

Celebrity Endorsements in Japan and the United States: Is Negative Information All That Harmful?

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"Perfect [endorsers] without flaws may warm the heart of the brand manager, but they tend to leave audiences cold. If you want your [endorser] to connect, give him some problems, preferably the self-inflicted kind."

-Brandweek (Lanahan, 2003)

The rapid advance of media technology and its expanding reach have elevated celebrities and the products they endorse to an unprecedented level of worldwide recognition. Celebrities' product endorsements transcend national borders and flow both from the United States to other countries as well as from other countries to the United States. The percentage of commercials worldwide featuring a celebrity has doubled in the last 10 years to about 17 percent (White, 2004). In the United States alone, the use of celebrities in advertisements has increased from 10 to 25 percent over the last decade, according to another estimate (Stafford, Spears, and Hsu, 2003). Even the ubiquitous American infomercial has adopted the practice of using celebrity endorsers, with growing frequency and apparent effectiveness (Martin, Bhimiy, and Agee, 2002).

Of course, except for cartoon characters and posthumous celebrities, advertisers cannot control the personal lives of their endorsers, and negative publicity surfaces on occasion in the lives of some. The two-edged sword of positive and negative information about a celebrity endorser has been explored mostly from the positive side, which has a well-established literature (e.g., Agrawal and Kamakura, 1995; Mathur, Mathur, and Rangan, 1997; Silvera and Austad, 2004). Damage to product reputation as a function of negative celebrity information emerging after an endorsement relation has been established represents a provocative area of inquiry for advertising researchers but has received limited attention (for exceptions, see Louie, Kulik, and Johnson, 2001; Till and Shimp, 1998). Considered in context of practical brand equity considerations, researchers might contemplate the potential effects on endorsed products resulting from the moral, ethical, and legal problems in which celebrity endorsers sometimes find themselves.

We investigate the effect of negative celebrity endorser information in a comparative study between Japan and the United States. Japan presents interesting cultural differences with the United States and is home to the world's second largest economy—one that makes extensive use of celebrity endorsements (Kilburn, 1998). Our study examines the influence of type of negative information about a celebrity in the context of the cultural dimension of individualism/collectivism (Hofstede, 2001). The type of information manipulation is that of self-oriented (deleterious behavior affecting only the celebrity him/herself) versus other-oriented (the behavior harms other people in its wake), as moderated by consumers' cultural background (collectivist Japanese versus individualist Americans).

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Celebrity endorsements have been a prominent procedure in advertising for years, though this practice has not been extensively examined by advertising scholars or earned illuminating theoretical accounts (McCracken, 2005). While the positive aspect of celebrity endorsements has received quite a bit of attention from advertising researchers, the negative side of endorsements—or what happens to an endorsed brand when the celebrity endorser for that brand tarnishes his or her public image—has been virtually ignored. This is surprising given the huge stakes at risk by advertisers, apparently highlighted by the extensive media coverage of endorser indiscretions, with much accompanying coverage of sponsor and/or consumer responses to the bad behavior.

Negative celebrity information

As Miciak and Shanklin (1994) point out, "Erratic behavior that offends customers is too much of a risk for a company to hazard.... This is the greatest fear of execs involved in advertising and almost impossible to control." Nevertheless, celebrity endorsers are widely used in advertising even in view of the reality that negative information about celebrities is rather commonplace and seems to be increasing. Although there have been numerous examples in the past of celebrity endorsers for whom negative information may have adversely affected the products they endorsed (e.g., Michael Jackson, Mike Tyson, O. J. Simpson), the present discussion is restricted to current examples. For example, NBA players' public image problems reportedly led to a 33 percent drop in NBA apparel sales from 2004–2005, presumably linked at least partially to indiscretions such as Carmelo Anthony's much-publicized gang-related music DVD entitled *Stop Snitching*, which intimidated witness against testifying in drug cases (Kang and Pereira, 2005), and to Kobe Bryant's rape trial. McDonald's and Nutella both dropped Bryant from their roster of celebrity endorsers after his arrest, although Nike did not sever the \$45 million agreement signed with Bryant just before his indictment. Supermodel Kate Moss was unceremoniously dumped from endorsement

contracts with Chanel and Burberry following allegations that she used cocaine (Wall Street Journal Online, 2005). Terrell Owens' endorsement potential took a dramatic nosedive after he engaged in a series of outrageous and immature off-field behaviors while a member of the Philadelphia Eagles' football team (Janoff, 2005).

The consumer and social psychology literature has formed a basis of knowledge about negative information in general. For example, Ito, Larsen, Smith, and Cacioppo (1998) demonstrated that negative information tends to be evaluated more strongly than comparably extreme positive information. This evaluation tends to occur early in the evaluation process, as people start to categorize products into classes. Negative information gets more attention, processing, and impact than positive information depending on which type of information is presented first and which is less expected (Smith and Petty, 1996). At its extreme, negative information is evaluated more negatively than moderately evaluated information (Wojciszke, Bryce, and Borkebau, 1993), and in long-term memory, negative information is better remembered than neutral information (Kensinger and Corkin, 2003). Negative behavior in celebrities attracts more attention, is better encoded, and is more easily recalled than positive information (Folkes, 1988; Ybarra and Stephan, 1996), although commitment of the consumer toward the brand moderates the effect of negative information about the endorser (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava, 2000).

Langmeyer and Shank (1993) found that a negative opinion about a celebrity led to negative perceptions about a nonprofit agency the celebrity endorsed. Till and Shimp (1998) used an associative network framing in their experimental research and discovered that the size of the associative sets (basically how much information is known) for both the celebrity and the brand, as well as timing of the negative information and the strength of the link between the brand and the celebrity all influenced the impact of negative information on brand evaluations. Louie, Kulik, and Johnson (2001) determined that stock prices decline when negative publicity reaches the media about a celebrity who endorses one of the company's brands. Although some evidence exists that positive information about a brand can reverse some of the damage caused by negative information (Butler and Berry, 2002), most research shows it is extremely difficult to refurbish a celebrity endorser's public image once it has been tarnished (Poniewozik, 2005).

On the basis of this growing literature, we expect that consumers will view products less positively when exposed to negative information about a product's celebrity endorser. Hypothesis H1 formalizes this straightforward prediction in terms of the experimental procedures employed in this research:

H1: Respondents who are exposed to negative information about a celebrity endorser will form less favorable judgments of a new brand versus respondents exposed to equivalent advertising but who are not subsequently exposed to negative information about the brand's celebrity endorser.

The role of national culture

The role of national culture in influencing consumer judgments and choice behavior is a rapidly emerging area of research focus. Some of this research has drawn upon the five dimensions of national culture developed by Hofstede (2001) and colleagues (e.g., Hofstede and Bond, 1988). We focus on the individualism/collectivism dimension in developing an argument as to why Japanese and American consumers may be differentially affected by the type of negative information that afflicts a celebrity after a product endorsement relationship has been established. Japanese and American cultures reveal wide disparity in Hofstede's index scores for individualism, the United States being the most individualistic of any country in his study and Japan being significantly more collectivist.

Advertising in Japan.

Differences between Japanese and American advertising are well documented. Japanese advertising is rich in symbolism compared to relatively more information-based American advertising (Lin and Salwen, 1995). This advertising orientation is consistent with Japan's "high context" culture, where between-the-lines communication by innuendo is more valued than in the "low context" U.S. culture where explicit communication is more the norm (Hall and Hall, 1987).

Celebrity endorsements are extremely popular in Japan. Seventy percent of all Japanese commercials feature a celebrity, and 90 percent of advertisements that Japanese consumers rate as likable, popular, or memorable feature a celebrity (Kilburn, 1998). Another reason that endorsers are so prevalent in Japan's advertising is that Japanese are especially receptive to advertising messages that convey a sense of trust (Melville, 1999). Endorsements by celebrities from the United States have become more prevalent in Japan, as doing endorsements is losing its once powerful stigma to a celebrity's career (White, 2004).

The collectivist other versus self-moderator.

We expect the Japanese consumer to be more sensitive to negative celebrity endorser information than Americans, not only because endorsements are more pervasive in Japanese advertising, but also because of the collectivist nature of the Japanese society. Markus and Kitayama (1991) found that in Japanese culture, formation of self-image is based on the interconnectedness of people, fitting in, and interdependence with others. Americans, on the other hand, express self-concept by discovering and highlighting their differences with others. Positive emotions are more closely associated with interpersonally engaged feelings (e.g., friendliness, associated with collectivism) for Japanese, but with disengaged emotions (e.g., pride, associated with individualism) for Americans (Kitayama, Markus, and Kurokawa, 2000). Regarding negative information specifically, in situations of success or failure, Americans' self-image is based on self-enhancement, for the good of the individual, whereas Japanese are more likely to engage in self-criticism, showing how their actions hurt the collective good (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, and Norasakkunkit, 1997).

Thus, the same Japanese youth who prefer celebrity endorsements in advertising exhibit, according to sociological studies, more of a group consciousness than American and British youth (Kawasaki, 1994). The American social system relies on the concept of legal guilt to enforce its social code; the Japanese rely on shame, a group-oriented concept. This might explain why Japan only has 17,000 licensed attorneys compared with 900,000 in the United States (Bremner, 1999). In our study, we predict that national culture will moderate the relationship between negative information and brand evaluations; that is, the collectivism of the Japanese culture will augment (vis-à-vis American

individualism) the effect of negative endorser information on product evaluations.

We specifically expect that for the Japanese other-oriented negative information, or that which has implications for the social collective, will be more damaging to brand evaluations than self-oriented negative information that damages only the celebrity. For example, if a Japanese celebrity does something that brings shame or hurt upon a group or those close to him (e.g., arrested for drunk driving much to the shame of his family), then the Japanese would be expected to judge the celebrity's endorsed brand more harshly than if he or she did something to only disgrace himself or herself (arrested for drunk driving but no close family or friends seem to be embarrassed by it). These expectations are stated formally as Hypotheses H2a and H2b:

H2a: For Japanese consumers, other-oriented negative information about a celebrity (versus self-oriented) will result in less favorable evaluations of a new brand that is endorsed by the celebrity.

H2b: For American consumers, there will be little, if any, difference between self- and other-oriented negative information on product evaluations.

In other words, the type of negative celebrity information (self- or other-oriented) will little matter to American consumers, who are not expected to be differentially sensitive to one form of negative information over the other. By comparison, we anticipate Japanese consumers to be especially sensitive to other-oriented negative information due to the collectivist nature of Japanese society. Stated alternatively, Hypotheses H2a and H2b predict an interaction effect between national culture (collectivist Japan versus individualist America) and type of negative information (self- versus other-oriented) in determining consumer evaluations of a new product that is linked to a celebrity who subsequently is besmirched with negative information.

COMPARATIVE STUDY

Methods

We conducted experiments in Japan and the United States to test these hypotheses. The between-participants design involves a 2 (national culture: collectivist Japan versus individualist United States) × 3 (information type: self-oriented negative information about a celebrity endorser, other-oriented negative information, and a no negative information control).

Choice of celebrities.

In doing research of this type there are merits to using a fictitious celebrity to minimize prior exposure to and perceptions about real celebrities and their endorsement relations (cf. Till and Shimp, 1998). On the other hand, using actual celebrities in a study lends a sense of realism in examining the effects under consideration, as studies have demonstrated (Kamins, 1990; Walker, Langmeyer, and Langmeyer, 1992).

We chose to use actual celebrities who possessed widespread appeal. It is important to note that we decided that motion picture stars would generate the most interest (versus pop singers, athletes, or other celebrities) among participants of both genders and in both countries. Motion picture stars were deemed appropriate to the study because, in additional consideration of gender bias, sports figures and pop musicians tend to hold greater popularity among one gender (particularly professional sports figures for males) or the other. Movie stars, on the other hand, often hold equal or near-equal sway for both genders because blockbuster movies are promoted heavily in the general population. Moreover, it is expected that greater equality exists between male and female fans for the movie star category of entertainer when compared to the other forms of entertainers.

Celebrity movie actors were selected and pretested in two stages. In the first stage, eight stars (Ben Affleck, George Clooney, Tom Cruise, Matt Damon, Leo DiCaprio, Harrison Ford, Keanu Reeves, and Denzel Washington) were pretested by presenting 110 undergraduate students at a large U.S. university (mean age 20.6 and 53 percent male) with the name and photo of each celebrity on a separate page. To prevent order effects, reverse orderings of the celebrities were randomly distributed to students. A 6-item instrument asked respondents to rate the celebrities on dimensions of likeability and approachability (e.g., "[Name of celebrity] is one of my favorites"; "If it were possible, I would like to have [name of celebrity] as a personal friend"; "If [name of celebrity] starred in a movie, I would see it as soon as possible."). Two well-known celebrities were selected from this group of eight famous Hollywood stars. Although actual names and photos were used in the study, because fictitious negative information was presented to study participants, we choose not to publicly disclose the names of the two celebrities but will simply refer to them hereafter as C1 and C2. Importantly, both of these celebrities are well known in Japan and have achieved superstardom status in that country as well as in the United States.

A second stage of pretesting was designed to establish that the two celebrities were basically equivalent in terms of how subsequent research participants would react to negative information that would be experimentally implanted. A sample of 158 students from the same university was confronted with negative information for either C1 or C2:

"Suppose, for the purpose of this question, that you learn that a celebrity who endorses one of your favorite brands is a drug abuser. In particular, this celebrity is a long-time user of cocaine. Let's be more specific: Assume that you learn that C1 [or C2] is a cocaine user and that he has been endorsing one of your favorite brands."

Respondents then reacted to four 7-point rating scales in a strongly agree to strongly disagree format: (1) I would immediately stop using the brand endorsed by [name of celebrity]; (2) I would not feel good about using the brand, but I would continue buying it; (3) I would continue buying the brand and feel good about my decision; (4) Whatever [name of celebrity] does in his private life is irrelevant to what brands I choose to buy.

Results from this second stage of pretesting indicated that no significant differences existed in participants' perceptions of the two

celebrities in terms of how the students would respond to negative information about either celebrity. None of the between-celebrity comparisons was statistically significant. It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that the two celebrities are essentially equivalent in terms of how college-aged students respond to negative (drug abuse) information about them.

Thus, for purposes of generalization, we used both of these celebrities as endorsers for the experimental product that is next described. Finally, it is critical to note that special debriefing efforts were undertaken at the end of the experiments in Japan and in the United States to make it abundantly clear to respondents that the reports of negative information were fabricated for purposes of the study.

Choice of product.

To eliminate the prospect of prior familiarity with and stored attitudes toward existing brands and products, a fictitious product was created for experimental purposes with designs on it being experimentally meaningful to respondents. After discussions conducted with about 40 students in Japan and the United States, it was determined that a high-tech electronic device would be appropriate for the study because a new technical electronic product might likely be targeted to and hold interest for college-aged students. Also, as demonstrated in previous celebrity endorser research (Walker, Langmeyer, and Langmeyer, 1992), consistency between an endorser's image and the desired product image may be more important for a technical product than for a commodity.

The product ultimately chosen was a computer the size and configuration of a writing tablet, larger and more powerful than current PDAs. Named WebPad for experimental purposes, the device was equipped with handwriting-recognition software, a wireless telecommunications connection to the internet, and a port to download information to a desktop. A prototype in development had been discussed in the popular business press at the time the study was conducted, but the product had not yet been introduced to the market.

Participants, procedures, and measures.

Participants were recruited from undergraduate business classes in major public universities in the United States and Japan. Although a convenience sample of student participants, they were deemed appropriate for the study because they were representative of the target segment for the product category used in the experimental research (Ferber, 1977). That is, the fictitious WebPad was a high-tech, electronic device, related to the internet, targeted to younger consumers in their 20s who are familiar with and utilize such products.

A drawing in each country among participants to win one of four \$50 cash prizes was used as incentive. Full data were obtained from 249 respondents from Japan (20.5 average age, 66.7 percent male) and 222 from the United States (20.8 average age, 43.5 percent male). Experimental sessions were run in small groups ranging from one to nine participants per session. The experimenter in Japan adhered to a very strict protocol, under the supervision of a Japanese professor who is a coauthor of this article, such that the experiment in Japan was conducted exactly as it was in the United States.

Students were informed at the outset that they were participating in an "Advertising Study" under the ruse that an advertising agency and its research group were soliciting feedback from consumers in the college-age target on early-stage advertisements "that might eventually appear in magazines." Participants were further informed that their task was to provide "thoughtful and honest evaluations of these advertisements and of the advertised products." They then were exposed to an advertisement for the target product, under the brand name WebPad, in which either celebrity C1 or C2 endorsed the product.

As shown in the Appendix, the mock magazine advertisement presented a prominent image of the WebPad and provided necessary product information. The headline stated rhetorically: "Got lots of places to be, things to do, but hate lugging the laptop?" This was followed by a statement that the WebPad is "A note pad and computer in one!" Displayed at the bottom of the advertisement was a prominent photo of either C1 or C2, and alongside the celebrity was a statement used to implicitly rationalize the celebrity endorsement as well as provide product usage information. It declared that "Everybody, even Hollywood's hottest, needs help getting and giving information-email, the best web sites, jotting notes. Here's the power of a PC with the simplicity of a note pad!" Following in quotes was an explicit endorsement by either C1 or C2: "Perfect for my needs" (signed C1 or C2).

To reduce the effect of hypothesis guessing and the prospect of demand bias, a celebrity endorsement of a second nontarget product (a camcorder) was included in the advertising-research booklet presented to participants. This product was endorsed by the other celebrity, either C1 or C2, who, for a particular participant, did not endorse the target WebPad. In other words, if a participant was randomly assigned to the WebPad-C1 condition, he or she then was assigned to the camcorder-C2 combination. Order of product presentation was counterbalanced.

Following exposure to the advertisements, respondents were informed that they would be presented with "some current and pertinent information about the two celebrities who endorsed the products in the advertisements that you viewed several minutes ago." A separate page for each celebrity then presented pertinent information such as personal interests and past movie credits. A concluding paragraph on this page manipulated the form of negative information as follows:

Self-oriented negative information: A little known fact about [name of celebrity]-because his agent has been able to prevent the media from reporting this news-is that he has a history of drug abuse and at times during his career has been a regular cocaine user. This has caused him considerable pain and anguish, but he mostly has been able to conceal the problem from close friends and family.

Other-oriented negative information: A little known fact about [name of celebrity]-because his agent has been able to prevent the media from reporting this news-is that he has a history of drug abuse and at times during his career has been a regular cocaine user. This has caused considerable pain and anguish for his family and close friends.

No negative information: A little known fact about [name of celebrity]-because his agent has been able to prevent the media from reporting this news-is that he was not a very good student and often cut classes.

The narrative about the celebrity was followed by three- and five-item Likert scales to measure celebrity attractiveness (he is attractive,

classy, sexy) and trustworthiness (he is dependable, honest, reliable, sincere, trustworthy; Ohanian, 1990). The purpose of these measures was to establish that the two forms of negative information (self- versus other-oriented) did not result in differential perceptions of the celebrity endorsers. Results revealed, in fact, no significant differences between the celebrities and the two negative information conditions on either the attractiveness or trustworthiness measure (both F values < 1 for both celebrities). Next, respondents completed a three-item measure of their evaluation of the WebPad product on 9-point bipolar scales (strongly dislike/strongly like, unfavorable/favorable, negative/positive). They also completed a purchase intention measure worded as follows: "If the WebPad were available at a local retail outlet and you had the income to afford it, what are the chances that you would purchase it?" Response options ranged in 10 percent increments from "No chance at all" (0 percent) to "Definitely would" (100 percent).

Demographic information was then collected, and an open-ended question to gauge hypothesis guessing was posed. A participant was deemed to have guessed the hypothesis if he or she could correctly identify the study's purpose of evaluating the effects of negative celebrity endorser information on product ratings. Not a single student identified the specific research hypothesis, which thus removes demand artifact as an alternative account for our results. Finally, participants were aggressively debriefed about the fictitious nature of the celebrity's drug abuse problem.

Results

We focus the presentation only on purchase intentions as the sole dependent variable in view of the fact that the correlation between product attitudes and intentions was high ($r = .67$, $p < .01$) and because intentions reflect greater commitment on the part of respondents toward the advertised product insofar as they would need to expend effort and resources to acquire it. Initial analyses established that the results were essentially equivalent regardless of which of the celebrities endorsed the experimental product. The data accordingly were pooled across the two celebrities for analysis purposes.

A 2 (country) \times 3 (negative information) ANOVA revealed significant main effects for both country ($F_{1,465} = 31.81$, $p = .000$) and negative information conditions ($F_{2,465} = 4.99$, $p = .007$), but no significant interaction effect obtained ($F_{2,465} < 1$). In support of these statistical values, the means in Table 1 reveal that the significant, but uninteresting, country effect is merely due to the fact that Japanese respondents were less positively inclined toward the WebPad, perhaps because they are more technologically sophisticated and already better equipped for internet usage than their American counterparts.

Data in Table 1 also make it clear why a significant negative information effect materialized. In particular, both Japanese and American students who were exposed to the self-oriented negative celebrity information condition manifest stronger purchase intentions than did respondents in either of the other two information conditions. Post-hoc contrasts reveal significant differences between the self-oriented and no negative information conditions (Scheffe $p = .016$), between the self- and other-oriented conditions ($p = .035$), but not between the no negative information and other-oriented conditions ($p = .99$).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

These results fail to support the hypothesis (H1) that predicted that negative information about a celebrity who endorses a new brand would mitigate judgments of that brand. Moreover, the results do not comport with the moderation effect proposed in the form of Hypotheses H2a and H2b. In particular, the same pattern of effects was manifest with both Japanese and American participants rather than revealing a significant interaction effect between country and negative information conditions as predicted based on cultural-orientation differences between these two countries.

Especially intriguing in our findings is the pattern of results revealing that research participants both in Japan and the United States manifested stronger intentions to purchase the celebrity endorsed WebPad product after being exposed to self-oriented negative celebrity information compared to participants who were presented with other-oriented negative information and even those participants who received no negative information about the celebrity (the control group). Intentions to purchase the experimental product among participants in the self-oriented negative information group not only did not suffer from the negative information but, to the contrary, appeared to benefit from this form of negative information about a celebrity endorser. It is surprising, on the one hand, that respondents in the other-oriented group did not have significantly less favorable attitudes than those in the no negative information group. Even more unexpected is the fact that self-oriented negative information produced an augmentation (rather than the expected mitigation) effect on purchase intentions vis-à-vis the control group.

The role of sympathy and related emotions

The augmentation impact of self-oriented negative information suggests that participants in Japan as well as in the United States experienced something akin to a sympathy effect in learning that the well-known and much admired celebrities who endorsed the experimental product had experienced a misfortune that affected but apparently did not destroy their personal and professional lives. The role that sympathy and its emotion cousin, empathy, play in advertising is not well known, and advertising research examining these related emotions is in its infancy, though it has been established that both sympathetic and empathic reactions to dramatic TV commercials play a role in how such commercials affect viewers' attitudes toward advertised brands (Escalas and Stern, 2003). As applied to our research, it is reasonable to deduce that many of the research participants felt sympathy for the celebrity endorsers who were described as having problems with illicit drug usage. This is to say that our participants likely identified with the celebrity's feelings upon becoming aware of his circumstances, which is the essence of sympathy (Wispe, 1986).

Sympathy and empathy are emotions related to the more general notion of forgiveness, which provides one way for people to cope with the stressful state of unforgiveness. Forgiveness has been defined as an emotional juxtaposition of positive emotions (e.g., sympathy and empathy) that serves as a coping strategy against the negative emotion of unforgiveness, which itself results when individuals experience an interpersonal transgression (Worthington and Scherer, 2004). Related to our research, it is reasonable to assume, though we have not empirically established this prospect, that our participants, upon learning of the celebrity's drug-related problem, may have felt transgressed against-i.e., someone they liked and respected, perhaps for years, had violated their tacit trust in him by being exposed as a

longstanding cocaine abuser. Because unforgiveness is stressful, forgiveness, as manifest via sympathetic and empathic emotions, is a way to reduce the stress. We conjecture that our participants experienced a degree of stress and dealt with it by manifesting sympathy toward the cocaine-using celebrity endorser. Hence, in comparison to the control group that received no negative information about the celebrity endorser, participants in the negative information groups, especially the self-oriented group, may have become even more positive toward the celebrity due to experiencing sympathy for his plight. The new brand that he endorsed thus suffered no decrement in evaluations but rather was appraised more positively, vis-à-vis the control group, which resulted in more favorable purchase intentions toward the product that he endorsed. Sympathy for a besmirched endorser is a likely emotional response in a world where celebrity worship is widespread (McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran, 2002) and where it seems that celebrity indiscretions are commonplace and perhaps even perceived among faithful admirers as enviable.

Suspension of the fundamental attribution tendency

Our results are ever the more interesting in view of knowledge about how people typically make causal attributions. In particular, the fundamental attribution error (FAE) (Ross, 1977) theorizes that individuals are overly inclined to attribute another person's problems or faults to his or her dispositional traits (e.g., he is weak person who lacks the willpower to avoid succumbing to drug usage) and to underestimate the effect of situational factors (e.g., environmental influences) in determining that behavior.

Our findings suggest that the FAE was suspended and that participants exposed to the self-oriented form of negative information attributed the celebrities' drug usage not to dispositional deficiencies but to a situational cause. Rather than committing the fundamental attribution error, it is likely that college-aged individuals—certainly not all, but many—may be inclined to attribute drug use among Hollywood stars not to their personal character shortcomings but to environmental pressures, group norms, and other situational factors that justify behaviors that, in other milieus, would be regarded as unacceptable. This being the case, situational (rather than dispositional) attributions for a celebrity's negative behaviors may effectively serve to insulate the individual from the negative, dispositional-based attributions that are the basis for most ordinary causal attributions. Although drug usage by common citizens is typically viewed as a stigma and a sin (Weiner, 2004), actors, other entertainers, and models may get a pass, so to speak, from the attribution of fault and thus may be less damaged by negative news than would ordinary citizens.

Practical advertising implications

This research thus suggests that all negative information is not equally negative and that celebrities may be somewhat protected from negativity perceptions due to the suspension of the typical dispositional-based attribution to which more common people are subjected. In a reverse-English sort of fashion, celebrities' images may actually benefit, rather than suffer, from some forms of negative press—namely, those behaviors that are perceived as being beyond their control and which may generate sympathetic emotions among celebrity worshippers rather than contempt.

Whereas advertising practitioners typically drop a celebrity from a brand-endorsement contract at the slightest hint of negative news—the "hot-potato" effect, so to speak—our results suggest that this may not be necessary. If a celebrity endorser is perceived not at fault, then the negative evaluative conditioning feared by brand managers and their advertising agencies—i.e., that an association with a tarnished celebrity will reverberate negatively to the endorsed brand—may not be justified. A Kate Moss may not at all be damaged goods among those consumers who attribute her cocaine snorting to the pressures of a model's life and feel sympathy for her problem.

More research obviously is needed before these tentative ideas can be confirmed, but we think we offer an empirical finding that warrants further discussion and additional empirical inquiry. Most of all, advertising practitioners may need to reappraise whether summarily dumping a successful endorser is always justified when negative news about that endorser surfaces. Rather than being a "hot potato" in the negative sense of that expression, a besmirched celebrity may simply be hot—not a liability for an endorsed brand but perhaps even an asset.

BIOGRAPHIES

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APPENDIX

Advertising Stimulus Shown to Participants

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