectiveness. With specific attention to the dimensions of the match, while Kahle and Homer (1985) focused on physical attractiveness and likability of celebrities, Misra and Beatty (1990) focused on the perceived fit between the brand's image and the celebrity's image (i.e., relevant characteristics, as seen by consumers). As reported by Wang and Scheinbaum (2017): "attractiveness implies one's outward appearance". Attractiveness involves someone who is perceived as beautiful, elegant, or classy (McCracken, 1989; Ohanian, 1990; Amos et al., 2008). In addition, it stems from how one is familiar or pleasant. With specific reference to celebrities, an attractive celebrity is able to positively impact brand attitude and purchase intention (Kahle and Homer, 1985). Attractiveness was also used as a match-up factor by Lee & Thorson (2008). Given the broad academic relevance of the attractiveness factor, this study also focuses on this one as the main dimension of the match-up.

Despite several developments, relevant divergent evidence (Lee & Thorson, 2008; Törn, 2012) in recent years emerged, raising several questions about the broader applicability of the match-up paradigm and factors that may influence its practical effectiveness: what degree of congruence between product and celebrity is actually generating the highest impact? Should the degree of congruence be chosen regardless of the type of brand considered? And regardless of how will the endorsement initiative be shared?

Overall, by providing a deeper understanding of the "moderate mismatch" between product and celebrity, our study contributes to the extant literature on celebrity endorsement and match-up hypothesis (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Misra & Beatty, 1990), clarifying the possibility of utilizing moderately incongruent celebrity to promote products and brands. The research also open new avenues of research on the necessity of investigating how celebrities should be selected based on the level of match with the brand. Furthermore, our research offers valuable insights to managers involved in the evaluation of different celebrity profiles for their product category, linking to the campaign goals and their type of brand.

The reminder of the paper is structured as follows: after conducting a literature review, the paper clarifies methodology and results of this work and the academic and managerial contributions, including a "Celebrity Fit Framework" aimed at optimizing the choice of celebrities by organizations based on fit with the product.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The development of the so-called "Match-up Hypothesis" (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Misra & Beatty, 1990), in support of a 'match' between product and celebrity in celebrity endorsements has seen relevant developments since its conceptualization. Misra & Beatty (1990) first brought up important results in support of the concept. Kamins (1990) carried out a test supporting the attractive aspect of the "match-up", founding that using a physically attractive celebrity for an attractiveness-related product enhances spokesperson credibility and ad attitudes significantly more than using a physically unattractive celebrity. Srivastava & Arora (2014), instead, innovatively categorized several different conceptions of the match-up hypothesis into two categories: "relevancy between an endorser-product and "schema-based expectancy of the endorsement". The first category is connected to how relevant the image of a celebrity is to that of the product; the second one is connected to the consumer's expectations on the match

88 between product and celebrity. However, despite the wide diffusion of the match-up hypothesis,
89 scholars highlighted several problems, mainly consisting in the lack of criticism on the degree
90 of congruence between the celebrity and the product: when it comes to congruence, there is in
91 fact no further exploration of different forms and degrees of congruence and their possible
92 impact. Representative of this perspective is the study of Lee & Thorson (2008), which follows
93 Lane's (2000) definition of incongruence. Their research, which saw the schema-congruity
94 framework (Mandler, 2014; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989) as a fundamental theoretical basis,
95 was based on the test of three different levels of match between product and celebrity: complete
96 match, moderate mismatch, and extreme mismatch (illustrated in Fig. 1).

Type of match (on the attractiveness factor)	Explanation of match	Examples
Complete match	The image of the product is perceived by the consumer as perfectly congruent with that of the celebrity	George Clooney and a cologne; Daniel Craig for Aston Martin
Moderate mismatch	There is a moderate element of discordance between perceived product image and perceived celebrity image	George Clooney and a candy bar; Timothée Chalamet for Chanel
Complete mismatch	The celebrity and product duo are regarded as completely misaligned and discordant	George Clooney and a vacuum cleaner; Kim Kardashian for Charmin

97 Fig. 1. Levels of match between product and celebrity.

98   Results showed that celebrity endorsements are evaluated more favorably in terms of purchase
99   intention when there is a moderate mismatch than when there is either a complete match or an
100 extreme mismatch. Subsequently, Törn (2012) demonstrated that selecting a brand-incongruent
101 endorser improves communication effects, like longer ad viewing times, higher brand attitudes
102 and brand interest, higher purchase intentions, and more positive word-of-mouth
103 communication. Finally, the study by Harmon-Kizer (2014) highlighted that, in terms of
104 celebrity-branded products, lower levels of congruence between the celebrity's image and the
105 brand's image lead to greater advertising effectiveness compared to higher levels of congruence,
106 in the case of brands created by two celebrities: Taylor Swift and Paris Hilton.

107 When it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of a celebrity endorsement, there are several
108 factors to look at and to which, therefore, the study of the consequences of the application of
109 the match-up hypothesis is related. Knoll & Matthes (2016) grouped them into cognitive,
110 affective, and behavioral. The behavioral ones also include the purchasing behavior of a product
111 (Kamins & Gupta, 1994). Moreover, as reported by Bergkvist & Zhou (2016), despite much
112 research has focused on the ability of celebrity endorsement to generate purchase intentions,
113 there is still no univocal support for the greater effectiveness of the match-up hypothesis, and
114 therefore of the congruence between products and celebrities, in stimulating consumer
115 purchases. Of course, there are additional elements and outcomes that should be taken into
116 account when choosing a celebrity endorser. Indeed, while purchase intention may be the

preferred outcome in the short term, in the long term several considerations may be included in terms of brand personality (Zamudio, 2016; Ambroise et al., 2014) and brand identity (Centeno & Wang, 2017). From this conflicting evidence regarding purchase intention, we derive our first hypothesis:

H1: a moderate mismatch between celebrity and product in a celebrity endorsement has a more positive effect on purchase intention than a perfect match.

Although the ability to generate purchase intention is relevant for companies, identifying the factors mediating the relationship between a mismatch and purchase intention is crucial to building the right initiatives. It is in this sense that attitude toward advertising comes into play. Mitchell & Olson (1981) introduced the concept, in the context of a mediating relationship between the effects of advertising content and brand attitudes. Shimp (1981) introduced the attitude toward the advertisement approach, explaining its relevance as a mediator of brand choice. Furthermore, MacKenzie et al. (1986) showed how attitude toward the advertising influences brand attitude both directly and indirectly. Seiler & Kucza (2017) brought to light further confirmation of the positive effect of product fit (in this case between the type of testimonial, expert, celebrity, and type of product) on attitude toward the advertising, also capable of influencing attitude toward the brand and the purchase intention. On the other hand, Törn (2012) reported contrasting results with what has just been stated.
In line with the results identified, we expect that attitude toward the advertising can positively mediate the effect of moderate mismatch on purchase intention. Formally:

H2: the attitude toward the advertising mediates the relationship between the mismatch and purchase intention.

In addition to the main effect and the mediation relationship, other influencing factors should be considered. Specifically, first, consumers do not relate to all brand categories in the same way. Especially when the perspective is represented by the comparison between luxury and non-luxury brands (Cheah et al., 2015; Hennigs et al., 2013). Narrowing the spectrum of analysis to celebrity endorsements, several studies have focused on possible differences between luxury and non-luxury brands. The results of Park & Yim (2020) showed that celebrity endorsements are more effective than noncelebrity endorsements only in attitudes toward advertisements, but not in brand luxuriousness, brand attitudes, and purchase intention. Furthermore, if ad viewers intend to purchase high-end luxury brands, they could prioritize the brand's meaning, identity, and value over celebrity endorsements (Vigneron & Johnson 2004). Therefore, loaded with a strong heritage of values, luxury brands could benefit more from a mismatch between product and celebrity, compared to brands that are not luxury. Formally we project that:

H3: luxury brand (vs. non-luxury) has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between mismatch and attitude towards advertising.

In addition to this factor, the different mediums on which advertising is disseminated also differ in characteristics and consumer responses. Curana et al. (2022) showed how, generally, television advertising greatly influences purchasing decisions compared to Instagram social

161 media for a new product. De Pelsmacker et al. (2002) showed how, in a television context,
162 advertising content and brand recall were positively influenced by a positively appreciated
163 context. However, social media, on the other hand, holds unique characteristics relating to
164 content consumption and how consumers relate to celebrities: social media have a crucial
165 entertainment component (Arli, 2017), on social media content that evokes high-arousal
166 positive (awe) or negative (anger or anxiety) emotions is more viral (Berger & Milkman, 2012),
167 and consumers know more about celebrities with online content, increasing the consumers'
168 feeling of knowing them better (Wood & Burkhalter, 2014). Therefore, we hypothesize that a
169 mismatch on social media could have greater effects than one on television. Formally:
170
171 **H4**: the relationship between mismatch and attitude toward the advertising is positive and
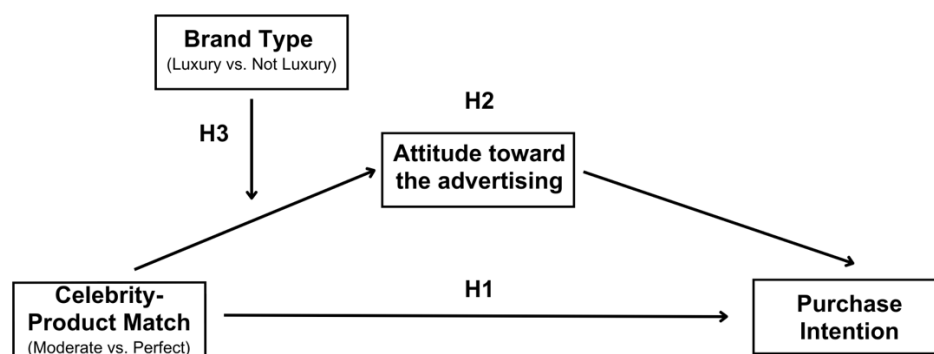172 stronger for social media advertisements than in a television commercial.
173

174
175
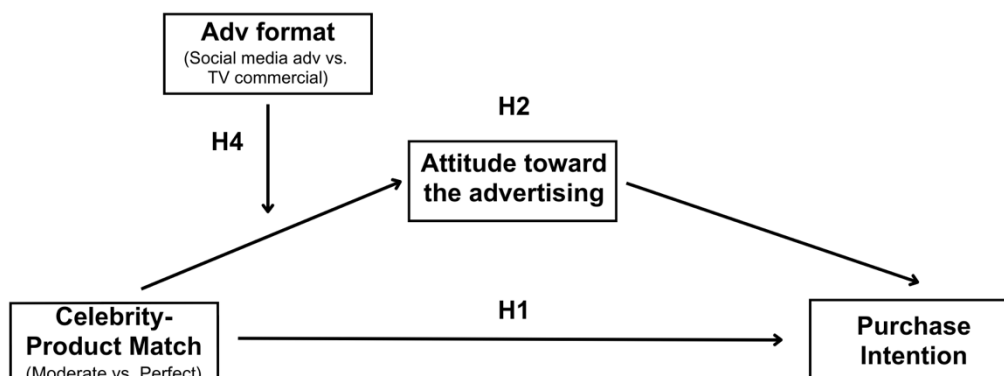176 Fig. 2a. Conceptual model of mediated moderation in presence of Brand type.
177

178
179
180 Fig. 2b. Conceptual model of mediated moderation in presence of Adv format.
181
182 *Methods and Materials*
183 **Pretest**
184 Before conducting the main study, a pilot study was made to test the perceived difference
185 between a moderate and a high fit condition between the celebrity and the sponsored product.

186 We utilized a set of pre-tested stimuli by Lee & Thorson (2008) in terms of celebrity (George
187 Clooney) and product categories (a candy bar for moderate mismatch, and a cologne for perfect
188 match). The results from a survey involving 43 Italian participants confirmed the result of the
189 previous study (the average perceived fit was $M_{candy\ bar}$=4.05; SD=1.56 vs. $M_{cologne}$ =7.46;
190 SD=1.46, with difference significantly perceived (t(42) = -10.25, p<0.001).
191
192 **Main Study**
193 **Participants**
194 Data were collected in Italy, the UK, and the US, with the Prolific platform, a trustworthy online
195 platform for data collection (Palan & Schitter, 2018). In Italy consumers have become indeed
196 increasingly sophisticated and attentive in evaluating products over time (Porter, 1990). On the
197 other hand, the US and UK are geographical areas belonging to different continents where the
198 relevance of celebrity endorsements is high and widespread. A total of 450 participants took
199 part in the study, with N=417 answers were used for the final analysis (33 were incorrect or
200 missing).
201
202 **Research Design and Stimulus Materials**
203 The study employs a 2 (celebrity-product match: moderate vs. perfect) x 2 (brand type: luxury
204 vs. non-luxury) x 2 (adv format: social advertisement vs. TV commercial) factorial between-
205 subjects design. Eight different stimuli were produced, in which George Clooney was flanked
206 by four different brands: Twix (moderate match, non-luxury), Fabelle (moderate match,
207 luxury), Calvin Klein (perfect match, non-luxury), Prada (perfect match, luxury). In addition,
208 each version was presented in two different versions: a screenshot of a TV commercial, and an
209 Instagram post. The manipulations of product type (luxury vs. non-luxury) and ad format (social
210 vs. TV) were not pre-tested.
211
212 *Findings*
213 First, we tested the effect of the moderate mismatch (conditions: 1=fit, N=194 vs. 0=no fit,
214 N=223), compared to the perfect match between product and celebrity, on purchase intention
215 (H1). An independent samples t-test revealed that there is indeed a significant effect
216 (t(414.09)=-3.51, p<0.001) of the 'fit' condition on purchase intention, with a higher mean for
217 the 'no fit' condition (M=3.11, SD=1.63) than for the perfect march condition (M=2.57,
218 SD=1.49). Subsequently, we moved on to the analysis of mediation and moderation. For these,
219 we used Hayes PROCESS macro (Model 7) conducting two different analyses for the two
220 moderators respectively.
221 The analysis concerning the luxury moderator (conditions: 1=luxury vs. 0=no luxury) revealed
222 that, first of all (H2), the celebrity-product match has a significant and positive effect on the
223 attitude towards advertising (b=0.56, p=0.003). The effect of attitude towards advertising on
224 purchase intention is also positive and significant (b=0.66, p=0.000. The effect of the perfect
225 match on purchase intention is also significant but negative (b=-0.72, p=0.00). The results of
226 the moderated mediation regarding the luxury variable showed that attitude toward the
227 advertising fully mediated (H3) the effect of the moderate mismatch on purchase intention
228 (index=-0.41, 95% C.I. = [-0.75, -0.06]). The analysis revealed that, furthermore, the
229 moderating effect of the luxury factor on the relationship between match and attitude toward

230 the advertisement is significant, but negative (b=-0.612, p=0.024). Moreover, specifically
231 looking at the conditional effects of the focal predictor on the moderator values, a significant
232 moderation effect can only be observed in the non-luxury condition (b=0.56, p=0.003) and not
233 in the luxury condition (b=-0.051, p=0.80). Finally, the analysis concerning the format factor
234 (H4) revealed that the effects considering this variable were not significant, making it
235 impossible to state the existence of the related relationships.

General Discussion

238 In this study, we tried to confirm divergent evidence related to the "match-up hypothesis" and
239 investigate further factors involved in the effectiveness of the endorsement by a celebrity, such
240 as the fact that it involves a luxury brand or the advertising format (social vs. TV). Furthermore,
241 we tried to understand where this effect might come from. The results of a survey involving
242 more than 400 consumers in Italy, the UK, and the US, effectively confirm that a moderate
243 mismatch between celebrity and product has a more positive effect on purchase intention than
244 a perfect match (namely in the case of George Clooney who sponsors a candy bar instead of a
245 cologne). Furthermore, this relationship is fully mediated by the attitude toward the advertising,
246 which, however, is higher in the case of a fit condition. It is possible (and future research may
247 explore this further) that this effect is explained by the possibility of attracting more attention
248 from a moderate mismatch, compared to a perfect match, without however negatively
249 disappointing consumers' expectations.
250 Despite the advertising format did not show a significant effect on the relationship between
251 mismatch and attitude towards the advertising, luxury moderated the relationship, "reversing
252 its sign". In fact, when we are in the presence of a celebrity who sponsors a luxury product, a
253 condition of perfect match between the two leads to a negative effect on the attitude towards
254 the advertising, unlike what happens with products not made by luxury brands.

Limitations, Theoretical and Managerial Contributions

257 Our research presents some limitations. First of all, although the results confirm the
258 hypothesized main effect, our study only takes into account the variable of purchase intention,
259 not evaluating the effects of the choice of a celebrity "in mismatch" with the product on further
260 factors and dimensions more oriented to the long term. Moreover, of the two moderators
261 included in the conceptual model, only one (the type of brand) showed a significant effect,
262 suggesting the possibility of further variables influencing the relationship between the match
263 and the attitude toward advertising. Furthermore, factors influencing the relationship between
264 celebrity-product mismatch and purchase intention should also be included in the analysis, to
265 capture other potential influences on purchase intention and offer even more broad-spectrum
266 insights to researchers and managers. Finally, our sample consists only of European and
267 American participants, with the absence of people from other countries or cultures. The
268 participation of people from, for example, Asia or the Middle East could provide further useful
269 results and give greater validity to what emerges from our research. These limitations offer
270 promising avenues to advance future research on product-celebrity mismatch in celebrity
271 endorsements.
272 The results of this research bring with them several relevant contributions to academic research,
273 providing further evidence to support the generalization of a positive effect on purchase

intention of a condition of (moderate) mismatch between celebrity and product in a celebrity endorsement and showing evidence of a mediation relationship already hypothesized in the literature. Furthermore, to our knowledge, this is the first study that attempted to investigate the differences in the effect of fit in celebrity endorsements for luxury and non-luxury brands, and also the interaction between fit and format condition.

Our study also brings several insights for managerial practice too. First, we highlight how the perfect match between celebrity and product category is not always preferable in advertising. Although this consideration should, of course, also take into account long-term outcomes related to the brand's identity and personality, in generating greater purchase intention our results show the possibility of a moderate mismatch being more effective. Furthermore, we show how the choice of a celebrity for a celebrity endorsement should also take into account the type of brand. For some brands, in fact, their type could have an effect on attitude, and it should be further evaluated how this could impact brand performance.

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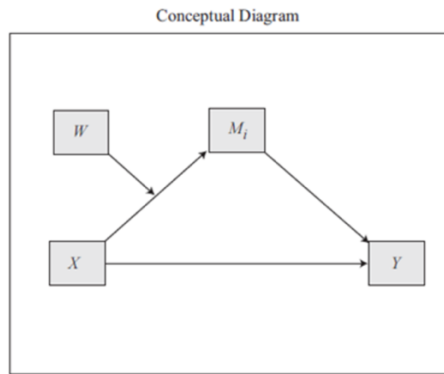
Appendix 1

Conceptual Diagram

Image of Process Model 7.

Appendix 2

As an additional element of analysis to provide further managerial utility to our results, we built a "Celebrity Fit Framework" aimed at optimizing the choice of celebrities regarding the "fit" factor. The first two steps derive from managerial practice: companies usually select possible celebrities to use, reducing the initial choice for internal evaluations. Steps three and four instead derive from the results of this research. In fact, the company will have to implement an objective evaluation of the fit between product and celebrity through various tools, to make the most of the positive effects of a moderate mismatch. This will lead to the elimination of 'unmoderated mismatches': thanks also to the insights deriving from Lee & Thorson, (2008) corroborated by this research, and by the parameters evaluated in relation to attractiveness, it is clear that complete or strong mismatches should not be considered, and therefore eliminated from the choice pool. Finally, the company will implement an analysis for the final choice also based on managerial practices and evaluations which, however, will be informed by insights from scientific research. In case the company is unable to decide between two final celebrities (moderate mismatch and complete match ones) it could perform a final test to try to predict purchase intentions. Below we briefly explain the phases of the process:

1. **Initial celebrities pool**: at this stage, the organization has a series of names in mind;
2. **Pool of a few selected celebrities**: for strategic, operational, and/or economic reasons there is a significant reduction of celebrities, who now constitute a very limited pool;
3. **Evaluation of fit with the product**: in this phase, the company evaluates the few remaining celebrities and their fit with the product. This includes the definition of the variables on which the match should be assessed. It is advisable to use tools that reduce personal judgment as much as possible;
4. **Elimination of 'unmoderated' mismatches**: celebrities who are completely 'mismatched' from the categories should be eliminated from the pool of choices;
5. **Analysis for final choice**: once the preferable options for the initiative have been defined, several factors and strategic, economic and communication reasons should be taken into account for the final decision. Precisely, particular attention should be given to: economic feasibility (therefore the budget possibilities and terms of agreement with the celebrity); competitive feasibility (the possible use of the same celebrity or similar

celebrities by competitors); reputational feasibility (however suitable a celebrity may be, the risks associated with the actions in real life must be taken into account);

6. **Final choice**: once the advertising campaign has been developed and released, the outcome relating to the celebrity should be carefully analyzed, to verify that the expectations have been respected and possibly detect best practices or errors to be corrected for future campaigns.

7. **Feedback loop**: at the end of the process, insights regarding the effectiveness, the actual ex-post evaluation of the product-celebrity match, the returns on brand equity and the economic ones should be collected, reworked and shared. These insights can in fact inform corrective actions to improve the outcomes of future projects.

Celebrity Fit Framework

7) Feedback Loop

1) Initial celebrities pool

Reduction for strategic and/or economic reason

2) Pool of a few selected celebrities → 3) Evaluation of fit with the product (consumer tests, perceptual maps) → 4) Elimination of unmoderated mismatches (preference for moderate mismatches) → 5) Analysis for final choice on strategic, economic and communication reasons

6) Final choice ← Possible comparison between final celebrities (perfect vs. moderate fit)