The Power of Mismatch: How Incongruous Pairings Drive Ad Effectiveness

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Abstract

Traditionally, celebrity endorsements have relied upon the “Fit Hypothesis”, which assumes that there is a perfect match-up between a celebrity and a product. Ideally, this pair results in increased levels of trust and expertise, both in the celebrity and the product, thus increasing marketability and reliability. But recent “misfit” advertisements indicate a potential for an alternative path to successful advertising. In the following study, we will present findings from 32 participants who evaluated six real-world celebrity endorsement pairings using three fit metrics (expertise, image congruence, audience overlap) and three success metrics (brand recall, image improvement, interest change). Following this evaluation process, we asked participants to provide justifications to explain their ratings, which were thematically analyzed for results. It was expected that the celebrity endorsements with higher fit would receive better ratings, based on increased credibility, social proof, and the similarity between the celebrity and the product being advertised. While high-fit endorsements generally received the strongest ratings, not all low-fit endorsements performed poorly. One low-fit case, Shaq–Taco Bell, illustrates how emotional appeal and social proof may compensate for weak fit under certain conditions. Through a thematic analysis of 192 justifications, we identified five unique drivers that help explain both traditional and non-traditional success within the celebrity endorsement marketplace. Future utilizers of this market strategy may consider using this strategic incongruity in celebrity endorsements to call attention to products and create viral engagement, while establishing strong narratives that could sustain consumer interest.

Keywords

Celebrity Endorsement; Fit Hypothesis; Strategic Incongruity; Value Congruence; Brand Recall; Purchase Intention; Social Proof

Introduction

In today’s competitive marketing environment, agencies continue to use celebrity endorsements as a tried-and-true method for increasing the marketability of any one product. Researchers have thereby been able to measure the persuasive effects of celebrity endorsements over time. The following study is based on two major theoretical frameworks, collectively called the Fit Hypothesis, and individually referred to as the Match-Up Hypothesis and the Meaning Transfer Model (Kamins, 1990; McCracken, 1989). These theories propose that celebrity endorsements are most effective when there is a high degree of similarity between the celebrity and the product that they are endorsing. Previous research has consistently shown that celebrities associated with specific products, like a sportsperson endorsing athletic equipment, or celebrities with a reputation aligned with their sponsor, generally result in more positive attitudes towards the brand and increase consumer spending habits (Ohanian, 1990; Aaker, 1997). But although many examples of successful celebrity endorsements exist, there is evidence that a strategic mismatch may also produce equally positive results in consumer behavior.

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Literature Review

Research using the Fit Hypothesis has shaped both academic and practitioner understanding of the importance of congruence in celebrity endorsement marketing. However, the alternative of strategic incongruity and value congruence provides another perspective where a stronger connection to consumers can be achieved. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the overall impact of endorsements on brand equity, which includes purchase intentions, brand awareness, and brand image (Fahriana et al., 2023; Krisnanda, 2023; Atay, 2011).

2.1 The Dominant Paradigm: Theoretical Foundations and Fit Hypothesis

The success of a celebrity endorsement depends on the connection that a celebrity has to a product, which can be validated through three models. Using the Source Credibility Model, first suggested by Hovland, Janis, and Kelley in 1953, later revised by Ohanian in 1990, a celebrity who is seen as a trustworthy and credible individual will be more successful in promoting a product than a celebrity without these attributes. Furthermore, if a celebrity's public image doesn't align with a product, the effectiveness of the endorsement will decrease, as stated in the Match-Up Hypothesis suggested by Kamins in 1990.

Early studies focused primarily on physical attractiveness, but McCracken (1989) extended the study to include a person's values, lifestyle, and overall personality. These metrics illustrated how celebrities are able to authentically assign cultural significance to brands, creating the opportunity to transfer meaning to the product. Empirical evidence supports this idea and has demonstrated that a combination of an advertised product and the celebrity endorsement increases brand awareness, enhances brand image, and increases purchase intentions by decreasing perceived consumer risk (Fahriana et al., 2023; Krisnanda, 2023). Overall, the evidence indicates that only congruent matches will result in effective awareness, image, and purchase intentions.

2.2 Strategic Incongruity: When Mismatch Works

Contrary to traditional research on congruence, recent literature on strategic incongruity is growing, highlighting the benefits of a moderate disconnect between a celebrity and a product. This identifies an alternative path to advertising success under limited conditions. According to Mandler (1982), disorienting stimuli that deviate from the expected norm result in deeper levels of processing and ultimately lead to enhanced memory recall from consumers, ultimately affecting their purchasing behavior. Provided that the level of incongruity is not excessive, one study by Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer (2000) found that surprising elements can attract attention and increase perceptions of humor in TV commercials. The application of these findings provided evidence that mature brands can be revitalized through incongruence, and low-involvement products can become more appealing to consumers through strategic incongruity (Lee & Thorson, 2008).

2.3 Value Congruence: A New Dimension in the Match-Up Hypothesis

Value congruence, a new dimension to the Fit Hypothesis study, differs from previous fit-based research, as it includes expertise and image congruence. Through a series of controlled experiments, Atay (2011) demonstrated that advertising effectiveness increases substantially if the personal beliefs of the celebrity endorser are aligned with the core values of the product. For example, the alignment of personal values of soccer star turned influential figure David Beckham with the Sharpie pen brand shows how value alignment can create endorsement success that can't be explained by more conventional models (Atay, 2011).

2.4 Methodological and Contextual Considerations

Careful methodological design and attention to contextual variables are essential in investigating the congruence and mismatch of the Fit Hypothesis. Establishing a congruence continuum through pre-testing and screening allows for the systematic analysis of outcomes (Atay, 2011). In addition, the relationship

between the alignment of the endorser and product shifts based on the type of brand and product interaction. In high involvement categories, alignment with the brand is more beneficial than misalignment in competing products, while in low involvement categories, competition may be more beneficial due to misalignment (Lee & Thorson, 2008).

Methods

3.1 Research Design and Case Selection

This study utilized a comparative, mixed-methods case study research design to examine celebrity image alignment with products, in order to test for effective endorsement. Specifically, this study compared "fit" campaigns against "misfit" campaigns and assessed the impact of the endorsement campaign on outcomes, including consumer interest, brand recall, and brand image. The three celebrities selected included Michael Jordan, David Beckham, and Shaquille O'Neal (Shaq), with two endorsement campaigns each in the "fit" and "misfit" categories. The reason these celebrities were selected is due to the fact that they are all globally well known and have different public personas, creating two clear cases of congruent and incongruent endorsements. In addition to selecting the same three celebrities for each campaign, we also made sure to present the three fit assessment tools in a single block, then provided participants with an unrelated filler activity, prior to presenting the three success assessment tools. This ensured that participants avoided creating preconceived notions about what would constitute a successful or unsuccessful endorsement campaign based on their fit assessments. As a result, unbiased low-fit/high-success evaluations could emerge after the completion of the survey. For example, when evaluating the success of the campaign for Shaq's taco promotion, participants did not know he was involved until the survey was completed, thus basing their success assessment solely on their experience with the campaign.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

Participant data were collected via SurveyMonkey from 32 participants, who evaluated all six combinations of celebrity product endorsements. We conducted a preliminary screen to assess participant familiarity with celebrities, with a 3 out of 5 cutoff score (1 = Never heard of them; 5 = Very familiar) of David Beckham, Michael Jordon, and Shaquille O'Neal. The purpose of the screen was to eliminate potential participants who may not have been familiar enough with at least one of the celebrities. By eliminating participants whose familiarity with the celebrities who fell below the established threshold, the 'cleaning' process resulted in a dataset of 32 complete responses. Image congruence was measured by drawing upon the work of Ohanian (1990), and functional fit by Kamins (1990). Relevance was measured by asking participants to evaluate three separate 5-point Likert scale items, including "audience overlap", "expertise overlap", and "image congruence", to assess alignment from multiple perspectives. To address potential noise from outliers, we calculated the mean and median for each case.

Measures of effectiveness were assessed through four methods. First, an unaided recall test was administered, which asked: "Which one of the following brands was depicted in the ad?" Following this, two Likert questions assessed changes to brand interest and product interest. The assessment was then completed using an open-ended question that asked, "Please briefly describe what influenced your level of interest (e.g., credibility, surprise, relevance, dislike, etc.)."

We utilized a five-point Likert scale to reduce cognitive burden in our participants and produce a manageable online sample, while supplying sufficient variance to the data set. Since the three items all contribute to reliability, the reliability of each construct increased. With N≈32. increased granularity of ratings via use of 7- point Likert scales increases the potential for "pseudo-precision," and noise without contributing to inference. The rescaling of the 1-5 brand-recall metric also ensured that we could establish a simpler scoring methodology and interpretation for analysis. By connecting the cognitive recall variable with the affective and conative scales, we remained true to previous models but uncovered cues that provoked participant responses.

3.3 Participants & Demographics

Thirty-two respondents completed the survey. The age profile skewed towards older adults, as the 45-54 cohort comprised roughly half the sample size. This was followed by under-18-year-olds (one fifth), with the 35-44 age group also comprising roughly the same amount. A smaller cohort fell into the 18-24 and 25-34 categories, each measuring less than 10% of the sample, with a smaller group reporting 65+ years. The predominant gender of the participant group reported being male, roughly three-fourths of the sample. This suggests that the sample tilted towards mid-life, male respondents. This was taken into account when interpreting preferences for sports-oriented endorsements and brands.

3.4 Measurement Instruments

Participants' ratings provided two composite measures:

3.4.1 Relevancy Rating (Mean Fit Score):

We used the following three items to measure relevancy of the celebrity and the product. The results were then combined into a single fit score per endorsement. Expertise fit is measured for the "celebrity's occupation or expertise appropriate to the product." Image congruence measured the "celebrity's general image or lifestyle fit with the brand." The audience overlap measured the "fans or influence of the celebrity overlap with target buyers of the product."

3.4.2 Success Rating (Mean Effectiveness Score):

The average of the scores provided the overall success score. Thematic analysis was conducted on the participants' written reasoning and justification for their responses. Brand recall was measured by assigning "accurate choices" a score of 1, "incorrect choices" a score of 0. The percent accuracy was then translated to a 1-5 scale, measuring 87.5% = 4.325/5. Brand image change was interpreted after seeing the advertisement, and how the overall impression of the brand changed in participant perception. Change in product interest was measured by asking participants how their interest in the product changed after seeing the endorsement advertisement.

These three indicators were grouped because they capture complementary dimensions of advertising effectiveness. Brand recall reflects the cognitive effect of the endorsement (whether the advertisement is remembered correctly), brand image change captures the affective effect (whether the ad improves perceptions of the brand), and product interest reflects the conative effect (whether the ad increases behavioral inclination toward the product). Together, these measures reflect the hierarchy-of-effects logic discussed in the literature review. In this study, the three components were weighted equally, not because they are necessarily identical in practical importance, but because our exploratory design did not provide a theoretical or statistical basis for privileging one over another.

3.5 Scoring, Thematic Analysis, and Reliability

3.5.1 Scoring rationale

We analyzed all open-ended "why?" explanations (N = 192 statements; 32 participants × 6 ads; unit of analysis = one statement) using a deductive codebook with five themes—Credibility & Social Proof, Emotional & Creative Appeal, Involvement & Personal Relevance, Mismatch & Tension, and Product–Celebrity Congruence (Fit)—each specified with rules and positive/negative examples (codebook v1.0). Two research coders independently double-coded an initial one-third pilot set, all randomly assigned, to calibrate the application. We computed Cohen's κ and percent agreement per theme and clarified wording (v1.1) without changing constructs. We then coded the full corpus and conducted periodic consensus checks and a post-hoc reliability spot-check on a 20% random sample (κ reported by theme in the Appendix). We conducted a final adjudication pass to resolve disagreements and produced the coded sheet, including raw text, five binary columns, and an uncoded flag. From this, we derived theme

frequencies and cross-tabs by endorsement and fit-success quadrant. As described in §3.2, the fit and success question blocks were separated in the survey to minimize consistency bias between constructs.

3.5.2 Thematic analysis workflow

We analyzed all open-ended "why?" explanations (N = 192 statements; 32 participants × 6 ads; unit of analysis = one statement) using a deductive codebook with five themes—Credibility & Social Proof, Emotional & Creative Appeal, Involvement & Personal Relevance, Mismatch & Tension, and Product–Celebrity Congruence (Fit)—each specified with include_when rules and positive/negative examples (codebook v1.0). Two coders independently double-coded an initial one-third pilot set (random sample) to calibrate the application; we computed Cohen's κ and percent agreement per theme and clarified wording (v1.1) without changing constructs. We then coded the full corpus, conducting periodic consensus checks and a post-hoc reliability spot-check on a 20% random sample. A final adjudication pass resolved disagreements and produced the coded sheet (raw text + five binary columns + uncodable flag), from which we derived theme frequencies and cross-tabs by endorsement and fit–success quadrant. (As described in §3.2, the fit and success question blocks were separated in the survey to minimize consistency bias between constructs.)

3.6 Data Cleaning and Limitations

We ensured that a data sweep was completed at every possible stage of the data collection process. First, participants who did not know the celebrity in the advertisement (measured by less than 3 levels of familiarity) and those who did not complete the entire survey were removed from the final dataset. The final sample, therefore, consisted of 32 participants.

Results and Discussion

4.1 Quantitative Results: Fit & Success Scores

The fit ratings for the endorsements were developed using the mean of three relevance dimensions: expertise fit, image congruence, and audience overlap. These were averaged across 192 observations amongst the 32 respondents and 6 endorsement advertisements. The success scores represented the mean of the three impact measures, including brand recall, brand-image improvement, and product-interest change, based on 144 observations amongst 24 respondents and 6 endorsement advertisements, following data cleaning. The average mean fit scores across the six endorsement cases ranged from 2.45 (Shaq-Taco Bell) to 4.41 (Shaq-Reebok), and the mean success scores ranged from 3.76 (Jordan-Hanes) to 4.27 (Jordan-Air Jordan). These results demonstrated a wide variation in perceived fit and success across the campaigns involved in this study.

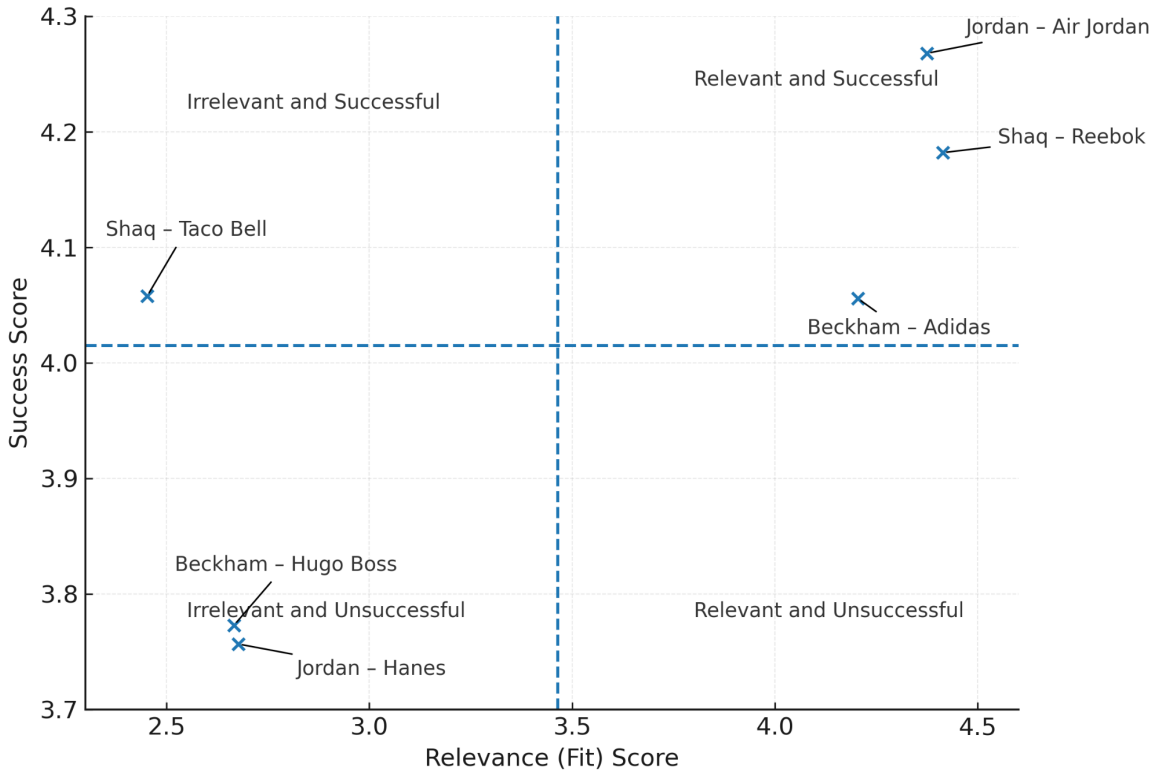
Table 1. Fit and Success Scores

Celebrity	Endorsement Case	Mean Fit Score	Mean Success Score
Jordan	Air Jordan	4.3750	4.2678
	Hanes	2.6771	3.7566
Beckham	Adidas	4.2043	4.0556
	Hugo Boss	2.6667	3.7729
Shaq	Reebok	4.4138	4.1818
	Taco Bell	2.4524	4.0576

4.2 Four-Quadrant Configuration

Using grand-mean cutoffs of approximately 3.47 for fit and 4.01 for success, each of the endorsement combinations was assigned to one of the four quadrants. Only three of the endorsement combinations (Jordan Air Jordan, Beckham-Adidas, and Shaq-Reebok) were assigned to the High-Fit/High-Success quadrant. The Shaq-Taco Bell endorsement uniquely occupied the Low-Fit/High-Success quadrant. Two of the endorsement campaigns, Jordan-Hanes and Beckham-Hugo Boss, were categorized as Low-Fit/Low-Success. No endorsement pairings were categorized into the High-Fit/Low-Success quadrant. This quadrant structure suggests that fit is not the sole determinant of endorsement effectiveness. Rather, mismatch appears to be conditionally effective, depending on how the advertisement activates other persuasive mechanisms.

Figure 1. Fit/Success Scatter Plot



4.3 Thematic Frequencies

A thematic analysis of 192 open-ended "why?" justifications employed five binary coding variables: : Credibility & Social Proof, Emotional & Creative Appeal, Involvement & Personal Relevance, Mismatch & Tension, and Product–Celebrity Congruence (Fit).

Table 2. Code Sheet Sample

Raw_Why_Text	Credibility & Social Proof	Emotional & Creative Appeal	Involvement & Personal Relevance	Mismatch & Tension	Product - Celebrity Congruence (Fit)
surprise	0	1	0	0	0
Credibility	1	0	0	0	0
Goat	1	0	0	0	0
so good to see MJ's move, thanks for nike for making these film	0	0	1	0	0
Overall positive vibe	0	1	0	0	0

Credibility but made me think of what if I wear that shoes and play basketball, but mot Michael Jordan since he is a basketball goat	1	0	1	0	0
It's good in that it gives an instant message to people who are thinking about what to present for the Christmas season	0	1	0	0	0

We counted the frequencies of each code to deduce the main driving factor behind the success of each endorsement advertisement.

Table 3. Tallied Frequencies of Codes

	Credibility & Social Proof	**Emotional & Creative Appeal**	**Involvement & Personal Relevance**	**Mismatch & Tension**	**Product–Celebrity Congruence (Fit)**
Total	54	24	9	8	25
Relevant & Successful	34	11	5	1	16
Shaq's Taco Bell case	4	6	1	1	4

A review of the frequency counts indicated that Credibility & Social Proof was the most commonly cited factor associated with success, having 54 mentions, followed by Product-Celebrity Congruence at 25 mentions, Emotional & Creative Appeal with 24 mentions, Involvement & Personal Relevance with 9 mentions, and Mismatch & Tension with 8 mentions. Among the three Relevant & Successful endorsements, Credibility & Social Proof was again the most common justification for success (34 mentions), with Product–Celebrity Congruence (16 mentions) and Emotional & Creative Appeal (11 mentions) following shortly behind. However, the Shaq-Taco Bell combination differed from the other two successful combinations, specifically, Emotional & Creative Appeal (6 mentions) exceeded both Credibility & Social Proof (4) as the primary justification for success in this endorsement. This demonstrated that creative novelty can contribute to marketing success, despite low fit. More broadly, the frequency data indicate that successful endorsements were not driven by a single theme alone. While Credibility & Social Proof dominated the relevant-successful cases overall, the low-fit/high-success case showed a different thematic pattern, suggesting that multiple routes to success may coexist.

4.4 Codes and Definitions

The five meta-themes established to code for the open-ended "why?" justifications can be found below in Table 4. Each one of the themes was coded for in binary: 1 = present, 0 = absent. This enabled more than one meta-theme to be coded per response. We employed the following coding criteria: a) More than one meta-code may be assigned to a single response (e.g. "the ad was funny and Jordan knows shows" was

coded as emotional = 1 + credibility = 1); b) If none of the definitions above apply to a response, we assigned all zeros and did not count the response in any of the meta-theme tallies. This coding system allows for consistent and defendable classification of every single qualitative justification for why participants responded the way they did to any one endorsement advertisement.

Table 4. Code/Definition

Code	Include_when
Credibility & Social Proof	Mentions the celebrity's authority, expertise, or trust, or invokes peer/fan influence ("everyone's talking about it," "must be good because…").
Emotional & Creative Appeal	References humor, novelty, surprise, beauty or other emotional hooks ("fun," "punchy," "unexpected," "memorable").
Involvement & Personal Relevance	Expresses personal connection or identification ("I could see myself using it," "it spoke to me," "as a fan, I…").
Mismatch & Tension	Calls out awkwardness or lack of congruence ("didn't make sense," "felt forced," "brand–celebrity gap," "weird pairing").
Product–Celebrity Congruence (Fit)	Directly states the celebrity "fits" the product ("perfect match," "aligned," "they belong together," "makes total sense").

Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of Results

Both the survey and evidence illustrate two ways that celebrity endorsements work well. The first route is what we call the "Fit Credibility" pathway, which includes successful, high-fit endorsements such as Michael Jordan endorsing Air Jordans, David Beckham promoting Adidas, and Shaquille O'Neal endorsing Reebok. Each of these endorsements paints a picture in which the celebrity's values, public identity, and credentials are identical to those of the product that they are endorsing. This similarity between the celebrity and the product has a number of important consequences. It draws the attention of consumers to the brand and leads to favorable attitudes towards the intention to promote the brand through word-of-mouth. Value congruence produces this series of conclusions by removing cognitive dissonance, builds trust due to the celebrity's claimed expertise, and creates symbolic meanings to memory structures (Festinger, 1957; Ohanian, 1990; Kamins, 1990; McCracken, 1989).

The low-fit/high-success quadrant of the Shaquille O'Neal campaign for Taco Bell suggests a possible "strategic incongruity" pathway, in which weak relevance does not automatically lead to weak outcomes. The Shaq–Taco Bell pairing serves as an illustrative example of this pattern, indicating that emotional engagement and social proof may, in some cases, offset poor fit. According to Incongruity Theory, moderate schema incongruity leads to elaborate cognitive processing, which is rewarding to the consumer (Mandler, 1982). And since the surprise element was benign, it attracted viewers' attention and increased their

perception of humor (Alden et al., 2000). Our frequency analysis also indicated that Credibility & Social Proof (34 of 67 codes) and Product-Celebrity Congruence (16 codes) were significant in the High-Fit/High-Success examples. Emotional & Creative Appeal (six mentions) outperformed Credibility & Social Proof in the Shaq-Taco Bell example, as shown in Table 3. These results highlight how, even with poor fit, a strategic mismatch can compensate for poor fit and support the strategic incongruity model.

An important interpretive consideration is the demographic composition of our sample. As noted in the Methods section, the participant pool being predominantly male and relatively familiar with sports celebrities could have amplified the perceived credibility and relevance of athlete–product pairings. This is especially relevant when interpreting the strong performance of the three high-fit endorsements: Jordan–Air Jordan, Beckham–Adidas, and Shaq–Reebok, all of which connect athletes to sports-related products in ways that may have felt especially natural and persuasive to respondents already comfortable with sports culture. In other words, some of the observed support for the Fit–Credibility pathway may reflect not only the structural fit between celebrity and product, but also the predispositions of a sample more likely to recognize and value those particular forms of expertise and identity alignment.

At the same time, this sample characteristic may also help explain why certain low-fit cases performed differently from one another. For example, Shaq–Taco Bell may have benefited from respondents' existing familiarity with Shaquille O'Neal as a highly recognizable and entertaining sports figure, making the humorous mismatch feel more accessible and engaging rather than simply confusing. By contrast, low-fit endorsements such as Jordan–Hanes and Beckham–Hugo Boss may have lacked the same degree of novelty payoff or category resonance for this particular sample. Thus, while the demographic tilt of the survey does not invalidate the findings, it does suggest that the relative success of some endorsements, especially sports-linked or sports-adjacent ones, should be interpreted as partly shaped by audience composition as well as by the endorsement strategy itself.

5.2 Practical Applications

Applications of the conclusions of this study should take into account the alignment of endorsement and branding strategy with market objectives. For example, if companies intend to build long-term trust with their customer bases, introducing products that may be difficult to understand requires expertise congruence. Establishing credibility and strong emotional and creative elements may be key to penetrating a new market or capturing immediate attention. This includes inserting strategic humor and social proof through genuine testimonials and behind-the-scenes campaigns to build trust and validity. Lastly, it would be wise to have media support endorsement strategies wherever possible, with congruent pairings best served through informative channels like review and demonstration sites. High-impact and attention-attracting formats, like social media campaigns and viral video marketing, may be especially beneficial for mismatched product endorsements.

5.3 Limitations

There are several methodological limitations to this study. First, our sample size only consisted of 32 participants, who were skewed in terms of age and gender. Thus, the findings of this study are limited by demographic, which skews the results of this study towards a particular population. Second, our case selection was primarily focused on athletes and endorsements related to athletics. Furthermore, parasocial intensity and fan identity may be stronger with sports versus other domains, strengthening the effects of credibility and social proof. Third, our study did not measure purchase behavior or longitudinal changes to brand equity, as our survey captured attention and intent after viewing an advertisement. Finally, participants were only exposed to one advertisement, allowing little opportunity for repetition/re-learning or attention-fatigue for fully integrated marketing campaigns that cut across various forms of media. Our study may have been affected by the novelty of advertisements during the memory and interview process.

5.4 Future Improvements

Celebrity endorsement research should include larger samples that are segmented on demographics and test participants who are 18 or older to better capture variations across different segments (i.e., age, interests, occupation, etc.) and gender. This will allow researchers to see if there is still a fit-success relationship in certain sub-populations. Surveys used for self-reporting can be compared to objective measures of click-through rates, time on page, and sales to feel more confident about participant answers. Furthermore, researchers should measure consumers' perception of brands/purchase intent at different time periods during campaigns to determine successful congruent and incongruent endorsements over time. Increasing or decreasing the levels of incongruity in future studies could help us understand at what threshold consumers are most likely to engage with an advertisement based on how mismatched it is. There may be a "sweet spot" of mismatch that allows us to maximize consumer attention and purchasing power. Lastly, it would be interesting to look at endorsement cases from other industries (i.e., technology, health, financial services, etc.) and compare them to the three sampled in this study. Doing so will allow us to gain an industry-specific understanding of fit as well as build more practical models we can use to develop strategic frameworks for future endorsements.

Conclusion

This study adds to the literature on celebrity endorsement by showing that success is not determined by fit alone. Using both fit–success mapping and thematic analysis, we found that the traditional Match-Up Hypothesis still holds strong: endorsements with high perceived fit were generally the most consistently successful. At the same time, our findings also suggest that a low-fit endorsement is not automatically ineffective. Rather than overturning the Fit Hypothesis, this study refines it by showing that endorsement outcomes can also depend on other factors, such as value congruence, perceived expertise, emotional appeal, and creative surprise.

In that sense, our results point to two broad pathways to endorsement success. The first is the more familiar fit-based pathway, where strong alignment between the celebrity and the product increases trust, credibility, and positive consumer response. The second is a more limited but still important pathway, where a mismatched pairing can succeed if it is supported by humor, novelty, or social proof. This does not mean that a mismatch is equally reliable as a fit. Instead, it suggests that under the right conditions, incongruity can still be persuasive. The Shaq–Taco Bell case is best understood as one example of this possibility, rather than the main proof on which the argument depends.

For practitioners, the takeaway is straightforward. When the goal is to build long-term trust and brand consistency, a strong celebrity–product match remains the safest and most effective strategy. But when the goal is to attract attention, create memorability, or generate buzz, a carefully managed mismatch may also work, especially if it is paired with strong creative execution and a clear emotional hook. Ultimately, the value of this study lies not in arguing that fit no longer matters, but in showing that marketers need a more flexible understanding of when to match and when to surprise in today's crowded media environment.

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