

Do different attract each other? The impact of a moderate mismatch between product and celebrity in celebrity endorsements on purchase intention

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# **Do different attract each other? The impact of a moderate mismatch between product and celebrity in celebrity endorsements on purchase intention**

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## **Abstract**

Celebrities are constantly used by brands for their endorsements. However, which celebrity to choose is a crucial issue for the effectiveness of marketing campaigns. For a long time, research has supported the "match-up hypothesis", but evidence suggests a positive impact of a moderate mismatch between product and celebrity in a celebrity endorsement on purchase intention. This study aims to provide further evidence to this dynamic. A 2x2x2x2 experiment involving 417 participants revealed that a moderate mismatch has a more positive effect on purchase intention than a perfect match between product and celebrity. A moderation and mediation analysis also found that this effect is fully mediated by attitude toward the advertising, whose relationship with fit is significantly negatively moderated by whether the product is a luxury vs. non-luxury brand. No significant effect was found for the second moderator, i.e. the advertising format. After conducting a literature review, I illustrate the methodology and results of this thesis, the academic and managerial contributions and limitations of the research, as well as future directions for future research. Finally, as part of the managerial contributions, I also develop a "CELEBRITY FIT FRAMEWORK" aimed at optimizing the choice of celebrities by organizations on the basis of fit with the product.

## **1. Introduction**

Companies and brands have always looked for ways to establish themselves within the competitive scenario in the most effective ways. Especially when, as in current times, the world presents itself to them as increasingly dynamic and constantly evolving. To differentiate themselves within the market, brands also support themselves with increasingly innovative communication strategies capable of engaging consumers. Artificial intelligence, digital marketing, unconventional methods are chosen more frequently. However, in this overwhelming scenario, one path still seems to convince the most popular and non-popular brands: celebrity endorsement. Loved, hated, widely studied in its

components and effects (especially side effects), celebrity endorsement is difficult to ignore for companies and, as will be seen in my following lines, also for consumers. But what are we actually talking about when we discuss celebrity endorsements? Is it really effective? In what terms? And what are the components that make it more or less effective?

As also reported by Halonen-Knight & Hurmerinta (2010), communication theory describes celebrity endorsement as "a one-way communication and persuasion process where factors residing within the endorser are deemed important. These factors include source (endorser), credibility (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Tripp et al., 1994), and attractiveness (Erdogan et al., 2001; McCracken, 1989), which consists of familiarity and likeability". A celebrity is "any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement" (McCracken, 1989). These are, traditionally, movie stars, singers, models, athletes, politicians and businesspeople (Hsu & McDonald, 2002). However, as significantly specified by Yang (2018), McCracken's (1989) definition also allows us to capture managerial developments in which more and more "ordinary" people become celebrities. From an evolutionary point of view, although one might think that celebrity endorsements are a recent phenomenon, their roots date back to the late nineteenth century, where there is evidence of an attempted association between Queen Victoria and Cadbury's Cocoa (Sherman, 1985). Its growth occurred mainly thanks to commercial radio in the 1930s and the explosion of commercial television in the 1950s (McDonough 1995). As reported by Erdogan (1999), in 1979, celebrity endorsers' use in commercials was estimated as one in every six advertisements (Howard 1979). By 1988, estimates were one in five (Motavalli 1988). Shimp (1997) claimed that around 25% of all US-based commercials used celebrities in nineties. The figure, albeit a slight decline, seems to still be confirmed today: according to Kantar research (2021), celebrities feature in 16% of ads worldwide. Furthermore, longitudinal analyses show a steady increase over the past years (Erdogan 1999; Pringle & Binet 2005). However, despite its widespread use, there is still a fervent academic and managerial debate about the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement and the factors that contribute to its strength in influencing desirable outcomes. Studies have mostly investigated celebrity endorsements according to one or more of the model's advertising functions (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Erdogan, 1999; Kaikati, 1987). Knoll & Matthes (2016) summarized the results of studies aimed at testing whether consumer attitudes and behavior are changed by celebrity endorsements in three narratives (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Erdogan, 1999; Kaikati, 1987) and one quantitative review (Amos et al., 2008), criticizing the lack of meta-analytic knowledge about whether celebrity endorsements actually influence consumers' responses, including the size of their influence. The unequivocal summary result deriving from the literature is that celebrities have an impact on consumers, but it varies greatly depending on the basis of what we consider as impacted variables. Various models

relating to celebrity endorsement have been developed. As reported by Halder, Pradhan & Chaudhuri (2021), the credibility of the celebrity plays a crucial role: "a preliminary search among Scopus-indexed journals indicates that 17.79% of the relevant literature on celebrity endorsement (n=2158) discusses issues related to celebrity credibility". In addition to source credibility theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), also source attractiveness theory (McGuire, 1985), elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), match-up hypothesis (Kamins, 1990), and meaning transfer-model (McCracken, 1989) represent some of the fundamental theories that have attempted to investigate the factors most influencing the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements. In an attempt to synthesize the countless theories and models structured on the topic, Halder, Pradhan & Chaudhuri (2021) stated that "the theories on source credibility (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) and source attractiveness (McGuire, 1985) emerge as the two major theoretical paradigms explaining communication effectiveness". Of similar opinion are Jain & Roy (2016), who summarize the most important research in: the study of the effects of credibility on consumers (Ohanian, 1990; Goldsmith et al., 2000), the effects of the "match-up" theory (Kamins & Gupta, 1994; Till & Busler, 1998, 2000) and the "Meaning Transfer Model" (MTM) (McCracken, 1989; Langmeyer & Walker, 1991; Byrne et al., 2003). So, credibility, match-up theory and MTM emerge as the most recurring topics. As regards credibility, a "source is perceived as possessing expertise relevant to the communication topic and can be trusted to give an objective opinion on the subject" (Goldsmith et al., 2000, Ohanian, 1990). While expertise is a derivation of the subject's knowledge, trustworthiness is related to the honesty and credibility of the resource (McGinnies & Ward, 1980). Credibility is not only an important resource for consumer reactions to advertisements and brands (Goldsmith et al., 2000), and influencing consumers' attitudes and behavior toward the endorsed product (Atkin & Block, 1983; Priester & Petty, 2003), but also for how consumers relate to the brand. The study by Spry et al. (2011) demonstrated the existence of a direct and positive relationship between endorser credibility and brand credibility and a positive relationship between brand credibility and consumer-based brand equity. However, although credibility proves to be an excellent focus to adopt in the factors that distinguish an endorser effective, it says little about how the endorsement occurs from a procedural point of view. The meaning transfer-model (MTM) focuses on this. It was first developed by McCracken (1989) and has been summarized very well by Jain & Roy (2016): "McCracken (1989) proposed a three-stage meaning transfer process. In the first stage, meanings related to a celebrity developed from the roles, campaigns, traits or accomplishments of him/her. In the second stage, the celebrity transferred (or at least was expected to transfer) the meanings to the products by virtue of the endorsement. In the last stage, meanings were transferred from the product to the consumers through purchase and consumption". The model is based on the belief, brought into vogue by McCracken (1986, 1988), that there is a shared path for movements of

cultural significance in consumer societies. Since then, an incredibly wide range of studies have followed, supporting its unequivocal greenness: Langmeyer & Walker (1991) demonstrated that the qualities of the celebrity were transferred to the endorsed product; scholars such as Byrne et al. (2003) and Bartra & Humer (2004) tried to use new approaches to support the validity of the model; while Peetz et al. (2004) have focused on the gender perspective, others such as Till & Busler (2000) and Charbonneau & Garland (2010) have even explored the possibility of a reverse transfer, from brand to celebrity. To finish this brief review relating to MTM, it is also important to specify that the associations between brands and celebrities can be negative and positive (Campbell & Warren, 2012). However, if the MTM focused on the process underlying celebrity endorsement, the piece that aims to push companies more towards a correct choice of celebrity is still missing. Match-up theory (or "hypothesis") sees this notable function. According to the match-up hypothesis (Khlae & Homer, 1985; Misra & Beatty, 1990), summarizing, a congruence between the celebrity and the product can lead to better results in terms of endorser effectiveness. It is on this last fundamental aspect on which I will focus my work, trying to add to previous research which still does not provide a univocal perspective on the actual validity of this theory. Furthermore, in the following chapters, in addition to carrying out a literature review on the topic, and adding any evidence in favor to its effect (or not), I will examine the interaction of this perspective with other factors, such as the brand type and the ad format, in order to provide further evidence on what factors may significantly influence the effectiveness or otherwise of the chosen celebrity.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Celebrity-product Mismatch in Celebrity Endorsements**

When it comes to the choice of celebrities, one of the most famous and rarely opposed theories is the so-called "Match-up Hypothesis" (Khlae & Homer, 1985; Misra & Beatty, 1990), according to which a congruence between the celebrity and the product can lead to better results in terms of endorser effectiveness. This theory has not only seen a large following, but several variations. First of all, not all scholars agree on the term "congruence" to name the fit between celebrity and brand or product: congruence was preferred for example by Kamins (1990), who carried out a test supporting the attractive aspect of the "match-up", demonstrating that the physical attractiveness of the celebrity could enhance product and advertising evaluations if the characteristics of the product are in line with the image transmitted by the celebrity; furthermore, as reported by Srivastava & Arora (2014), different authors have brought different views on textual and practical definition, such as "fittingness"

(Kanungo & Pang, 1973) or consistency (Walker, Langmeyer, & Langmeyer, 1992). What scholars have stated over time is that, in any case, a congruence or fit between the highly relevant characteristics of the product and that of the chosen endorser is preferable. This concept, which is based on the crucial characteristics of the product and endorser, is the basis of the definition given by Misra & Beatty (1990), who in their crucial study demonstrated three important results in support of the concept: 1) "brand recall is found to be enhanced when the celebrity and brand are matched"; 2) "transfer of affect from spokesperson to brand is found to be facilitated when the two are matched"; 3) "affect toward the brand is also found to be higher when brand and spokesperson are matched". However, the amount of research and above all the differences in visions in the academic landscape relating to the fit between brands and celebrities have increasingly pushed towards a clear ordering and separation of schools of thought. This arduous task was for example carried out by Srivastava & Arora (2014), who innovatively categorized these different conceptions of the match-up hypothesis into two categories: "relevancy between an endorser-product and schema-based expectancy of the endorsement". In this study, the first category of conceptions will be used as a reference, in which the match-up hypothesis sees the centrality of relevance, understood as "material pertaining directly to the meaning of the theme and reflects how information contained in the stimulus contributes to or detracts from the clear identification of the themes or primary message being communicated" (Heckler & Childers, 1992). Now, although the introduction of the match-up hypothesis has built a milestone in academic research relating to celebrity endorsements, leaving great space not only for future insights but also for great applications from a managerial point of view, scholars enlighten several problems, mainly consisting of: the lack of criticism on the degree of congruence between the celebrity and the product, on the one hand; and, on the other, by the need for further generalizations of the effect of congruence or fit on some outcomes desirable by companies, such as on purchase intention. And it is in the intersection between these two delicate themes that the study by Lee & Thorson (2008) arises, which follows Lane's (2000) definition relating to incongruence, constituted, considering in Lane's case the incongruence in the brand extension context, as the "degree to which a brand extension is considered unanticipated or surprising". Lee & Thorson (2008) answer a crucial question in the validation of the theory and related to inconsistency: if it is true that a congruence or fit causes different desirable positive results, what is the degree of desirable congruence? Considering the nature of this variable, how is it possible, in essence, to understand how much incongruence leads to negative results and how much congruence leads to desirable results in terms of results for the brand? The scholars responded with what can be considered without a shadow of a doubt one of the first studies that tests different degrees of inconsistency, defined in their case as "mismatch", between brand or product and celebrity. The research, which saw the schema-congruity framework (Mandler, 2014; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989)

as a fundamental theoretical basis, was based on the test of three different levels of match: complete match, moderate mismatch, extreme mismatch. What has been demonstrated is surprising: celebrity endorsements are evaluated more favorably in terms of purchase intention when there is a moderate mismatch than when there is either a complete match or an extreme mismatch. Subsequent studies have shed further light on the relevance and possible greater effectiveness of a moderate mismatch compared to a total congruence - more widely supported in research and managerial practice - between product and celebrity, even in categories recently developed thanks to tools such as social media, or connected more intimately to the use of advertising. Törn (2012) demonstrated for example that selecting a brand-incongruent endorser improves communication effects by generating longer viewing times, higher brand attitudes and brand interest, higher purchase intentions, and more positive word-of-mouth communication. When it comes to more recent phenomena, however, the study by Harmon Kizer (2014) proves to be particularly valuable, highlighting that, in terms of celebrity-branded products, lower levels of congruence between the celebrity's image and the brand's image lead to greater advertising effectiveness compared to higher levels of congruence. Therefore, both the theoretical bases of the schema-congruity framework and the studies cited suggest a scientific and practical relevance of a moderate mismatch between the product and the celebrity, suggesting a need for greater generalization on the topic and greater in-depth analysis on the factors that could strengthen, reverse or reduce any positive effect of a moderate mismatch.

## **2.2 Celebrity-product Mismatch and Purchase Intention**

There are several reasons why companies should implement celebrity endorsements. The effects and effectiveness of celebrity endorsements have been summarized, among others, by Knoll & Matthes (2016), who grouped them into cognitive, affective and behavioral. The behavioral ones also include the purchasing behavior of a product (Freiden, 1982; Kamins, 1989; Kamins & Gupta, 1994; Roozen & Claeys, 2010). As effectively summarized by Salvation (2018), we define the purchase intention as "the likelihood of a person buying certain product over competing brands due to an interaction between the needs and expectations, perception toward the brand and promotional efforts" (Tirtiroglu and Elbeck, 2008; Kotler and Armstrong, 2010). In this sense, we cannot have doubts in identifying the intention to purchase a specific brand as one of the most important desirable results of companies, which invest company resources also in order to stimulate this outcome. Although, as reported by Bergkvist & Zhou (2016), much research has focused on the ability of celebrity endorsement to generate purchase intentions, there is still no univocal support for the greater effectiveness of the

match-up hypothesis, and therefore of the congruence between products and celebrities, in stimulating consumer purchases. For example, Till & Busler (2000) showed how, although an "attractiveness effect" of the celebrity was detected on the purchase intention, an effect of the match-up on the latter variable was not detected. In fact, congruence was able to positively influence brand attitude, but not purchase intent. Other studies, such as those by Choi and Rifon (2012) supported the thought that a perfect congruence between the spokesperson and the product led to better results in stimulating consumers' purchase intention. However, other scholars have also obtained diametrically opposite results: not only has Törn (2012) demonstrated that a lower fit between brand and celebrity is more effective in generating purchaser intentions, but the result is also further confirmed by Lee & Thorson (2008) which, as anticipated, varied the degree of congruence in the celebrity endorsements to evaluate the outcomes, also in terms of purchase intention. Therefore, there is a need to further investigate the relationship between a weak fit (or moderate mismatch) between brand and celebrity and purchase intention. Given previous studies, I hypothesize that a reduced mismatch can have a positive impact compared to a complete and perfect match in generating purchase intention. Based on what has been stated, below I develop my first hypothesis relating to the relationship between brand-celebrity mismatch and purchase intention:

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

### **2.3 Celebrity-product Mismatch and Attitude toward the Advertising**

The effectiveness of advertising and celebrity endorsement can depend on various factors, more or less intrinsically interconnected with the advertising to which consumers are exposed. Although the ability to generate purchase intention is relevant for companies, identifying the factors mediating the relationship between a mismatch between brand and celebrity in a celebrity endorsement and purchase intention is crucial to building the right initiatives. It is in this sense that attitude towards advertising comes into play. Attitude toward the ad (hereinafter "Aad") has been defined as a "predisposition to respond in a favorable or unfavorable manner to a particular advertising stimulus during a particular exposure situation" (MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch 1986). There are various elements over time in which scholars have tried to identify the contributors to this particular factor: the creative platform (humor or other appeals in the message), the contents of the copy and the images (Edell & Staelin, 1983; Baker & Lutz, 1988), of which the latter could have an important role in communicating information



regarding the advertised brand (Dickson et al., 1995). It should also be noted that scholars see attitudes toward advertising in general as an important contributor (Lutz, McKenzie & Belch, 1983; Muehling, 1987; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989; Mehta, 2000). Attention towards Aad has been present since not very recent times, thanks to the publication of two articles respectively by Mitchell & Olson (1981) and Shimp (1981), which laid the basis for subsequent studies. Among these, particularly interesting were those dedicated to demonstrating a significant effect of attitude toward the advertising on brand attitude and purchase intentions (e.g., Gardner, 1985; MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch 1986). Going deeper into the analysis relating more specifically to the match-up hypothesis and a possible effect of a mismatch on the attitude towards advertising, here too the scholars do not offer a unitary and concordant vision. Kamins (1990) demonstrated the significance of the (positive) relationship between congruence between celebrity and endorsed brand on attitude toward the advertising. Seiler & Kucza (2017) brought to light further confirmation of the positive effect of product fit (in this case between type of testimonial, expert and celebrity, and type of product) on Aad, also capable of influencing attitude toward the brand and the purchase intention. On the other hand, Törn (2012) reports contrasting results with what has just been stated. Furthermore, if it is true that several studies support the positive effect of the weak mismatch or inconsistency between brand and celebrity on purchase intention, and on the other hand a clear connection between attitude towards the advertising and purchase intention, little evidence supports a relationship between mismatch and attitude toward the advertising. For this reason, and starting from the evidence analyzed, I develop my second, third and fourth hypotheses:

**H2:** the moderate mismatch between celebrity and brand has a positive effect on attitude toward the advertising.

**H3:** the attitude toward the advertising has a positive effect on purchase intention.

**H4:** the attitude toward the advertising mediates the relationship between the mismatch and the purchase intention.

## **2.4 Brand Type**

In evaluating the effectiveness of a possible mismatch between celebrity and brand in celebrity endorsements, it is also necessary to identify which factors may have a positive or negative effect on the relationship between the mismatch and the identified outcomes. Among the various factors studied over time, a crucial role played in celebrity endorsement is played by the type of brand, i.e. whether it

is a luxury brand or not. There are several studies that highlight the relevance of the dimension of belonging to the luxury or non-luxury category of a brand in the effectiveness and in the different effects that the endorsement can have, and above all that a specific endorser can have. This is because the purchasing motivations for luxury brands differ substantially from those that do not build a lush image. Unlike the latter, we choose luxury brands for their uniqueness, scarcity, quality, hedonic and self-expression attributes (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Furthermore, according to Groth & McDaniel (1993), we are motivated towards luxury by external factors e.g. opinions, influences, approval and suggestions of or interaction with others. However, luxury brands are also distinguished from non-luxury ones by the effectiveness and effect of celebrities in their advertising. Sharma (2015) has shown for example that celebrity endorsements have a positive and significant effect on perceived quality and brand loyalty in non-luxury market, but they do not have any significant influence on perceived quality & brand loyalty in luxury market. As reported by Jayawardena, et al. (2023) recent marketing studies on luxury and non-luxury brands have demonstrated that advertising strategies can improve the purchasing decision process (Jayawardena et al., 2022; Oh et al., 2004). Furthermore, different impacts have been noted in advertising for luxury and non-luxury brands in numerous aspects, such as femvertising advertising practices (Michaelidou et al., 2022; Park et al., 2023), message effectiveness (Huang et al., 2018; Kim and Bae, 2023) and sustainability practices (Kim and Bae, 2023). Narrowing the spectrum of analysis to celebrity endorsements, then, several studies have focused on possible differences between luxury and non-luxury brands: the results of Park & Yim (2020) for example showed that celebrity endorsements are more effective than noncelebrity endorsements only in attitudes toward advertisements, but not in brand luxuriousness, brand attitudes, and purchase intention. The type of brand, therefore, has a significant effect in generating different results depending on whether it is a luxury brand or not. However, although previous research has been largely dedicated to the study of the differences between luxury vs non-luxury brands in various aspects, such as those mentioned, very little has been stressed by research on the differences in a match-up effect for the two categories, with the previous scholars who have focused on studying this effect only in a very general way. For this reason, in this study I hypothesize a moderating effect of the brand type (luxury vs non-luxury) on the relationship between moderate mismatch between product and celebrity and the attitude toward the advertising, hypothesizing that the fact that the advertised brand is a luxury one positively influences this relationship.

**H5:** being a luxury brand has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between mismatch and attitude towards advertising.

## 2.5 Ad Format

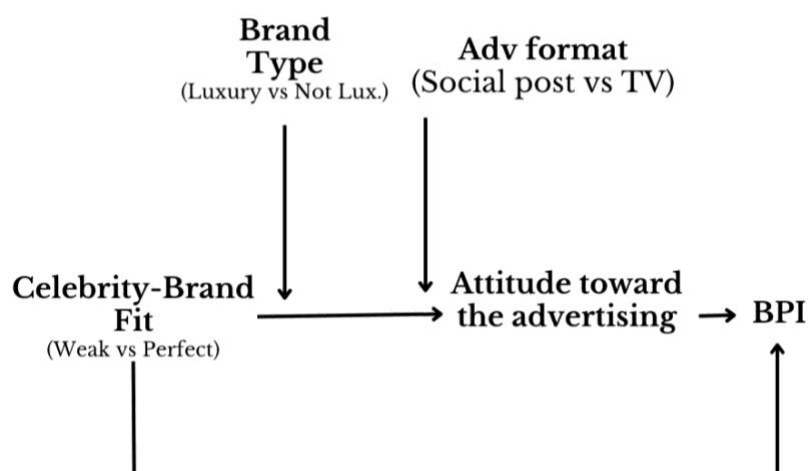
As previously mentioned, the components of advertising and the method through which it is used can also influence its effectiveness: the different mediums on which advertising is disseminated differ in characteristics and also in consumer responses. Among these, social media and television are of particular importance. Over time, scholars have dedicated themselves to comparing the advertising effectiveness of these means or to their unified use. Curana et al. (2022) showed how television advertising greatly influences purchasing decisions compared to Instagram social media for a new product. De Pelsmacker, Geuens & Anckaert (2002) showed how in a television context advertising content and brand recall were positively influenced by a positively appreciated context. However, despite the historical relevance of the television medium, social media have begun to be considered an increasingly more efficient and effective medium too, also thanks to their affordability. Leaving aside the established and widespread phenomenon of influencers, and focusing instead on celebrity endorsement, despite some scholars, such as Brooks, Drenten & Piskorski (2021), having discussed and studied the phenomenon of "influencer celebrification", social media have shown widespread validity in their use as a medium for advertising. Arli (2017) demonstrated that the different dimensions of social media, such as entertainment (most relevant in its effects), usefulness, informativeness and irritation influence consumers' attitude toward the brand's social media use, loyalty and that consumers' attitude toward a brand's social media strongly influences consumer loyalty, awareness and purchase intention. Ertugan & Mupindu (2018) also provided an important result regarding the usefulness of celebrity endorsement in stimulating consumers' purchase intention on social media advertisements. However, the scholars specify that "in comparison with similar research in the field, the notions that the credibility and the attractiveness of the celebrities as being effective on online consumer purchasing intention were not supported". Further studies, such as that of Chung & Cho (2017) have also shown how consumers' parasocial interactions with celebrities through social media have a positive impact on celebrity endorsement. Shouman (2020) also supported the choice of social media for celebrity endorsements by showing that consumers find the use of celebrity endorsement on social media believable and helps them better remember a brand or a product. Furthermore, the author also demonstrated that celebrity endorsements on social media positively influenced consumers' purchase intentions. Therefore, in summary there are two important elements to deduce from recent studies: 1) television and social media present different characteristics that impact advertising results; 2) the medium or format (television commercial vs advertising on social media) has a significant influence on the results of celebrity endorsement. Despite this, no study has

investigated how a different advertising format can impact more or less positively on the effectiveness of a congruence between celebrity and brand. Given the characteristics of social media and their crucial entertainment component (Arli, 2017), advertising on social media could positively influence the impact of a moderate mismatch between brand and celebrity. Consequently, I propose my last hypothesis:

**H6:** for social media advertisements, the relationship between mismatch and attitude toward the advertising is positive and stronger than in a television commercial.

## 2.6 Conceptual Framework

From the hypotheses and theoretical developments presented previously, I thus derive my conceptual model reporting the involved variables and the relationships between them. In particular, the independent and dependent variables are respectively identified in the mismatch between celebrity and product and the purchase intention (H1): I hypothesize, in line with Lee & Thorson (2008) that a moderate mismatch between celebrity and endorsed product has a more positive effect on the purchase intention compared to the case in which a mismatch is absent (and therefore there is a perfect match in the endorsement). Attitude toward the advertising mediates the relationship between mismatch and purchase intention (H2, H3). Finally, the type of brand and the advertising format moderate the relationship between moderate celebrity-brand mismatch. Respectively, I hypothesize that for a luxury product the mismatch effect will be stronger and positive while, for advertising on social media it will be stronger than for advertising on television.



### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Pretest

Before conducting the main study, pilot studies were conducted to test the perceived difference between a moderate and a high fit between the celebrity and the sponsored product. As a celebrity, George Clooney was chosen. The American actor was in fact previously used for the study by Lee & Thorson (2008), in the pretest aimed at choosing the celebrity to test the fit between celebrity and sponsored product, according to 5 dimensions: high ratings on the match-up factor, its salience, high familiarity, little recall of the prior endorsement, overall favorableness. Furthermore, because of the authors' previous validation, a candy bar (moderate mismatch) and a cologne (perfect match) were chosen as product categories. In fact, these products had previously been chosen by Lee & Thorson (2008) from a set of 18 categories for a mean indicating perceived moderate fit ( $M=3.54$ ;  $SD=2.16$ ) and perfect fit ( $M=6.74$ ;  $SD=1.91$ ) related to George Clooney. In order to avoid possible interference of prior brand knowledge, the pretest materials were developed with a generic product image of a candy bar and perfume, without logo or other indication. The results from a survey involving 43 Italian participants confirmed the result of the previous study: for the candy bar the average perceived fit was  $M=4.05$  ( $SD=1.56$ ), for the cologne,  $M=7.46$  ( $SD=1.46$ ). Finally, in order to verify the significance of these differences, I conducted a paired-samples t-test, which confirmed that the difference was indeed significantly perceived ( $t(42) = -10.25$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

#### 3.2 Main Study

##### 3.2.1 Participants

Data were collected in Italy, the UK and the US (participants of various nationalities). Those in Italy were collected thanks to a survey dissemination led by word of mouth. Those from the UK and US, via online data collection platforms, specifically, with the Prolific platform. It is in fact recognized as a trustworthy online platform for data collection (Palan & Schitter, 2018). A total of 450 participants took part in the study. Of these, 33 answers were incorrect or missing, so only  $N=417$  answers were used for the final analysis. There is a marked presence of the female gender ( $N=252$ , 60.4%) compared to the male gender ( $N=156$ , 37.4%). A very small minority indicated a non-binary/third gender ( $N=3$ , 0.7%) or preferred not to indicate it ( $N=6$ , 1.4%). The age of the participants was very diverse, ranging from 19 to 79 years.

### 3.2.2 Research Design and Stimulus materials

The study employs a 2x2x2 factorial between-subjects design with the following factors: 1) celebrity-product match (moderate vs. perfect); 2) product type (luxury vs. non-luxury); 3) ad format (social vs. TV). Eight different materials were produced (in the appendix), in which George Clooney was flanked by four different brands: Twix (moderate match, non-luxury), Fabelle (moderate match, luxury), Calvin Klein (perfect match, non-luxury), Prada (perfect match, luxury). In addition, each version was presented in two different versions: screenshot of a TV commercial, Instagram post. The manipulations of product type (luxury vs. non-luxury) and ad format (social vs. TV) were not pre-tested. While the latter is easily distinguishable through natural intuition, the former is also recognized for the different brands presented in general culture and research (Moore & Doyle (2010) for Prada; Economic Times (2022) for Fabelle). On Calvin Klein, some research has argued for its positioning as a 'luxury brand' (Stankeviciute & Hoffmann, 2020; Phau & Prendergast, 2000). However, recent developments (Guardian, 2019) and the difference with Prada makes its distinction as "non-luxury" easily evident.

### 3.2.3 Measures

The variables to be measured were the attitude towards the advertising and the purchase intention. Both scales were adapted from those of Lee & Thorson (2008), who in turn adapted the first scale from Mitchell & Olson (1981), which included *bad/good*, *dislike/like*, *irritating/not irritating*, and *uninteresting/interesting*; and the second measure from MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch (1986), which included *unlikely to/likely to*, *willing to/unwilling to*, and *don't plan to/plan to*. All measures used were on a 7-point scale, and all were bipolar.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Reliability and validity of the measures

Before conducting the hypothesis testing, I conducted an analysis to confirm the validity and reliability of the measures used. The KMO (0.84) and Bartlett's test ( $\chi^2 = 1911.68$ ,  $df = 21$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) confirm the validity of the assumptions of the factor analysis (FA). The FA results confirm the existence of two constructs that explain 77.20% (0.7720; in the appendix) of the cumulative variance, as also evident from the scree plot, where only two values are above *eigenvalue* > 1 (in the appendix). Finally, all items show communalities greater than the 0.50 threshold and loadings (matrix of rotated components, VARIMAX) greater than 0.70. Turning to the reliability analysis, in both cases the Cronbach alpha is

above the recommended value of 0.70 (0.857 for attitude towards advertising, 0.905 for purchase intention). Thus, the reliability of the measures is also supported.

## 4.2 Hypothesis testing

First, I tested the effect of the moderate mismatch (conditions: 1=fit,  $N=194$  vs. 0=no fit,  $N=223$ ), compared to the perfect match between product and celebrity, on purchase intention (H1). An independent samples t-test revealed that there is indeed a significant effect ( $t(414.09)=-3.51, p<0.001$ ) of the 'fit' condition on purchase intention, with a higher mean for the 'no fit' condition ( $M=3.11, SD=1.63$ ) than for the perfect match condition ( $M=2.57, SD=1.49$ ). Subsequently, I moved on to the analysis of mediation and moderation. For these, I used *Hayes PROCESS macro (Model 7)* conducting two different analyses for the two moderators respectively. The analysis concerning the luxury moderator (conditions: 1=luxury vs. 0=no luxury) revealed that, first of all (H2), the celebrity-product match has a significant and positive effect on the attitude towards advertising ( $b=0.56, p=0.0027$ ). The effect of attitude towards advertising on purchase intention (H3) is also positive and significant ( $b=0.66, p=0.0000$ ). The effect of the perfect match on purchase intention is also significant and negative, confirming the t-test results ( $b=-0.72, p=0.0000$ ). The results of the moderated mediation regarding the luxury variable showed that attitude toward the advertising fully mediated (H4) the effect of the moderate mismatch on purchase intention ( $index=-0.41, 95\% C.I. = [-0.75, -0.06]$ ). The analysis revealed that, furthermore, the moderating effect of the luxury factor on the relationship between match and attitude toward the advertisement (H5) is significant, but negative ( $b=-0.6124, p=0.0240$ ). Moreover, specifically looking at the conditional effects of the focal predictor to the moderator values, a significant moderation effect can only be observed in the non-luxury condition ( $b=0.56, p=0.0027$ ) and not in the luxury condition ( $b=-0.051, p=0.80$ ). Finally, the analysis concerning the format factor revealed that the effects considering this variable were not significant, making it impossible to state an existence of the related relationships.

## 5. General Discussion

Choosing the right celebrities as endorsers is a delicate issue for companies and organizations, which invest significant amounts of money to ensure significant returns in economic terms and beyond. However, choosing an endorser guided by scientific criteria is often the least made choice. For years, research has largely sided in favor of the "match-up hypothesis", according to which when choosing a celebrity, managers should seek the greatest possible fit between the product category (or brand) and

the endorser. In essence, you want an almost perfect match between the characteristics (especially attractiveness and expertise) of the person involved and those of the sponsored product. However, a small number of recent studies, such as that of Lee & Thorson (2008), have found that this is not always true and that, instead, a moderate mismatch can even have a greater impact on variables such as purchase intention. In this study, I tried to confirm these results and investigate further factors involved in the effectiveness of the endorsement by a celebrity, such as the fact that it is a luxury brand or the advertising format (social vs TV). Furthermore, I tried to understand what this effect could derive from, hypothesizing that attitude toward the advertising has a mediating effect on this relationship between fit and purchase intention. In fact, it is crucial for organizations to understand not only what the effects of their choices are, but also why these effects occur, in order to have congruent and positive possibilities of replication. The results of a survey involving more than 400 consumers in Italy, the UK, and the USA, effectively confirm that a moderate mismatch between celebrity and product has a more positive effect on purchase intention than a perfect match (as in the case of George Clooney who sponsors a candy bar instead of a cologne). Furthermore, this relationship is fully mediated by the attitude toward the advertising, which, however, is higher in the case of a fit condition. Despite the format which did not show a significant effect on the relationship between mismatch and attitude towards the advertising, luxury moderates the relationship, "reversing its sign". In fact, when we are in the presence of a celebrity who sponsors a luxury product, a condition of perfect match between the two leads to a negative effect on the attitude towards the advertising, unlike what happens with products not made by luxury brands.

## **5.1 Theoretical and managerial contributions**

The results of this research bring with them several relevant contributions for academic research and management practice. First of all, this study contributes to the literature on celebrity endorsement, providing further evidence to support the generalization of the positive effect on purchase intention of a condition of (moderate) mismatch between celebrity and product in a celebrity endorsement, and therefore reevaluating the "match-up" hypothesis supported by most authors for a long time. By demonstrating a significant mediation effect of attitude toward the advertising, I have given further evidence to a mediation relationship already hypothesized in the literature, thus giving a further insight into the causes of this "strange effect" of a moderate mismatch on consumer intentions. Third, to my knowledge, this is the first study that attempted to investigate the differences in the effect of fit in celebrity endorsements for luxury or non-luxury brands, and also the interaction between fit and format condition. By revealing the significance of the first moderation, the research sees a further contribution



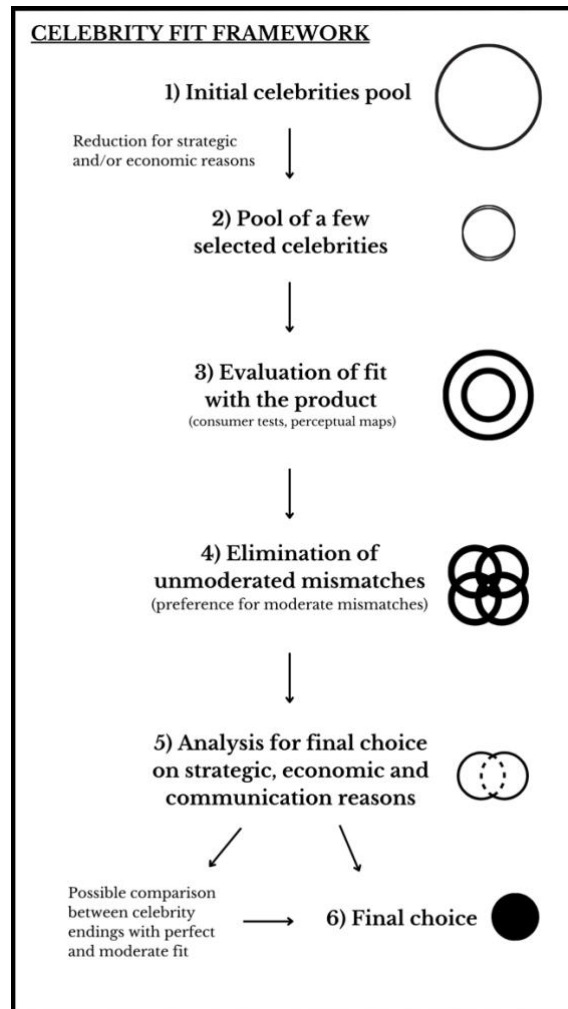
to the literature on luxury brands and the choices they can make in terms of marketing and advertising, as well as a result on which to possibly build in the investigation relating to celebrity endorsements of luxury brands. luxury and the factors that characterize them compared to other types of brands. Fourth, the denial of the significance of the format also contributes to the literature on advertising placement and the differences between social media and more traditional means, such as television or radio.

This study also has important consequences for management practice. First of all, managers can reveal the choice of celebrity to use as an endorser by having further empirical evidence available regarding the effect of a moderate mismatch. The suggestion is to test the chosen personality as much as possible before actually making binding agreements, in order to evaluate its actual effectiveness regardless of the team's shared thoughts on its validity. Second, luxury companies once again see proof of their peculiarity, and a need for further attention in the choice of celebrities which, in the case of a perfect match, can not only lead to a lower purchase intention, but also to a lower attitude toward the advertising (effect not observed for the other categories). Finally, organizations can benefit from the non-significant proof of the differences between social TV, focusing more on the aspects more purely linked to consumers and the creativity of advertising, rather than on its placement which, as seen, does not influence the relationship of the mismatch with the 'attitude toward the advertising. Based on the results obtained, I built a “CELEBRITY FIT FRAMEWORK” aimed at optimizing the choice of celebrities regarding the "fit" factor. Below I briefly explain the phases of the process:

- 1) Initial celebrities pool: at this stage the organization has a series of names in mind. Since it is an exploratory phase, it is advisable to write them down or list them all and possibly broaden the possible choices;
- 2) Pool of a few selected celebrities: naturally, for strategic, operational and/or economic reasons there is a significant reduction in celebrities, who now constitute a very limited pool;
- 3) Evaluation of fit with the product: in this phase the company evaluates the few remaining celebrities and their fit with the product. It is advisable to use tools that stress the consumer's real perceptions, or internal analyzes that are based on objective data and/or benchmarks, reducing personal judgment as much as possible, to be used instead in residual cases or cases of strong indecision;
- 4) Elimination of unmoderated mismatches: celebrities who are too similar or too distant from the categories should be eliminated from the pool of choices. However, it is possible to keep a perfect match choice to test it further (perhaps because it has been used in the past or due to the personal judgment of the manager);
- 5) Analysis for final choice: different types of reasons can be involved in the evaluation that leads to the choice of a celebrity with a moderate mismatch with the product. It is at this stage that a final

comparison should be made on various indicators with respect to one or two remaining celebrities who represent a "perfect match" with the product, also including motivations linked to the brand, the target and other typologies;

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



## 5.2 Limitations and future research

Despite its many contributions, this research, like any other, is not without limitations. First of all, the study only considered participants resident in Italy, the UK and the US. The re-proposal of similar studies in countries with different cultures and demographics could bring further useful insights aimed at generalizing the relationships analyzed. Along the same lines, famous celebrities in other countries and different product categories should be considered, to verify that the different types of fit are

perceived consistently. Second, this research only took into consideration one celebrity, George Clooney, who can primarily be categorized as an actor. Future research, for this reason, could: 1) consider actors other than George Clooney, with different degrees of attractiveness and/or expertise in relation to the product, for example; 2) consider different categories of celebrities (sportsmen, singers, academics...). Third, as highlighted by previous studies, the difference between celebrities and influencers is increasingly narrowing. To date, to my knowledge, there are no studies that try to test the effects of these different degrees of fit between endorser and product category in relation to influencers, or to compare the results between the two categories. Furthermore, it would be interesting to understand how there could be a difference between the products created by the influencer himself and external brands, also on dependent variables such as engagement, as well as the conversion rate. Finally, given the exponential growth of the phenomenon of virtual influencers, this specific new dynamic could also be studied, to increasingly connect the topic of endorsements with new technologies (AI, Metaverse...). Fourth, this research only considered product type and format as moderators. However, several other factors could interact, such as some personal characteristics of consumers, or other features of the product. Furthermore, it would be very interesting to evaluate the effects of moderate or perfect fit also in the case of brand communities: would the consumers who are part of them suffer from the match effect or would they be less subject to it, given their attachment to the brand? Future research certainly has several avenues to follow regarding this. Finally, purchase intention and attitude toward advertising are important, but those are not all. A different perspective could be more centered on the attitude towards the brand: how does it change depending on whether the celebrity is "matched" or not? What effects are there on positioning if there is an inconsistency? Studies using this type of analysis and tools would also provide results of great concrete value to companies and decision makers.

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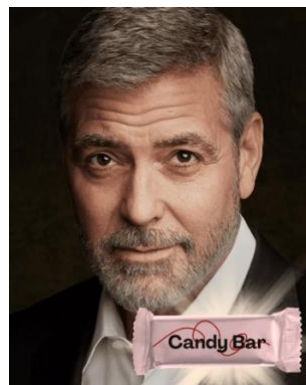
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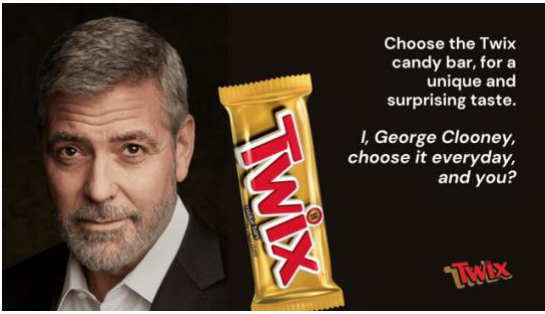
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## Appendix



Pretest materials



Main study materials



### Statistiche campioni accoppiati

		Media	N	Deviazione std.	Errore standard della media
Coppia 1	candybar_mean	4.0488	43	1.55945	.23781
	cologne_mean	7.4566	43	1.45721	.22222

### Correlazioni campioni accoppiati

		N	Correlazione	Significatività	
				P unilaterale	P bilaterale
Coppia 1	candybar_mean & cologne_mean	43	-.044	.391	.782

### Test campioni accoppiati

		Differenze accoppiate						Significatività		
		Media	Deviazione std.	Errore standard della media	Intervallo di confidenza della differenza di 95%		t	gl	P unilaterale	P bilaterale
					Inferiore	Superiore				
Coppia 1	candybar_mean - cologne_mean	-3.40775	2.18020	.33248	-4.07872	-2.73679	-10.250	42	<.001	<.001

### Dimensioni effetto campioni accoppiati

			Standardizzati ore <sup>a</sup>	Stima del punto	Intervallo di confidenza 95%	
					Inferiore	Superiore
Coppia 1	candybar_mean - cologne_mean	D di Cohen	2.18020	-1.563	-2.006	-1.111
		Correzione di Hedges	2.22012	-1.535	-1.970	-1.091

- a. Il denominatore utilizzato per stimare le dimensioni dell'effetto.  
 Il D di Cohen utilizza la deviazione standard del campione della differenza media.  
 La correzione di Hedges utilizza la deviazione standard del campione della differenza media, più un fattore di correzione.

### Test t

#### Statistiche gruppo

	1 = fit, 0 = no fit	N	Media	Deviazione std.	Errore standard della media
purch_int_mean	1	194	2.5704	1.48526	.10664
	0	223	3.1061	1.62968	.10913

### Test campioni indipendenti

		Test di Levene per l'uguaglianza delle varianze			Test t per l'uguaglianza delle medie				Intervallo di confidenza della differenza di 95%		
		F	Sign.	t	gl	Significatività P unilaterale	Significatività P bilaterale	Differenza della media	Differenza errore std.	Inferiore	Superiore
purch_int_mean	Varianze uguali presunte	6.456	.011	-3.488	415	<.001	<.001	-.53568	.15357	-.83755	-.23381
	Varianze uguali non presunte			-3.511	414.091	<.001	<.001	-.53568	.15258	-.83561	-.23575

### Dimensioni effetto campioni indipendenti

		Standardizzati ore <sup>a</sup>	Stima del punto	Intervallo di confidenza 95%	
				Inferiore	Superiore
purch_int_mean	D di Cohen	1.56418	-.342	-.536	-.148
	Correzione di Hedges	1.56701	-.342	-.535	-.148
	Delta di Glass	1.62968	-.329	-.523	-.134

- a. Il denominatore utilizzato per stimare le dimensioni dell'effetto.  
 La d di Cohen utilizza la deviazione standard raggruppata.  
 La correzione di Hedge utilizza la deviazione standard raggruppata, più un fattore di correzione.  
 Il delta di Glass utilizza la deviazione standard del campione del gruppo di controllo (ovvero il secondo).

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

att\_tow\_

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.1731	.0300	1.8881	4.2535	3.0000	413.0000	.0056

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	3.2930	.1244	26.4707	.0000	3.0485	3.5376
FIT	.5616	.1864	3.0128	.0027	.1952	.9280
LUXURY	.5312	.1849	2.8738	.0043	.1679	.8946
Int_1	-.6124	.2704	-2.2649	.0240	-1.1439	-.0809

Product terms key:

Int\_1 : FIT x LUXURY

Test(s) of highest order unconditional interaction(s):

X*W	R2-chng	F	df1	df2	p
	.0120	5.1298	1.0000	413.0000	.0240

Focal predict: FIT (X)  
Mod var: LUXURY (W)

Conditional effects of the focal predictor at values of the moderator(s):

LUXURY	Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
.0000	.5616	.1864	3.0128	.0027	.1952	.9280
1.0000	-.0508	.1959	-.2595	.7954	-.4358	.3342

\*\*\*\*\*

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

purch\_in

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.6006	.3608	1.6138	116.8188	2.0000	414.0000	.0000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	.7717	.1804	4.2767	.0000	.4170	1.1264
FIT	-.7212	.1254	-5.7530	.0000	-.9676	-.4748
att_tow_	.6606	.0450	14.6693	.0000	.5721	.7492

\*\*\*\*\* DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y \*\*\*\*\*

Direct effect of X on Y

Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-.7212	.1254	-5.7530	.0000	-.9676	-.4748

Conditional indirect effects of X on Y:

INDIRECT EFFECT:

FIT -> att\_tow\_ -> purch\_in

LUXURY	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
.0000	.3710	.1265	.1351	.6299
1.0000	-.0336	.1287	-.2804	.2253

In order: results of the pre-test, results of the independent samples t-test, results of the moderated mediation for the moderator 'luxury' (1=luxury, 0=no luxury; model 7 PROCESS)

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

att\_tow\_

Model Summary

	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
	.1057	.0112	1.9247	1.5541	3.0000	413.0000	.2000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	3.5546	.1272	27.9503	.0000	3.3046	3.8046
FIT	.1981	.1920	1.0315	.3029	-.1794	.5755
FORMAT	-.0450	.1862	-.2417	.8092	-.4111	.3211
Int_1	.1636	.2728	.5997	.5491	-.3727	.6999

Product terms key:

Int\_1 : FIT x FORMAT

Test(s) of highest order unconditional interaction(s):

	R2-chng	F	df1	df2	p
X*W	.0009	.3596	1.0000	413.0000	.5491

\*\*\*\*\*

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

purch\_in

Model Summary

	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
	.6006	.3608	1.6138	116.8188	2.0000	414.0000	.0000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	.7717	.1804	4.2767	.0000	.4170	1.1264
FIT	-.7212	.1254	-5.7530	.0000	-.9676	-.4748
att_tow_	.6606	.0450	14.6693	.0000	.5721	.7492

\*\*\*\*\* DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y \*\*\*\*\*

Direct effect of X on Y

Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-.7212	.1254	-5.7530	.0000	-.9676	-.4748

Conditional indirect effects of X on Y:

INDIRECT EFFECT:

FIT -> att\_tow\_ -> purch\_in

FORMAT	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
.0000	.1308	.1271	-.1107	.3810
1.0000	.2389	.1278	-.0032	.5057

Index of moderated mediation (difference between conditional indirect effects):

	Index	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
FORMAT	.1081	.1765	-.2288	.4645

Results of moderated mediation for the moderator 'format' (1=social format, 0=tv format,model 7 PROCESS)