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## When endorsers behave badly: consumer self-expression and negative meaning transfer

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### ABSTRACT

How do consumers adjust their public and private self-expression through a brand when an endorser attached to the brand gets involved in a scandal? Building on the theory of meaning transfer and congruity theory, the authors propose and demonstrate that in contrast to the extant literature, negative meaning transfer prevails over the high self-brand congruity barriers that managers attempt to build by employing endorsers to transfer positive meanings to their brands. Using three pre-studies and three experiments involving fictitious and real-life celebrities, the authors demonstrate that the effect of negative meaning transfer on consumers' self-expression in public and private domain and brand attitude becomes more prominent with increasing self-brand congruity and endorser-self congruity. Additionally, negative meaning transfer becomes more pronounced for a celebrity endorser compared to an expert and a celebrity-expert combined endorser. The findings offer novel implications for endorser selection and meaning transfer for marketing campaigns and brand management.

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## Introduction

It is well established that consumers integrate brand meanings into their self-identity (Escalas and Bettman 2005; Song and Kim 2020) and use them for self-expression in public and private domain (Tian et al. 2021). Endorsers, in this regard, have become an integral part of today's brand management campaigns, transferring positive meanings onto the endorsed brand and increased purchase likelihood (for a review see, Bergkvist and Zhou 2016). However, recent research on celebrity endorsement reports conflicting results on consumers' behavioral intentions. For instance, some indicate the strength of endorsers in influencing market and consumer decision making (Knittel and Stango 2014; Schimmelpfennig and Hunt 2020), while others question the use and impact of endorsers altogether (Amos, Holmes, and Strutton 2008; Bartz,

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Molchanov, and Stork 2013). Further, the increasing use of endorsers has also brought to light negative information about many globally known endorsers, including Ellen DeGeneres, Kevin Spacey, Ben Affleck and Tiger Woods, among others. Hence, the effect of this negative information on consumers' self-expression through the endorsed brand remains unknown. For example, after Hollywood actress Lea Michele's recent allegations of racism and on-set bullying appeared, brands such as HelloFresh terminated the endorsement contract in fear of a tarnished brand image. However, despite the late controversies about Johnny Depp's alleged incidents of violent domestic abuse, luxury brands such as Dior continued its relationship with Depp expecting no harm. On the other hand, while Kellogg's withdrew financial support from Michael Phelps after a photo surfaced of him smoking marijuana went viral, Visa publicly supported him and some other companies stayed silent. With these decidedly mixed corporate reactions, managers have little guidance regarding the best course of action when negative meaning transfer occurs.

Prior research on meaning transfer theory (McCracken 1989) provides rich insights into how positive celebrity endorser image gets transferred from celebrity to a product and eventually to consumers (Amos, Holmes, and Strutton 2008; Bergkvist and Zhou 2016; Knoll and Matthes 2017). However, negative meaning transfer warrants further investigation due to decidedly mixed results that show both positive and negative effects (Biswas, Biswas, and Das 2006; Dens and De Pelsmacker 2016; Knittel and Stango 2014; Um and Kim 2016). We tackle three specific questions in this regard. First, we examine how the process of negative meaning transfer can significantly influence consumers' self-expression through the endorsed brand in the public and private domain. Second, using congruity theory and the contrasting evidence from self-brand congruity and endorser-self congruity (Escalas and Bettman 2005; Park et al. 2010) together with negativity bias literature (Baumeister et al. 2001; Ito et al. 1998; Shi, Zhang, and Wu 2020), we investigate an important question, whether stronger self-brand congruity and endorser-self congruity can act as barrier to negative meaning transfer? Third, research on endorser effects has concentrated on a narrow definition of a celebrity such as movie stars or sports personalities. Using a broader definition proposed by McCracken (1989, 310) that defines an endorser "as any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement", we extend the current domain of endorsement literature by capturing the influence of three endorser types (i.e., celebrities, experts and combined celebrity-experts) on negative meaning transfer. We provide the first empirical test of this later implication of McCracken's (1989) view.

We use three experiments involving fictitious and real celebrities and contribute to the congruity theory and the literature on meaning transfer and negativity bias in several ways. Our results reveal that consumers start dissociating themselves with the brand when negative information about its endorser becomes public and self-brand congruity does not act as a barrier to negative meaning transfer. Contrary to existing belief, we also show that consumers with higher endorser-self congruity experience a greater decrease in self-expression through the endorsed brand. By integrating the strength of these relationships, we present a better understanding of the ties and processes in the transfer of negative meanings. Additionally, by examining the impact

of different endorser types we offer comprehensive empirical support to the notion of negative meaning transfer.

## Theoretical background

### *Meaning transfer, self-expression and self-brand congruity*

Globally, endorsements have become an important tool for marketers in grabbing consumers' attention, creating brand image and increasing sales (Bergkvist and Zhou 2016). However, the value of this marketing technique depends on the meanings the endorser brings to the endorsement process. McCracken (1989) opines that endorsers deliver meanings with exceptional depth and power drawing from the roles they assume in their careers. Meaning is something resident in the culturally constituted world and moves from the endorser to consumer goods when promoting the product (Tian et al. 2021). Consumers are constantly looking for goods with useful meanings (Escalas and Bettman 2005) to furnish certain aspects of their self and the world through possession and in turn satisfy psychological needs, such as differentiating oneself from others, asserting one's individuality or creating and expressing self-identity. Brands in general and especially endorsed brands with their meaning associations help consumers express their identity in public and private domains significantly.

Public meanings relate to the subjective meanings assigned to an object by outside observers (Richins 1994; Chernev, Hamilton, and Gal 2011). Although outside observers are likely to differ, members of social subgroups are likely to agree on some aspects of an object's meaning. These agreed-upon elements of meaning constitute the object's shared public meanings. Private meaning, on the other hand, represents the sum of the subjective meanings that object holds for a particular individual such as personal value of specific gifts (Richins 1994). Public and private meanings are also likely to differ in their spheres of influence. Because of the consensual nature of public meanings, they influence the kinds of possessions that people choose to communicate aspects of themselves to others. Private meanings, however, are more important in determining consumers' feelings about the things they already possess. Thus, in the public domain, brand associated meanings can assist consumers in expressing their fitting-in and standing-out behaviors (Escalas and Bettman 2005). For the private domain, brand associated meanings can assist consumers in establishing and conforming their identity of who they are to themselves (Chernev, Hamilton, and Gal 2011). Recent research indicates that consumers construct self-identity and present themselves to others through their brand choices based on their own self-brand congruity (Khalifa and Shukla 2021).

Congruence can be defined as "the similarity (the 'match' or 'mismatch') between the symbolic attributes of the product/brand and self-concept of the individual" (Parker 2009, p. 175). The stronger the congruence between a perceived brand personality, perceived endorser personality and consumers' own personalities, the more likely they are to consume that brand (Aaker 1997; Bergkvist and Zhou 2016). Self-congruity theory postulates that consumers seek and buy brands that they perceive to be congruent with their own self-concept (Sirgy 1982, 2018). Furthermore, they build self-brand congruity by integrating brands into their own self-concept in order to

express, affirm, or enhance their selves (Escalas and Bettman 2005). That is, when brands are seen as self-congruent, their consumption serves the symbolic function of self-expression. Similarly, consumers also attempt to establish or maintain their identity in congruence with endorsers (Biswas, Biswas, and Das 2006). In an endorsement context, congruity is driven by a balance between the endorser, brand and the consumers (McCracken 1989). Thus, for a consumer to be influenced by an endorser there has to be significant congruity between the brand and the consumer (i.e. self-brand congruity), the endorser and the brand (established by the advertiser); the endorser and the consumer (i.e. endorser-self congruity).

While endorsers bring lots of benefits to a brand (Schimmelpfennig and Hunt 2020), many endorsers have been found to be involved in socially non-acceptable behavior. Hence, we ask what happens when endorsers get involved in scandals and how does negative meaning transfer influence consumer self-expression through the endorsed brand? Research suggest that endorser scandals show inconclusive and mixed evidence of either a significant negative effect (Knittel and Stango 2014), or a positive effect (Louie, Kulik, and Jacobson 2001). For example, estimating the stock market effect of the Tiger Woods' scandal, Knittel and Stango (2014) found that the full portfolio of sponsoring brands lost more than 2% of market value resulting in negative brand equity and asset values. On the other hand, Louie, Kulik, and Jacobson (2001) argue that for low-culpability events, the increased visibility generated by an undesirable event enhances endorsers' effectiveness. Similarly, Um and Kim (2016) show that consumers with higher level of brand commitment resist negative celebrity information and continue with their prior behavioral intentions. However, despite these mixed results, and the recent call to study celebrity transgressions, empirical studies are scant (for a review, see Bergkvist and Zhou 2016). In addition, very few studies have empirically tested the transferring mechanism and effects of celebrity meanings through an experimental design that validates causality (Tian et al. 2021). Hence, meaning transfer remains a topic that demands more empirical testing and exploration (Bergkvist and Zhou 2016). In view of these mixed findings, the present study tries to reconcile different endorser-product situations while using experimental designs that validate causality.

### ***Endorsement usage and negative information***

Celebrity endorsement has been one of the most popular advertising and marketing strategies worldwide (Knoll and Matthes 2017). Much of the academic literature suggests that 25%-30% of all advertising uses celebrity endorsement (Schimmelpfennig and Hunt 2020). Furthermore, recent reports (Statista 2017) found that 16 percent of all internet users worldwide aged 16 to 24-years old discovered new brands through celebrity endorsements. In addition, even as the pandemic canceled hundreds of sporting events and left pro leagues scrambling, according to Forbes (2021), the world's 50 highest paid athletes made approximately \$2.8 billion in 12 months, and over \$1 billion of that came from endorsement deals and related activities in 2020. Hence, many companies spend a substantial amount of their annual marketing budget on payments to endorsers, as customers tend to perceive endorsed advertisements as more appealing, entertaining, memorable, credible and rate them overall more positively than other advertisements (Kamins and Gupta 1994; Kapitan and Silvera

2016). Moreover, the endorsed brands are better recalled, easier recognized and enjoy higher image awareness which is reflected in a significant increase in building a positive brand attitude and consumer purchase intentions (Amos, Holmes, and Strutton 2008; Knoll and Matthes 2017).

While endorsers present multiple benefits to both consumers and companies however, their use can also create often overlooked risks. For example, endorsers may engage in morally unacceptable behavior, get involved in scandals and once such negative information becomes public they may lose their credibility. Extant research concerning the negativity bias suggests a larger psychological impact of negative information than positive one (Baumeister et al. 2001; Ito et al. 1998). Negative information tends to receive more attention, generates increased physiological arousal, influences impression formation and also has a stronger influence on learning overall (Tian et al. 2021). Besides, the public pays more attention to negative than positive information, because it tends to generate greater physiological arousal and to grow and disseminate at an exponential rate (Baumeister et al. 2001). Thus, negative information about the endorser's socially unacceptable behavior can damage not only the endorser's own reputation, but also the reputation of the endorsed product (Bergkvist and Zhou 2016; Knittel and Stango 2014). Grounded on consumer inference literature, Tian et al. (2021) observed that both positive and negative traits of different valences of celebrities can be transferred to the endorsed brands when brand awareness varies (lesser-known vs. well-known brand). However, there is still not a clear direction as to how negative meaning transfer gets reflected in consumer self-expression.

### ***Self-brand congruity, endorser-self congruity and negative meaning transfer***

Prior literature suggests that when consumers have a positive opinion about a specific endorser, they are likely to have a favorable self-brand congruity with a brand promoted by that endorser (Escalas and Bettman 2005; Schimmelpfennig and Hunt 2020). Especially when the celebrities' personality is congruent with the brand they endorse, the brand is viewed more favorably by the public and used for self-expression in both public and private domains (Bergkvist and Zhou 2016; Um and Kim 2016). Thus, marketing managers select their endorsers with a high congruency not only with the brand but also with the product's target consumer group, as endorser effectiveness is significantly dependent on consumer's positive congruity with the endorsers. This thinking can be explained by Heider's (1946) balance theory and the congruity theory put forward by Osgood and Tannenbaum (1955). Both theories suggest that people prefer harmony, or consistency, in their thoughts and actions. In this regard, a brand promoted by an endorser who is congruent to consumer's self-identity will be readily accepted. This is because an endorser, especially a celebrity endorser, has created an attractive and accomplished self publicly (McCracken 1989). This self, construed by the endorser offers a kind of exemplary, inspirational figure and thus can help consumers in constructing own aspects of their self and their world. For example, if a consumer likes Cristiano Ronaldo and finds him endorsing Nike shoes, then he or she will also have a higher level of self-brand congruity with Nike and therefore express his or her identity using the specific brand in public and private domains. Endorser-self congruity, thus, works as a social influence process that enhances and

strengthens the persuasiveness of individuals such as endorsers on others (Kapitan and Silvera 2016; Knoll and Matthes 2017). We opine that high self-brand congruity and endorser-self congruity supports an effective meaning transfer and integration of these meanings into consumers' self-identity resulting in an enhanced self-expression in private and public domain.

While endorsers bring lots of benefits to a brand (Schimmelpfennig and Hunt 2020), many endorsers have been found to be involved in socially non-acceptable behavior. Hence, we ask what happens when endorsers get involved in scandals and how does negative meaning transfer influence consumer self-expression through the endorsed brand? Research suggest that endorser scandals show inconclusive and mixed evidence of either a significant negative effect (Knittel and Stango 2014), or a positive effect (Louie, Kulik, and Jacobson 2001). For example, estimating the stock market effect of the Tiger Woods' scandal, Knittel and Stango (2014) found that the full portfolio of sponsoring brands lost more than 2% of market value resulting in negative brand equity and asset values. On the other hand, Louie, Kulik, and Jacobson (2001) argue that for low-culpability events, the increased visibility generated by an undesirable event enhances endorsers' effectiveness. Further research on self-brand congruity (Um 2018) has also found that when negative information about an endorser becomes public, consumers with strong self-brand congruity are unlikely to be affected by negative publicity. Similarly, Um and Kim (2016) show that consumers with higher level of brand identification with the endorser also resist negative celebrity information and continue with their prior behavioral intentions while defending the brand. However, despite these mixed results, and the recent call to study celebrity transgressions, empirical studies are scant (for a review, see Bergkvist and Zhou 2016). In addition, very few studies have empirically tested the transferring mechanism and effects of celebrity meanings through an experimental design that validates causality (Tian et al. 2021). In view of these mixed findings, the present study tries to reconcile different endorser-product situations and the negative meaning transfer process.

We posit that the involvement of endorsers in scandals and the connected negative information changes the bundle of meanings that the endorser transfers to the product and consumer (McCracken 1989). The additional unfavorable meanings would create an incongruity with the existing value-system of the consumer and result in lesser identification with the endorser. Congruity theory holds that incongruity (like imbalance) is unpleasant and motivates consumers to change their attitudes (Osgood and Tannenbaum 1955). In the context of negative meaning transfer, we expect the consumers with high self-brand congruity and high endorser-self congruity to react more negatively. This is because a consumer with stronger self-brand congruity and endorser-self congruity will experience higher conflict between the lately tarnished endorser image and their self-image. This may, in turn, influence their overall self-expression in public and private domain significantly. Research on negativity bias also supports our assertion (Baumeister et al. 2001; Ito et al. 1998). Additionally, a similar case is observed in real-life. For example, the world-champion boxer Manny "Pac-Man" Pacquiao, endorsed Nike for nearly a decade. However, when he made homophobic remarks in a TV interview in 2016, they were condemned globally and as a result, consumers shunned Manny on social media wherein his Twitter followers dropped to around 11,000 from over 2 million (Serapio and Lema 2016). Moreover,

Nike also terminated their endorsement deal with Manny. This may happen due to consumers finding a conflict between the endorsers' tarnished image and their self-image, thus rejecting brands endorsed for their self-expression. We further posit that a consumer with low self-brand congruity and low endorser-self congruency will not experience the same intensity of imbalance with the contradictory information to their existing schema and thus may not change their self-expression substantially.

Based on the preceding debate, in this specific case of negative meaning transfer, we propose that both high self-brand congruity and high endorser-self congruity will not act as a significant barrier to negative information. We further posit that the negative endorser information will have a greater negative effect on the endorsed brand and consumer's self-expression for high self-brand congruity and high endorser-self congruity condition rather than low self-brand congruity and low endorser-self congruity. Therefore, we propose that:

Hypothesis 1: In case of negative endorser information, consumers with high (vs. low) self-brand congruity will experience a higher decrease in self-expression in public and private domain and attitude towards the brand.

Hypothesis 2: In case of negative endorser information, consumers with high (vs. low) endorser-self congruity will experience a higher decrease in self-expression in public and private domain and attitude towards the brand.

### ***Endorser type effects***

McCracken (1989) identifies endorsers as compelling partners to the meaning transfer process. However, the processes by which different types of endorsers influence consumer attitude and belief change are likely to be different. While many studies have examined the influence of celebrity and expert endorsers in isolation, differential comparative effects of endorser types on consumer self-expression remain under-explored (Bergkvist and Zhou 2016). We compare the influence of three major types of endorsers: a celebrity endorser, an expert endorser, and a celebrity-expert combined endorser. In addition to the level of endorser-self congruity, we believe that diverse endorser types will activate different information processing. This distinction will arise from the type of social influence process employed in consumer minds relating to different types of endorsers (Kelman 1961). We posit that the effectiveness of expert endorsers stems from a greater agreement and believability of the conveyed meanings through an endorsement and thus leads to a high internalization (Biswas, Biswas, and Das 2006; Zhu, Kim, and Choi 2021). Internalization is the acceptance of an influence which is characterized by a high congruence with the individual's value system and leads to a higher information processing (Kelman 1961). An endorser's credibility in a given area affects their informational influence on consumers and this effect is heightened the more a product fits within an endorser's area of expertise (Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020).

On the other hand, a celebrity endorser is influential in the transference of meanings because people draw these powerful meanings from the roles the celebrities assume (McCracken 1989). This is due to identification process in which individuals accept the opinion of the celebrity and process related information because they desire to be like



the celebrity and therefore beneficially improve their self-concept (Kelman 1961). In case of the combined expert-celebrity endorser consumers might not only be influenced by the celebrity status of the endorser (identification), but also by their profession based expertise (internalization) (Biswas, Biswas, and Das 2006). However, these processes and the comparison of different endorser types in a negative information scenario have remained unexplored in previous studies.

We posit that negative information about endorsers may harm endorser status and therefore decrease consumers' identification with them. In addition, because of the highly diagnostic nature of information processing associated with negative information (Mukherjee and Hoyer 2001), we propose that this will cause celebrity endorsers to be more affected than the other endorser types. This is because they gain their effectiveness predominantly from the roles they assume, which tend to change often (McCracken 1989). Conversely, with an expert endorser and a combined endorser, consumer decision making is more aligned with the profession-based expertise of the endorser, and therefore the non-profession related negative information will have a comparatively lower influence on consumers' self-expression in public and private domain and brand attitudes. Hence, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 3: In case of negative endorser information, the effect of celebrity endorser (vs. expert and combined celebrity-expert endorsers) will be more pronounced on self-expression in public and private domain and brand attitude.

## Overview of studies

We test the preceding predictions in three pretests and three experiments that examine the impact of negative meaning transfer on consumer's self-expression in private and public domain and attitude towards the endorsed brand. We further investigate some of the key moderators of this effect (i.e. self-brand congruity and endorser-self congruity) and offer a further nuanced understanding of this relationship extending prior literature. Study 1 analyzes how consumers react to negative information about an endorser in terms of self-expression and brand attitude, proving that contrary to the existing literature, high self-brand congruity does not act as a significant barrier to negative meaning transfer. Study 2 takes into account the degree of endorser-self congruity and its moderating effect on the relationship between negative endorser information and self-expression in private and public domain as well as brand attitude. We demonstrate that consumers with a higher self-brand congruity and endorser-self congruity show increasing influence of negative meaning transfer in their self-expression and brand attitude. Moreover, study 2 investigates the difference in negative meaning transfer for endorser types. In contrast to the first two experiments, the third study transfers the previously observed results with fictitious brands and endorsers into a real endorsement context and offers a robustness check, highlighting the role of self-brand congruity and endorser-self congruity.

## Study 1

The primary goal of study 1 is to explore the effects of negative information about endorsers on consumers' self-expression in private and public domain and brand

attitudes, distinguishing between consumers with high and low self-brand congruity. We test meaning transfer theory from a negative information processing perspective thereby proving that strength of self-brand congruity may not necessarily act as a barrier for negative information. Thus, we conducted a 2×2 mixed experimental design, with self-brand congruity as the between-subjects factor and before as well as after the scandal information as a within-subject factor.

### ***Choice of celebrity, brand, and congruence***

Endorsers such as celebrities are popular and well known, but people's congruity with them and their likability can vary even in a homogeneous group. Furthermore, some negative information about a real endorser could already exist in participant minds, which may influence the effect of new and subsequent negative information, which we test in this research. To avoid these effects, we created an endorser with an alleged name in studies 1 and 2. In addition, to avoid the bias of prior associations between a real brand and a celebrity, we also created two brands. Three separate pre-studies tested the suitability of the alleged celebrity and brands for the following studies.

### ***Pre-studies***

In pre-study 1 (N=155; ages 17–55, M=25; 42.6% male), participants mainly from the same population as that in the main studies rated 10 different crimes ranging from tax evasion to murder on their perceived severity on a five-point Likert scale. From this procedure, drunk driving (M=3.74) and bodily harm (M=3.85) were considered the most appropriate as they were closest to the mean of all types of crimes. We decided to avoid extreme cases of socially unacceptable behavior (i.e.  $M_{\text{child abuse}} = 4.88$ ,  $M_{\text{murder}} = 4.86$ ,  $M_{\text{rape}} = 4.84$ , etc.) as we wanted to avoid extreme negative associations. Moreover, by using an average level of socially unacceptable behavior (such as drunk driving or bodily harm), our study can also demonstrate that if a comparatively smaller level of negative meaning transfer has a significant effect on self-expression and attitude towards the brand, what extreme negative meaning transfer (such as murder or rape) would expectedly achieve. Hence, we used mean level socially inappropriate behavior in the construction of negative endorser information.

In pre-study 2 (N=100; ages 18–30, M=39; 39% male), participants from a homogeneous group as that in pre-study 1 saw a professionally processed picture of an alleged endorser with an alleged name ("Pierre Bana" – See Web appendix 1). The participants received attribute information about this celebrity that portrayed him as a successful movie star and an active philanthropist. The participants further indicated their familiarity with and perceived attractiveness of the portrayed celebrity through the 7-point attractiveness scale from Ohanian (1990), with –3 to +3 as anchors. Participants rated Pierre Bana as a very attractive (M=2.59) person. None of the participants showed any familiarity with this alleged celebrity. This ensured an empty association set for the endorser and allowed us to manipulate the endorser type and association set in studies 1 and 2.

In pre-study 3 (N=102; ages 18–30, M=40; 39.2% male), participants also saw the endorser picture of Pierre Bana, together with a positively written personal profile. Participants then indicated the perceived likability of Pierre Bana (M=1.69) following Ohanian's (1990) scale. Participants also rated Pierre Bana on his perceived expertise and trustworthiness on four product categories (i.e., running shoes, watches, sports drink and dietary supplements), which we chose in accordance with the latest celebrity endorsements in print advertisements, on ten bipolar seven-point scale items developed by Ohanian (1990). To prevent order effects, we randomly distributed reverse orderings of the product categories to participants. Furthermore, participants indicated the perceived congruency between the created person image and each of the product categories on six nine-point bipolar scale items adopted from Kamins and Gupta (1994). From this pre-test, only the watch and the sports drink were found to be appropriate product categories for the following research and used for studies 1 and 2. The watch was labeled with the brand name EVO® and the sports drink with ISOPOWA®. Pre-study 3 further confirmed the appropriate trustworthiness ( $M_{\text{watch}} = 1.43$ ;  $M_{\text{sports drink}} = 1.15$ ) and expertise ( $M_{\text{watch}} = 1.20$ ;  $M_{\text{sports drink}} = 0.91$ ) of the endorser for these product categories, and the appropriate congruency ( $M_{\text{watch}} = 2.96$ ;  $M_{\text{sports drink}} = 2.60$ ) of the endorser image with these product categories. Therefore, these results support an effective transference of meanings from the endorser to the product and the consumer.

### **Method**

Participants (N=362; ages 18–33, M=23; 53% male) were randomly assigned to one out of four scenarios – 2 group (experimental or control) x 2 product type (watch or sports drink) – and were then presented with a picture and attribute information about the alleged celebrity similar to pre-study 2 (see Web appendix). After reading a description of the endorser and his qualifications as a movie star and an active philanthropist, participants saw either a picture of the endorser with a watch (EVO®) or with a sports drink (ISOPOWA®). The endorser picture was the same as in pre-study 2. Participants also read a description of the product and then answered a series of questions pertaining to their self-expression in the public and private domains and brand attitudes towards the endorsed brands before exposure to the negative endorser information (see Web appendix). To measure self-expression in the public domain ( $\alpha = .92$ ) we used a four item scale with the items “You are afraid that if you buy (EVO®/ISOPOWA®), it may negatively affect what others think of you; You are worried that, if you buy (EVO®/ISOPOWA®), the esteem your family or friends have for you may drop; You think that, if you buy (EVO®/ISOPOWA®), others will not see you the way you want them to; You are afraid that, if you buy (EVO®/ISOPOWA®), others may look down on you” ranging from –3 (strongly agree) to +3 (strongly disagree). Similarly, we measured self-expression in the private domain ( $\alpha = .87$ ) on a four-item scale which included items such as “Buying (EVO®/ISOPOWA®) makes you feel unhappy or frustrated; Buying (EVO®/ISOPOWA®) will make you feel uncomfortable with yourself; (EVO®/ISOPOWA®) does not fit in well with the concept you have of yourself; (EVO®/ISOPOWA®) makes you doubt whether you were right in buying it”, anchored between –3 (strongly agree) to +3 (strongly disagree). Brand attitude ( $\alpha = .94$ ) was measured

using three semantic differential scale items derived from Park et al. (2010), which ranged from  $-5$  to  $+5$  with the following anchors: bad/good, negative/positive and dislike it/like it. Following this, participants received negative information about the endorser which we derived from pre-study 1 in the form of an alleged news article (see Web appendix). The article identified the same endorser accused of drunk driving and causing bodily harm to others. Participants again rated their self-expression in the public ( $\alpha = .97$ ) and private ( $\alpha = .94$ ) domains and brand attitudes ( $\alpha = .96$ ) toward the endorsed brands. Participants in the control groups went through the same procedure without exposure to the scandal article, but with a pause for the average reading time of the article before continuing the experiment. Finally, demographic information was collected. After answering all the questions, participants were asked by the interviewer whether they knew the purpose of the experiment and to name possible proposed hypotheses. We excluded ( $n=2$ ) participants who were knowledgeable about the proposed hypotheses from the analysis to decrease the confounding of results through demand artifacts. At the end of the experiment, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation. We measured self-brand congruity concerning the presented brands in the context of brand attitude ( $\alpha = .96$ ).

## Results

In contrast to the existing theory, we hypothesized that a strong brand will not act as a barrier to negative information. We further expect consumers with greater self-brand congruity to experience both a higher decrease in self-expression in the public and private domain, as well as a reduction in positive brand attitude. A substantial main effect emerged for information type after exposure to negative information on self-expression in the public domain ( $F_{1,258} = 384.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ), in the private domain ( $F_{1,258} = 171.95$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and for brand attitude ( $F_{1,258} = 381.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with both groups showing a decrease in attitude toward the endorsed brand after being exposed to negative information. For the control groups which were not exposed to negative endorser information, no change in the dependent measures was observed, indicating that the celebrity scandal was eligible to change consumers' self-expression and brand attitudes in the experimental groups.

A significant interaction effect was observed for self-expression in the public domain ( $F_{1,258} = 14.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ), private domain ( $F_{1,258} = 6.40$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and for brand attitude ( $F_{1,258} = 28.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ) in the experimental groups. Further noting the power loss that occurs due to median split analysis, we conducted a floodlight analysis (Spiller et al. 2013) to examine the entire range of information type effects and its interaction with self-brand congruity. In essence, this test reveals the results of a spotlight analysis for every value of the self-brand congruity. Such an analysis eliminates the arbitrariness of choosing high and low values such as one standard deviation above and below the mean (Preacher, Curran, and Bauer 2006). When examining the results in further detail (see Figure 1) for self-expression in public domain (Panel A) and in private domain (Panel B) as well as brand attitude (Panel C), the Johnson-Neyman point is observed at the value of  $-2.47$ ,  $-1.78$  and  $-1.40$  ( $p < 0.05$ ) respectively, indicating that the greater the self-brand congruity, the lower the self-expression in public and private domain and brand attitude following negative information. We thus provide evidence for negative meaning transfer.

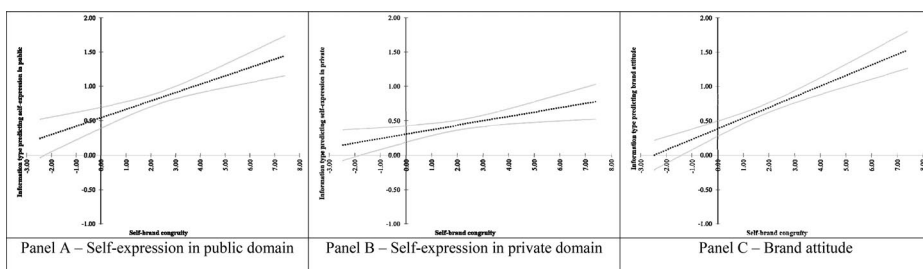
Comparing the two levels of self-brand association congruity in the experimental groups for self-expression in the private domain, the results demonstrate a significant between-group effect ( $F_{1,258} = 17.71, p < .001$ ), which results in a stronger decrease in case of high ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -1.12$ ) compared to low ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -0.76$ ) self-brand congruity. We also found a significant between group effect for brand attitude ( $F_{1,258} = 147.25, p < .001$ ) with a stronger decrease in case of high ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -1.93$ ) in comparison to low ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -1.10$ ) self-brand congruity. No significant between group effect in the case of self-expression in the public domain was observed. These results (see Figure 1) provide support for hypothesis one. High self-brand congruity will not protect an endorsed brand from negative endorser information as suggested in prior literature (Um and Kim 2016). Higher self-brand congruity, contrarily, makes the endorsed brand more vulnerable in terms of consumer's self-expression and attitude towards this brand.

## Study 2

Building on the findings from the study 1, this study aims at exploring the effects of negative meaning transfer while distinguishing between consumers' endorser-self congruity. Additionally, we test these effects for different kinds of endorsers, namely celebrity, expert and combined celebrity-expert endorser.

### Method

Participants (N=1110, aged 17–39, M=22; 50.4% male) were randomly assigned to one of twelve scenarios – 2 groups (experimental or control) x 3 endorser types (celebrity expert, combined) x 2 product types (watch or sports drink). The procedure in this study was similar to study 1 with one exception that participants were exposed to one out of three different endorser types randomly. After reading a description of the endorser, participants saw a picture of the endorser with either a watch (EVO®) or a sports drink (ISOPOWA®). Participants saw the same endorser picture as in study 1 and pre-study 2 for each endorser type to maintain an equal degree of endorser attractiveness and prevent confounding effects of source attractiveness. Participants also received the same product description as in study 1 for each endorser type, but the attribute information about the alleged endorser changed to create the desired three endorser types. The celebrity had the same profile as the movie star in study 1. The expert endorser was shown as a scientist who specialized in the development



**Figure 1.** The influence of negative information on consumers' self-expression in public and private domains and brand attitudes considering self-brand congruity levels (Study 1).

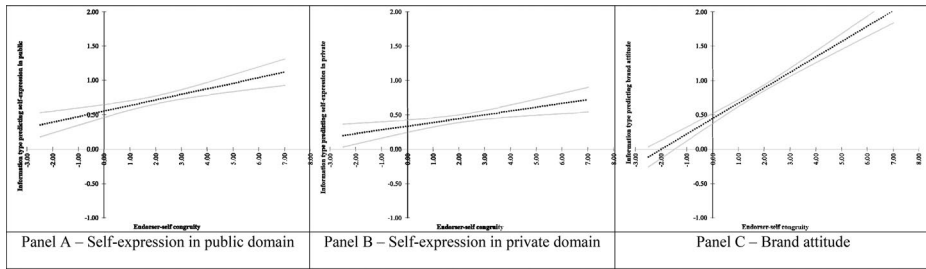
of either new nutrition components in the case of sports drinks or high-end exquisite mechanical devices in the case of watches (see Web appendix). Finally, the combined celebrity-expert endorser was given a previous profession in his profile - that of a watchmaker or a food scientist - before he became a movie star. After the presentation of the endorser picture with the endorsed product, the endorser attribute information, and the same product information as in study 1, participants in the experimental groups answered a series of questions pertaining to their self-expression in the public and private domains and brand attitudes towards the endorsed brands both before (public  $\alpha = .94$ ; private  $\alpha = .91$ ; and brand attitude  $\alpha = .93$ ) and after (public  $\alpha = .96$ ; private  $\alpha = .95$ ; and brand attitude  $\alpha = .98$ ) the exposure to alleged negative endorser information. We measured endorser-self congruity using three items namely, "I would have been proud to tell others if I were personally associated with Pierre Bana; If I were personally associated with Pierre Bana, I would have talked positively about him to my friends; and If I bought an EVO®/ISOPOWA® and the company's products were endorsed by Pierre Bana, I would have been proud to tell others about my purchase". For each presented endorser type (celebrity  $\alpha = .81$ ; expert  $\alpha = .85$  and combined celebrity-endorser  $\alpha = .85$ ) in the context of identification we classified participants with a high or low endorser-self congruity through a median-split.

## Results

Focusing on negative meaning transfer, we hypothesized that a strong endorser-self congruity could turn out to be a burden for the brand. To test hypothesis 2, we conducted a mixed experimental design MANOVA, with negative information (within-subject) and endorser-self congruity level (between-subjects) as the independent variables. A substantial main effect emerged for negative meaning transfer, for consumers with a high as well as low endorser-self congruity level, showing a decrease in self-expression in public domain ( $F_{1,1108} = 329.60$ ;  $p < .001$ ), in private domain ( $F_{1,1108} = 142.52$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and in brand attitude ( $F_{1,1108} = 747.05$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Again, for the control groups no change in the dependent measures was observed. We further analyzed the interaction effects between information type and endorser-self congruity, thereby finding a significant effect for self-expression in the public domain ( $F_{1,1108} = 335.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ), in the private domain ( $F_{1,1108} = 149.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ) as well as for positive brand attitude ( $F_{1,1108} = 588.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Based on these significant main and interactive effects, we conducted a floodlight analysis similar to Study 1. We observed similar results as in Study 1, wherein, a significant interaction effect of self-expression in public and in private domain and brand attitude was observed (see Figure 2). For self-expression in public domain (Panel A) and in private domain (Panel B) as well as brand attitude (Panel C), the Johnson-Neyman point is observed at the value of  $-4.02$ ,  $-2.83$  and  $-1.47$  ( $p < 0.05$ ) respectively. This indicates that when consumers have greater self-endorser congruity, their self-expression in public and private domain reduces and their brand attitude decreases following negative information. We thus provide further robust evidence for negative meaning transfer and support for H2.

Comparing the two levels of endorser-self congruity results for self-expression in the public domain, a significant between-group effect emerged ( $F_{1,1108} = 23.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ),



**Figure 2.** The influence of negative information on consumers' self-expression in public and private domains and brand attitudes considering self-endorser congruity levels (Study 2).

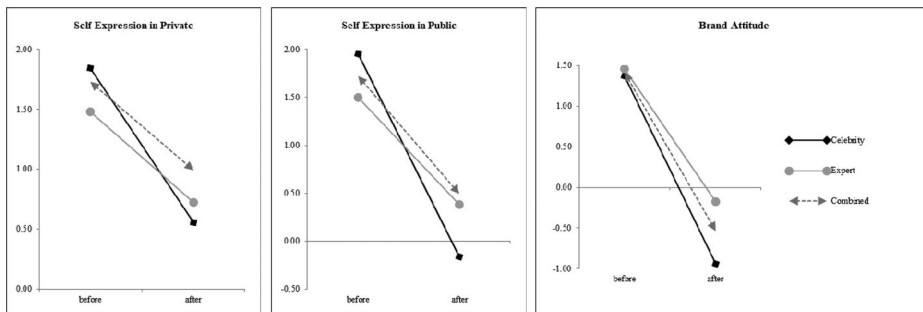
wherein a greater decrease in case of high ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -1.28$ ) compared to low endorser-self congruity ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -0.67$ ) was observed. For private domain a significant between-group effect emerged also ( $F_{1,1108} = 25.09, p < .001$ ), which results in a stronger decrease in case of high ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -1.20$ ) compared to low endorser-self congruity ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -0.56$ ) was observed. We did not find a significant between group effect in the case brand attitude. Comparing extant literature and the results of this experiment (please see Figure 2), a strong congruency between endorser and target consumer group might be beneficial as long as the endorser has a good image (McCracken 1989). However once negative information about the endorser becomes public this strong tie becomes a burden. A high endorser-self congruency will lead to a stronger decrease in self-expression in the public and private domains.

In hypothesis 3, we proposed that negative meaning transfer will be more pronounced for celebrity than for expert and combined celebrity-expert endorsers. Thus, we conducted a mixed experimental design MANOVA, with negative information (within-subject) and endorser type (between-subjects) as the independent variables.

We found a significant within effect of negative information on self-expression in public ( $F_{1,1108} = 554.02, p < .001$ ), in private ( $F_{1,1108} = 269.52, p < .001$ ) and on brand attitude ( $F_{1,1108} = 4605.57, p < .001$ ). The main effect comparing the three different endorser types was not significant. Moreover, the interaction between negative information and endorser type for self-expression in public domain ( $F_{2,1107} = 26.42, p < .05$ ) was significant (see Figure 3). When participants were exposed to subsequent negative information, the celebrity endorser ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -2.12$ ) experienced a significantly higher decrease in self-expression in public than both the combined celebrity-expert endorser ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -1.23$ ) and the expert endorser ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -1.12$ ).

For self-expression in the private domain, the main effect comparing the three different endorser types ( $F_{2,1107} = 4.96, p < .01$ ), as well as the interaction between information type and endorser type ( $F_{2,1107} = 10.36, p < .05$ ) were significant (see Figure 3). Subsequent negative information showed that the celebrity endorser ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -1.29$ ) caused a significantly higher decrease in self-expression in private than the combined ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -0.74$ ) and expert endorsers ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -0.76$ ).

Further, for the brand attitude measures, the main effect comparing the three different endorser types ( $F_{2,747} = 13.08, p < .05$ ), as well as the interaction between information type and endorser type ( $F_{2,747} = 10.38, p < .05$ ), were found to be



**Figure 3.** The influence of negative information on consumers' self-expression in public and private domains and brand attitudes considering different endorser types (Study 2).

significant (see Figure 3). Also in the case of brand attitude, the celebrity endorser ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -2.31$ ) experienced a significantly higher decrease than the expert ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -1.64$ ) and combined celebrity-expert ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -1.95$ ) endorsers. The above analysis offers support for H3. Study 2 shows the highest amount of decrease in public and private self-expression and brand attitude in the case of celebrity endorsers compared to other endorser types. The results highlight the overall robustness of an expert endorser when negative information about the private life of the endorser becomes public knowledge.

### Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 use fictitious brands and endorsers. Thus, building on the findings from the previous two studies, this study's goal is to re-examine the earlier effects of self-brand congruity and endorser-self congruity and enhance the external validity of our findings in the context of negative meaning transfer in a real-life scenario. Based on the findings from the two earlier studies, we specifically focus on celebrity endorsers and use watches as endorsed goods to align the context.

#### *Choice of celebrity, brand, and congruence*

In order to overcome limitations that arise from the selection of a fictitious celebrity and fictitious brands, in this study we selected a variety of real celebrity endorsers and real brands in order to create a lifelike consumer reaction to endorser scandals. To remain comparable with the first two studies in terms of the product category, we chose a watch to be the endorsed product. We extensively searched and screened websites and newspapers that regularly publish stories about celebrities (Star, InTouch, People, OK!, Hello, US weekly, Glamour, Closer, heat, Now, Life&Style, Manager Magazine) to determine celebrity endorsements of watch brands and scandal involvements of the pertained celebrities. Further, newswire reports archived in the Factiva database and online news archived in the Google news database were screened to extend, verify and complement the endorsement and scandal results.

To match participants to a celebrity-brand combination for eligibility in order to adequately answer the questions of interest, we first asked participants to indicate



whether they were familiar with the presented celebrities and brands (see Table 1) and which of the selected brands they favored the most. Afterwards, participants were directed to the most preferred and familiar celebrity-brand combination. The results of the familiarity analysis indicate a high awareness of the chosen brands and celebrities and therefore confirm a well-chosen selection of celebrity endorsements for the real world scenarios.

Furthermore, we asked participants to rate the celebrity-brand match on four semantic differential scale items derived from Kamins and Gupta (1994), which ranged from  $-3$  to  $+3$  with the following anchors: very inappropriate/very appropriate, inconsistent/consistent, very unlikely/very likely and does not match/matches very well, in order to ensure that the celebrity-brand combination was not rejected in consumers association sets. The results (see Table 1) show a consistently good match for all celebrity-brand combinations.

### Method

Participants were recruited from an online panel ( $N=938$ , ages 18–60,  $M=24$ ; 28.6% male) and randomly assigned to one out of six scenarios based on the most preferred and familiar celebrity-brand combination (see Table 1). The procedure in this study was similar to the procedure in studies 1 and 2. After the assignment to an adequate celebrity-brand combination, participants saw a picture of the celebrity endorsement and read a short endorser profile with some attribute information. As in studies 1 and 2, participants then answered a series of questions pertaining to their self-expression in the public ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and the private domains ( $\alpha = .77$ ) and in positive brand attitudes ( $\alpha = .94$ ) toward the endorsed brands. Since we were exposing participants to real advertisements, we also included attitude towards the ad and measured it using five semantic differential scale items derived from Mitchell and Olson (1981), which ranged from  $-3$  to  $+3$  with the following anchors: displeasing/pleasing, not interesting/interesting, bad/good, not appealing/appealing, irritating/not irritating ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

We then measured endorser-self congruity ( $\alpha = .82$ ) in regards to the presented endorser type in the context of identification with the celebrity. Following this, participants received real negative information about the endorser in the form of a news article. However, participants may have already been aware of some of the negative information about the real endorser scandals, which might differ from the effect of

**Table 1.** Severity results for celebrity scandal selection.

Celebrity	Watch Brand	Scandal	n	Celebrity brand match Mean	Severity of the Scandal	
					Mean	Std. Deviation
Andre Agassi	Longines	doping	25	6.20	5.16	1.625
Brad Pitt	Tag Heuer	extramarital affair	235	5.99	3.85	1.944
David Beckham	Breitling	extramarital affair	178	6.27	4.03	1.855
John Travolta	Breitling	sexual harassment	155	5.32	4.63	1.664
Kimi Räikkönen	Tag Heuer	drinking and getting naked	133	5.97	4.35	1.656
Michael Phelps	Omega	drug abuse	57	5.19	3.47	1.900

The chosen scandals differ between each other to a certain degree. However, the overall median of the severity measure is 5.00, hence assuring a suitable severity of the chosen cases. As group sizes are different in size, we use all cases together in the following analysis.

new and subsequent negative information in the first two studies. Therefore, before the study, we asked participants whether they knew the negative information related to the endorser and deleted the knowledgeable responses from the dataset with a final usable sample of 783 (ages 18–60,  $M=24$ ; 26.3% male). Furthermore, participants' perceived severity of celebrity misbehavior might vary even in a homogeneous group (Till and Shimp 1998) and could also trigger an error variance in the later results. In order to avoid this bias and to control for these effects, we asked participants to indicate how severe they perceived the scandal to be on a 7-point scale anchored between "not severe at all" to "very severe" (Table 1).

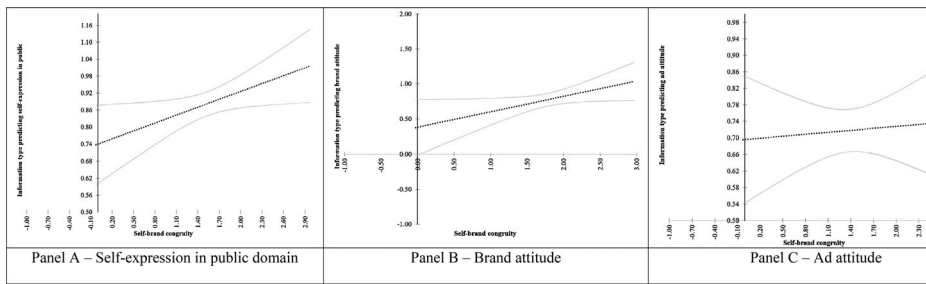
The results indicated overly equal severity ratings for the chosen scandals. No extremely high severity was observed. Participants then rated their self-expression in the public ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and private domains ( $\alpha = .84$ ) as well as brand ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and ad attitudes ( $\alpha = .89$ ). Finally, demographic information was collected and participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

## Results

Expecting consumers with a high self-brand congruity to experience a higher decrease in self-expression in the public and private domains, as well as a reduction in the positive brand and ad attitudes than consumers with a low self-brand congruity, we analyzed the data using a mixed experimental design MANOVA, with self-brand congruity as between-subjects factor and negative information as within-subject factor for all celebrity-brand combinations together. We measured self-brand congruity in the same way as in experiment 1.

There was no significant main effect of information type on public self-expression. However, contrary to the public domain, a significant main effect emerged for information type on self-expression in private ( $F_{1,772} = 37.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ), brand attitude ( $F_{1,772} = 38.80$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and ad attitude ( $F_{1,772} = 49.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A significant interaction effect was observed for self-expression in the public domain ( $F_{1,772} = 7.44$ ,  $p < .01$ ), brand attitude ( $F_{1,772} = 88.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and ad attitude ( $F_{1,772} = 11.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not for self-expression in the private domain. When examining the results in further detail through floodlight analysis (see Figure 4) for self-expression in public domain (Panel A) and in brand attitude (Panel B) as well as ad attitude (Panel C), the Johnson-Neyman point is observed at the value of  $-3.39$ ,  $0.03$  and  $-4.53$  ( $p < 0.05$ ) respectively. Thus, indicating that the greater the self-brand congruity, the lower the self-expression in public domain, brand attitude and ad attitude following negative information which further supports our assertion in H1. The interaction effect suggests that when introduced to negative information conditions, consumers self-brand congruity does not act as a barrier for self-expression in public as well as in holding neither brand attitude nor ad attitude. This becomes more explicit when examining the between group effects.

Comparing the two levels of self-brand congruity for self-expression, we found a significant between group effect in the case of self-expression in the public domain ( $F_{1,772} = 18.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with a decrease in case of high congruity consumers ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -0.098$ ) compared to an increase in the case of low self-brand congruity ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -0.059$ ). With regards to brand attitude, we also found a significant



**Figure 4.** The influence of negative information on consumers' self-expression in public domains, brand attitude and ad attitude considering self-brand congruity levels (Study 3).

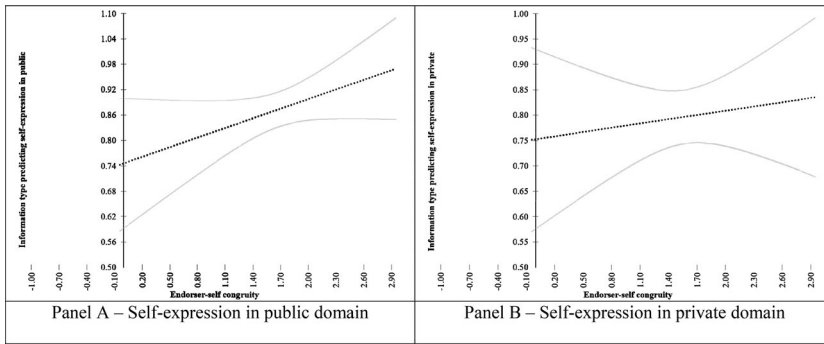
between effect ( $F_{1,772} = 881.70$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with a decrease in case of high ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -0.399$ ) compared to an increase for low self-brand congruity ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -0.049$ ). Analyzing ad attitude, we found a significant between effect ( $F_{1,772} = 121.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with a stronger decrease in case of high ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -0.326$ ) compared to an increase for low self-brand congruity ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -0.118$ ).

For H2 in the real endorsement context, we did not find a significant main effect for self-expression in public domain. However, a substantial main effect emerged for self-expression in the private domain ( $F_{1,772} = 35.06$ ;  $p < .001$ ), brand attitude ( $F_{1,772} = 29.81$ ;  $p < .000$ ) as well as ad attitude ( $F_{1,772} = 47.04$ ;  $p < .001$ ). We further analyzed the interaction effects between information type and endorser-self congruity and found a significant effect in terms of self-expression in the public domain ( $F_{1,772} = 10.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and private domain ( $F_{1,772} = 3.58$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). However, the interaction was not significant for brand attitude and ad attitude thus offering partial support for H2 in real-life situation. A floodlight analysis (see Figure 5) demonstrates the Johnson-Neyman point for self-expression in public domain at  $-3.63$  and for private domain at  $-4.30$ . The slope for both self-expression in public and private demonstrates the increasing negative effects of information type in regards to the endorser-self congruity.

Comparing the two levels of endorser-self congruity results for self-expression in the public domain, we found a significant between group effect ( $F_{1,772} = 6.48$ ,  $p < .01$ ), with a decrease in case of high ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -0.117$ ) compared to an increase in case of low endorser-self congruity ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = 0.069$ ). With regards to self-expression in private, we found a significant between effect ( $F_{1,772} = 18.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with a stronger decrease in case of high ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = -0.091$ ) in comparison to low endorser-self congruity ( $\Delta M_{\text{after-before}} = 0.086$ ).

## General discussion

Companies spend millions in endorsement deals globally and with increasing media scrutiny of endorsers, significantly higher number of scandals have come to light in recent years. Although meaning transfer process (McCracken 1989; Schimmelpfennig and Hunt 2020) has been used in prior research to shed light on the positive consequences of employing endorsers, little work has examined how consumer self-expression and brand attitudes change when endorsers engage in socially



**Figure 5.** The influence of negative information on consumers' self-expression in public and private domains considering endorser-self congruity levels (study 3).

unacceptable behavior, especially considering the consumer self-brand connection and endorser-self congruity. Three studies home in on one critical factor: the negative meaning transfer and the power of negativity bias in both consumer self-expression in the public and private domain and brand attitude. We show that consumer self-brand congruity and endorser-self congruity do not act as a barrier to negative meaning transfer. Especially, consumers with higher (vs lower) self-brand congruity and higher (vs lower) endorser-self congruity, once exposed to negative information about the endorser, show a more pronounced reduction in self-expression toward using the endorsed brand in the public and private domains. A similar effect is also observed for brand attitude. This effect remains robust in both fictitious and real-life endorsement scenarios. The findings also highlight varying effects of endorser type on consumer self-expression and brand attitude. It is observed that an expert endorser offers the most robust defense against negative meaning transfer. On the other hand, the largest decrease in self-expression and brand attitude is observed when negative information about a celebrity endorser becomes public. In capturing these effects, we show how negative meaning transfer shapes consumers' brand attitude as well as consumers self-expression in the public and private domains.

### **Theoretical contribution**

From a theoretical standpoint, our research contributes to the meaning transfer literature by offering a parsimonious explanation on the transference of negative meanings and the subsequent influence of this transference on consumer self-expression in the public and private domains. We further demonstrate the influence from a perspective of brand and endorser-self congruity. Wherein higher self-brand congruity and endorser-self congruity lead to greater reduction in consumers' self-expression through the endorsed brand.

Prior research has predominantly looked at meaning transfer and the role of celebrity endorser in the transference of positive meanings (Amos, Holmes, and Strutton 2008; Bergkvist and Zhou 2016; Knoll and Matthes 2017). However, limited attention has been given to how negative information about the endorser is

processed by consumers (Um and Kim 2016) and, more importantly, how it affects their self-expression through these endorsed brands when such information becomes public. Understanding the influence of negative meaning transfer is important due to the increasing attention of mass media in highlighting the involvement of endorsers in scandals and immoral behaviors. Our research thus adds to the literature by documenting negative meaning transfer wherein we show substantial effects of negative information on consumer self-expression through endorsed brands. We also add to the literature relating to negativity bias (Baumeister et al. 2001; Ito et al. 1998; Shi et al. 2020) by extending the discussion into the transference of associations.

We further demonstrate the influence of negative information on public and private self-expression and how it differs with regards to the level of self-brand congruity and endorser-self congruity. For example, prior research posits high self-brand congruity as a protection shield for brands against negative information (Monga and John 2008; Um and Kim 2016). In contrast, we show that consumers with a high self-brand congruity demonstrate a substantial decrease in self-expression as well as brand and ad attitude compared to consumers with low self-brand congruity. Similarly, when exposed to negative endorser information, we find a decrease in consumer's self-expression and a decrease in positive brand attitude, especially for consumers with a high rather than low endorser-self congruity. Thus, extending our understanding of negative meaning transfer from a brand and endorser congruity perspective.

Our findings offer insights of the differential reactions among consumers with low self-brand congruity and endorser-self congruity in fictitious versus real life endorsement scenarios. The results demonstrate an increase in self-expression in real life endorsement versus a significant decrease in a fictitious endorsement scenario among consumers with low self-brand congruity and endorser-self congruity. While counterintuitive, there are three plausible explanations for this effect. Firstly, we believe that the greater and stable association set (Till and Shimp 1998) with these global celebrities that were chosen in the experiment 3 may have derogated the effect of the negative celebrity information. Secondly, we believe that this result might stem from an awareness effect (Berger, Sorensen, and Rasmussen 2010) wherein the moderate negative information presented leads to increase in product awareness and can even increase purchase likelihood. Especially, in the case of low self-brand association, this effect may become more prominent. Thirdly, expectancy violations on the side of consumers are also influenced by context characteristics and are culture specific (Burgoon 1993). This could lead to less attribution of responsibility for the scandal to the endorser and thus reduce the negative effect of the scandal or even create some kind of sympathy for the endorser. Thus, the present research sheds light on how richer association sets, awareness effects and expectancy violations may play a role in mitigating the significant effects of negative meaning transfer among consumers with low self-brand congruity.

In addition, we also study the impact of different endorser types (celebrity, expert and combined celebrity-expert) together with endorser-self congruity. While comparing the influence of each endorser type, we observe the highest decrease in self-expression and brand attitude in the case of a celebrity endorser, and the lowest in the case of an expert endorser. We believe that the difference in endorser type effects stems

from the social influence process (Kelman 1961) employed by consumers while evaluating negative information. As argued earlier, consumers use an internalization process associated with the endorser's prior expertise when evaluating negative information (Biswas, Biswas, and Das 2006; Zhu, Kim, and Choi 2021). On the other hand, negative information regarding celebrity endorsers is analyzed through the identification process arising from the role assumed by the celebrity. Thus, we add to the literature by showing the differences in the influence of transferred negative meanings from an endorser to the consumer, comparing endorser types.

### ***Managerial implications***

The findings offer several notable insights to marketing practitioners for brand management and marketing campaigns. Companies spend substantial financial resources on campaigns involving endorsers in order to influence consumers' brand attitudes and purchase decisions. However, as the results of these experiments show, the process of meaning transfer can also be disadvantageous, especially in the case of negative endorser publicity. We argue that managers should be very careful in selecting an endorser. Once negative information about an endorser becomes public, the endorser can quickly become a liability and reduce the painstakingly built brand equity, as consumers avoid the endorsed brand to express themselves. This might be especially true for endorsers with a small association set in public (Till and Shimp 1998), such as newcomers, as consumers have little associations to contrast with the negative publicity compared to very well-known celebrities with a stable reputation.

Contrarily to conventional wisdom, we find that consumers who are highly attached to a brand show a significant reduction in their self-expression through the endorsed brand. Similarly, higher endorser-self congruity also leads to a similar reduction in self-expression as well as in brand and ad attitude. With the power of social media, negative news travels faster than before and consumers' actions are continuously under scrutiny from their peer group not just via in person but also through their social media based identity. Thus, managers need to exercise caution about this phenomenon when choosing an endorser for their branding campaigns and should develop an exit strategy that distances the brand from the endorser in the case of endorser-brand meaning distortion.

While negative endorser information may have an immediate and significant influence on consumer self-expression, the impact of endorser type is likely to influence the degree to which the self-expression is affected and thus merits special attention. The latter is also important because companies have specific policies in terms of the types of endorsers they use. For example, companies who promote FMCG goods or hedonic products tend to use celebrity endorsers such as movie stars, top models, and television stars. On the other hand, companies with a product portfolio of durable goods and companies promoting functionalities tend to use expert endorsers. In today's celebrity-driven culture, it seems that mass media is particularly attentive in capturing and disseminating celebrities related positive and specifically negative information. Moreover, managers do not have any control over celebrities getting involved in scandalous or immoral behaviors. Integrating this issue with our findings we recommend managers to be circumspect in selecting a celebrity as an endorser

for their brands. While a combined celebrity-expert and an expert endorser may not be that well-known or offer the same level of awareness and brand profile, both these types of endorsers present a better choice when considering their potential involvement in future negative associations.

### **Limitations and future research directions**

Our findings advocate multiple avenues for future research. For example, future studies could investigate the duration of the negative information effect on consumers. We examined the impact of negative information about endorsers on consumers' self-expression with brand and ad attitudes towards the endorsed brand only at the specific time in which this information appeared, without explicitly investigating the long-term dynamics of this effect (Bartz, Molchanov, and Stork 2013). Therefore, it is imaginable that the negative information effect is transient in nature and will fade away over time. Thus, the incorporation of a temporal perspective in the form of a longitudinal study would contribute to a better understanding of negative endorser information. Another promising area for further research involves investigating the effect of negative meaning transfer in multiple endorsements and multiple brand contexts. Many companies have multiple brands. Similarly, endorsers often endorse multiple brands. It would be interesting to investigate the effect of endorsers' negative information on related brands of the same company or the impact that this negative information would have on the different brands endorsed by the same person. Additionally, it would be of much interest to examine whether the endorser self-congruity would vary by industry type. While in this study we capture the effects using fictitious (Studies 1 and 2) and real-life celebrities (Study 3), future studies may isolate the bundle of meanings that consumers attach with real-life and known celebrities. An interesting avenue for further research stems from our initial examination of celebrity-expert combined endorser. Future studies could examine different levels of celebrity-expert combined combinations and tease out the source effects further using a variety of manipulation framing. Similarly, while the focus of this study was limited to endorsers, future research could extend our findings by examining whether the effects would hold when regular consumers or other influencers that are used in advertising campaigns are involved in scandals.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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