

# From digital media influencers to celebrity endorsers: attributions drive endorser effectiveness

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**Abstract** We propose that attributions about an endorser truly liking, using, or desiring a promoted product mediate the relationship between source and message factors and persuasion via endorsement. In this paper, we integrate the persuasion literature into a framework for examining endorser effectiveness via focus factors (e.g., involvement, cognitive load) that determine whether a consumer thinks carefully or superficially about a message, and lead consumers to rely on different source and message elements (e.g., source attractiveness, argument strength). These elements then influence attributional processing. Correspondent inferences about an endorser can lead to enhanced advertisement and brand attitudes, and spur either fleeting identification with the endorsement or more enduring internalization (Kelman, *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 25:57–78, 1961) of the endorser's message as a consumer's own. Implications of our framework and research directions are discussed.

**Keywords** Endorsement · Attribution · Source characteristics · Correspondence bias

In a consumer-led, user-generated and vastly cluttered media marketplace, with the average consumer streaming through 3,000 messages daily, how do endorsers influence consumers—and can they still be an effective tool for marketing? In this paper, we argue that the theoretical models that are foundational to understanding endorser influence remain effective, but must be adapted to better organize collected findings on paid-by-brand endorsements and to adjust for the emerging role of earned endorsements, such as recommendations from influential bloggers and online reviewers.

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Globally, 77 % of consumers would take action following an earned endorsement or recommendation from family, friends, or online user reviews—an increase compared to traditional television and magazine advertisements in the 2000s (Nielsen 2013). This represents an opportunity for marketing firms, who anticipate spending as much as 21 % of their budgets on social media marketing by 2019 (Soat 2014), and for research into endorser effectiveness to better understand how, and when, endorsements yield attitude change for the products they support. In 2013, beauty blogger Donna Kim was one of a dozen social media influencers who endorsed New York City-based drug store Duane Reade's hosiery line, posting images taken while wearing the brand's apparel via Twitter and Tumblr with vendor-directed hashtag “#DRLegCandy.” This tactic contributed to 19.4 million social media impressions and a 28 % boost in hosiery sales in Duane Reade storefronts (Soat 2014). Fashion brand Juicy Couture similarly launched a series of smartphone application snapchat stories unveiling its spring 2014 collection. The brand targeted snapchat's 26 million users (Weissman 2014) with daily “stories” featuring British model Rosie Huntington-Whitely and netted a 20 % increase in traffic to the brand's webstore (Weissman 2014). Both brands' marketing efforts saw measurable return on investment via strategies that generated third-party earned endorsements or retooled paid-by-brand endorsements for digital campaigns. How does the existing literature on endorsements help us understand what will be effective in the evolving new marketplace? As the digital marketing sector gains spending share, bested only by television advertising share in countries with more than 80 % internet connectivity (Breedon 2013; Nielsen 2013), this question becomes even more pressing for marketing researchers.

In this paper, we suggest that dispositional attributions consumers make about how much an endorser likes, uses, and truly values the endorsed product are essential to understanding endorser influence, no matter what type of endorser or what platform they are engaging with consumers on. When Duane Reade tapped into blogger Donna Kim's network with her earned endorsement for the drugstore's leggings and tights, her fans followed suit and shopped the affordable hosiery line, driving up sales (Soat 2014). In our framework for understanding endorser effectiveness, we suggest that Donna Kim's followers believed she truly liked, valued, and used the product, despite the remuneration (coupons and actual compensation) she earned for her promotional efforts. Attributions about Donna Kim's use of the hosiery led to internalization of the endorsement message and an attitude change for her followers that was favorable for Duane Reade's brand.

We propose that an attribution-based framework is essential for examining endorser effectiveness, regardless of the media consumption context. This framework hinges on focus factors that determine whether a consumer thinks carefully or superficially about a message and message elements that influence attributional processing depending on these differing levels of cognitive engagement. In this framework, inputs are processed via attributions consumers make about the endorser's belief in the product, which results in outcomes of social influence first proposed by Kelman (1961): (1) identification with the message source through superficial mechanisms such as attractiveness and familiarity, and (2) internalization of the message content as consumers weigh an endorser's authenticity and adopt the message as if it were their own. The proposed framework thus repositions endorser effectiveness as a process that, given the correct path from context and message cues to source and advertisement characteristics, results

in influence via shorter-lived identification or longer-lasting internalization. The framework seeks to organize the existing endorser literature and provide prescriptions for future use as media campaigns begin to rely more on peer endorsers in digital advertising (Lithium 2014).

The present work proposes a framework for the endorsement process with consumers' attributions about endorsers at its core. Despite its clear implications for endorsement effectiveness, the attribution literature has been largely neglected in endorsement research. The present work incorporates attributions into the endorsement process and integrates attributions with findings from the persuasion literature to propose a comprehensive model of endorsement effectiveness. In so doing, we aim to motivate future investigations into endorser effectiveness in both traditional and emerging media platforms.

## 1 Social influence

Influence and opinion change emerge embedded in social systems via three processes described by Kelman (1961), which vary in their level of public conformity vs. private acceptance. Of these, compliance is the most superficial level of opinion change, occurring in publicly observable settings when an individual adopts a belief in hopes of achieving a favorable outcome from a source of influence. Because consumers are unlikely to either seek personal favor from or have their behavior observed by celebrity endorsers, we do not focus on compliance in our framework.

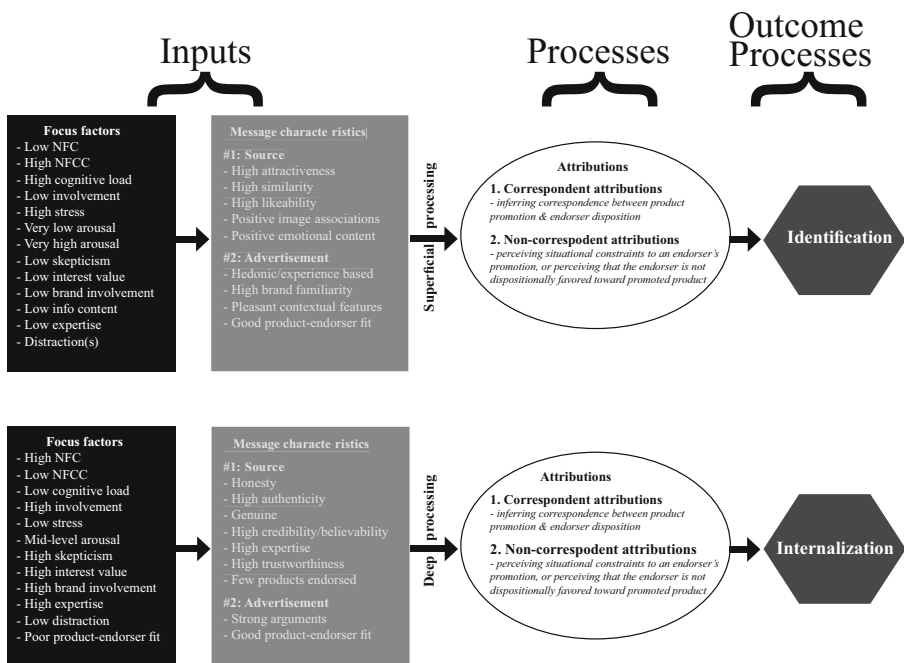
Identification processes (Kelman 1961), though, are based on a desire to become like an endorser by imitating his or her behavior, including the use of the endorsed product. Imagine a consumer who, flipping through a magazine or scrolling through her social media news feed on her smartphone, spots a shampoo advertisement featuring a familiar and likeable celebrity. The consumer does not feel involved in her choice of shampoo and does not desire to learn more about the shampoo's features. However, the endorser's attractiveness cues a spontaneous correspondent inference that the endorser uses and relies on the shampoo to achieve her look. This draws the consumer's attention fleetingly to the brand name. The next time she's at the pharmacy, she takes note of the brand as she is deciding among shampoos.

Internalization, on the other hand, focuses on the message itself (Kelman 1961). Consumers internalize a message when they are sufficiently persuaded by the content of the message to adopt its claims as their own beliefs. Picture the reader of a technology blog who spots a sidebar advertisement for a new tablet, endorsed by a science fiction actor, or the Twitter follower who notes a tech-savvy user posting a series of tweets recommending a new tablet. The consumer has been considering upgrading and has little to distract her as she evaluates either endorser's listed reasons. She generates her own arguments and counterarguments, then arrives at a carefully considered correspondent inference that the endorser genuinely believes in the tablet. Aided by this inference, the consumer adopts the position that this might be a good tablet for her, too.

The difference in identification versus internalization resulting from an endorser's message might not be quite as clean as implied by the examples above, especially considering that consumers are exposed to 3,000–5,000 advertisements every day

(Story 2007). However, as our framework suggests (see Fig. 1), these processes are more likely in certain settings than others and are dependent on the consumer's motivation, ability, and opportunity to process the advertising message. Note that we intend Fig. 1 to provide a representation of the types of focus factors and message and source characteristics that have been used in previous research, rather than an exhaustive list, which would not practically fit into a smaller figure. As Fig. 1 shows, focus factors such as low need for cognition in a setting that is high stress, when combined with source characteristics such as high physical attractiveness or high likeability, can drive correspondent inferences that result in a fleeting sense of identification. When motivation, ability, or opportunity are lacking, consumers are more likely to process the message superficially and rely on simple cues such as background music or physical attractiveness of the endorser (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Because identification cues are primarily superficial in nature, it is expected that in most cases identification will rely primarily on peripheral or heuristic processing. Although this superficial, peripheral route processing may lead to some degree of initial attitude change, it is less likely to produce attitudes that are persistent, are easily accessible, and reliably influence behavior.

On the other hand, high need for cognition paired with a low-stress setting and strong arguments in an endorsement can result in correspondent inferences that yield the longer-lasting attitude change of internalization. When individuals are highly motivated, have high ability to process the message, and have a high degree of opportunity to process the message, they are likely to form careful evaluations of the message based primarily on deep processing cues such as argument quality (Petty and Cacioppo 1984, 1986). Relevance of attitudes also plays a role in this process, with



**Fig 1** Attribution-based framework

higher attitude relevance increasing the likelihood of message-specific encoding, as found in one of the only studies to examine internalization and attitude-behavior consistency in the marketing literature (Cronley et al. 2010). Deep, central route processing fosters message-related thinking that activates cognitive responses and potential changes in cognitive structure. This leads, we suggest, to internalization of the message and development of strong, enduring, and easily accessible attitudes.

The juxtaposition of processing inputs highlights the basic problem for endorser effectiveness. Traditional, paid-by-brand endorsers are often most effective via peripheral channels and identification, cued by high source familiarity, likeability, and attractiveness (i.e., Petty et al. 1983; Mehta 1994), yet peripheral identification with an endorser seldom induces the types of strong positive attitudes an advertiser values most. If, instead, advertisers can position an endorser as highly authentic, credible, and/or expert, this can lead to internalization and deeper processing of the endorser's message.

In the social media context, where consumers report higher trust of the friends and influencers they follow and online reviews they read (Neilsen 2013), the challenges are similar. Yet influencers who have developed homegrown audiences are more likely, we suggest, to be both attractive/likeable and also perceived as authentic and expert. They might also be more likely to represent social influencers who are “in the know” in an identity-relevant product domain (e.g., Berger and Ward 2010; Berger and Heath 2008). It is possible that Donna Kim's Twitter and Tumblr followers, who had already looked to the New York City-based beauty blogger for tips and styles, internalized her promotional message as their own when they contributed to a 28 % sales increase to the drugstore Duane Reade's hosiery line in the month following Donna Kim's promotions (Soat 2014). In this way, we suggest that earned endorsements, i.e., those recommendations of a third party that have “empowered consumers to advocate for their favorite brands” (Neilsen 2013), might benefit from attributional processing that helps consumers internalize these messages and increases attitude strength for the endorsed product or service.

The antecedents of these processes, however, are the chief determinants of any resulting attitude change. Our story as researchers of endorser effectiveness, no matter how significant the plot twist of more than 1.1 billion users on social media behemoth Facebook and \$116 billion spent in internet advertising in 2013 (Breedon 2013), still begins with consumers interacting individually with advertising messages.

## 2 Framework inputs: superficial processing

Kelman (1961) proposed that people adopt behaviors and opinions from another person or group that conforms to their self-definition and upholds aspirational images. Consumers superficially adopt attributes, mannerisms, and styles, and even imitate the product preferences of influential others in an attempt to be like those others.

Certain focus factors increase the likelihood of superficial processing, which puts a consumer on the path to identification via correspondent inferences. Lack of informational content, low involvement with or interest in the product category, and low need for cognition (see Fig. 1), for instance, can all trigger superficial examination of messages (Petty et al. 1983; Khale and Homer 1985; Park and Young 1986; Lee and

Thorson 2008). Constraining focus factors such as high-stress situations or cognitive overload can also inhibit cognitive processing: Under high arousal or in high-stress situations, a celebrity endorser positively influences brand attitudes regardless of argument strength (Sanbonmatsu and Kardes 1988). Cognitive limitations also produce positive effects on brand evaluations from a positive source, regardless of the product category (Kang and Herr 2006).

In essence, any factor that can impact the ability or motivation of the target of a persuasion attempt, from distractions to lack of knowledge and message incomprehensibility, inhibits deeper processing. Under these conditions, peripheral cues and message characteristics such as positive emotional content or an attractive endorser are the most likely sources of influence on consumers through identification processes.

Accompanied by a relevant fit with the endorsed products, source characteristics such as high attractiveness, likeability, familiarity, and similarity can drive attributions that an endorser likes and values the advertised brand. Early work on endorser effectiveness found that physically attractive communicators tend to be more persuasive no matter what product category they endorse (Hovland and Weiss 1951). People rely on a heuristic that “what is beautiful is good,” which makes physically attractive endorsers appear intrinsically more persuasive and legitimate (Miller 1970; Ohanian 1991). Attractiveness is not merely physical, though—endorsers are also persuasive when they are familiar, likeable, and perceived to be similar (McGuire 1969; Ohanian 1991). But marketers beware: Assumed similarity only lasts so long as some endorsers are unfamiliar. The more familiar an entity becomes, the less likable they are (Norton et al. 2007); likewise, the more knowledge consumers have of the politics, faith, and social attitudes of celebrities, the less favorably celebrities are rated (Sanbonmatsu et al. 2012).

Consumers might also infer that characteristics transfer to an endorsed brand through mere association with an endorser. In meaning transfer, celebrity endorsers are invested with social and cultural meaning and transfer their image to products (McCracken 1989). This image is further transferred to consumers who identify with the endorser and purchase the endorsed products. Stronger evaluations of a technology product emerge, for instance, based on an endorsement from a science fiction actor versus endorsements from a comedy actor or a singer (St. James 2004). Although entertainers do not as a general rule have expertise on technology products, meaning transfer suggests that the image of a science fiction starship captain gives that endorser a stronger association with technology.

Key to the identification process is that, in the presence of positive peripheral source factors, there is a high likelihood that consumers will generate favorable attributions and identify with the endorsement. However, identification results in less enduring and less strong attitude change than internalization processes. For example, the presence of a noted endorser can overshadow the advertised message, resulting in more thoughts about the endorser (Mehta 1994), and fewer thoughts about the brand or product.

### 3 Framework inputs: deep processing

In internalization, consumers actively adopt a social actor’s belief system as their own (Kelman 1961). For internalization to occur, therefore, consumers must be cognitively engaged with the message and endorsers must be perceived as believable, honest, and

credible. When consumers internalize the endorsement messages authentic others bear, they are more likely to form strongly held attitudes that are highly accessible, that influence behavior, and that persist over time.

Involvement and motivation are key consumer focus factors leading to systematic or central route processing (Petty and Cacioppo 1984, 1986). Consumers with more internal motivation, more involvement with a product category, and higher need for cognition are more likely to carefully process the advertising message, rely less on superficial source characteristics when making purchase decisions, and potentially internalize the advertising message (St. James 2004).

The number of persuasive sources, varied vs. non-varied claims, and decision complexity (Pechmann 1992; Kardes et al. 1993) also stimulate deeper consideration of an endorsement message. Advertisements that list more than one attribute, for instance, or that reveal negative attributes alongside positive (i.e., higher cost; Pechmann 1992) inspire deeper engagement and encourage elaboration and attitude change.

Consumer motivation and a low-stress setting can thus facilitate deeper cognitive processing of an endorsed message and put a consumer on the path to internalization. Under these conditions, certain source and message characteristics (see Fig. 1) increase the likelihood of persuasion via the attributions that result in internalization. Perceptions of high source credibility, honesty, trustworthiness, and expertise are key inputs into consumers' tendency to internalize an endorsement message. The higher respondents rate an endorser's credibility, the more favorable attitudes tend to be toward the advertisement and brand, and the higher consumers' purchase intentions (Goldsmith et al. 2000).

The literature has shown that endorser type influences perceptions of credibility: Peer endorsers, experts, and company CEOs rate higher than their celebrity counterparts in terms of expertise, which translates to higher evaluations of product quality (Biswas et al. 2006; Kang and Herr 2006). In an era in which marketers are increasingly exploring the use of earned endorsements from social media influencers such as bloggers (Soat 2014; Breedon 2013), this built-in credibility is a competitive advantage for peer endorsers over paid-by-brand and/or celebrity endorsers. Credibility is a flexible concept, though: It can also be cued by argument quality and good product-endorser fit. Endorsers matched with products they are perceived to have more expertise with—an athlete endorsing an energy bar, a golfer endorsing golf balls—can also raise brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Kamins and Gupta 1994; Till and Busler 2000; Premeaux 2005; Choi and Rifon 2012).

Our framework suggests that product-endorser fit plays a dual role in the endorsement process: (a) poor product-endorser fit serves as a focus factor that increases the likelihood of deeper processing (e.g., through increased skepticism), and (b) product-endorser fit also serves as a message element under deeper processing such that some degree of fit increases perceptions of source credibility and thus the likelihood of internalization. Moderate incongruity between an endorser and the product or brand, in fact, is shown in schematic processing to yield the most positive affect for the cognitive efforts required to assimilate two slightly, though not entirely dissimilar, stimuli (i.e., Mandler 1982; Myers-Levy and Tybout 1989). For meaning to adhere to a product, the match must synchronize the celebrity image and endorsed product (DeSarbo and Harshman 1985; McCracken 1989). In the match-up hypothesis, the fit between a celebrity and



the endorsed product is a clear determinant of persuasion (Khale and Homer 1985; Kamins 1990).

Expertise, in general, is a factor in endorsements that enhances evaluations of a brand. Interestingly, expertise can also be derived from aesthetic characteristics: attractiveness of a celebrity endorser leads to higher endorser credibility and more favorable attitudes when the product category is attractiveness-related (i.e., luxury cars) but not attractiveness-unrelated (i.e., home computers) (Khale and Homer 1985; Kamins 1990; Parekh and Kanekar 1994).

The internalization process also hinges on the trust a consumer has for the genuine nature of the persuasive message an endorser presents. Deep elaboration of a message leading to favorable, message-consistent cognitive change in the structure of thoughts about the product can only occur when favorable thoughts predominate in a consumer's mind (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Distrust in an endorser—whether due to consumer skepticism, negative perceptions of an endorser, or unfavorable message attributes that inspire disbelief—can backfire on marketing attempts and cue deeper elaboration of negative attitudes (i.e., Priester and Petty 2003). When a well-known endorser loses face in light of a public scandal, deep processing of this challenge to the endorser's authenticity can lead engaged consumers to scorn the messages and products the endorser represents (Erdogan 1999; Till 1998; Till and Busler 2000). Endorsers who are involved in low-blame scandals (i.e., in a car accident vs. causing a car accident) or who are more closely tied to the product, such as celebrity entrepreneurs, can remain effective product endorsers only if they are able to retain their reputation as being expert or credible (Louie and Obermiller 2002; Premeaux 2005).

This points to the chief component of our organizing framework for harnessing endorser effectiveness: attributions consumers make about endorsers liking, valuing, desiring, and actually using the products and services they promote. Even when celebrities behave badly (such as domestic maven Martha Stewart's incarceration for investment fraud), if consumers can still infer that as endorsers they are likely to use and truly value the products they endorse, the bad news might not significantly impact the brand's bottom line.

#### 4 The power of attributions

We propose that the attributions consumers make during exposure to endorsed messages are a critical driver of endorser effectiveness. Observers view behavior as occurring either due to the dispositions of or the situation surrounding the person performing the behavior (Fiske and Taylor 1991). Yet observers are biased toward preferring dispositional or personality-based attributions (Gilbert and Malone 1995), even in the presence of powerful situational constraints such as a celebrity endorser being paid to appear in an advertisement.

Thinking that others are as they act can be an error when situational constraints are really driving someone's behavior, such as a contract with an apparel company driving an athlete's choice of athletic shoes (Gilbert and Malone 1995). The tendency to infer personal dispositions from behavior is mainly manifest when consumers have limited cognitive resources, are distracted, or are not carefully engaged with the content of the message (Morris and Peng 1994; Gilbert and Malone 1995). As more and more



advertising dollars are invested in internet and mobile platforms (Breedon 2013), consumer distraction—picture a 30-something mother browsing her favorite social media app with one hand at the playground while children squeal around her—may play a heightened role in encouraging dispositional attributions about endorsers.

Importantly, both situational and dispositional attributions are foundational to attitude formation. When consumers are not thinking carefully, they are more inclined to make correspondent inferences that an endorser truly likes the product, which in turn increases their own liking toward the product (Cronley et al. 1999). However, when consumers are motivated to reflect more deeply on an endorsement, they are more inclined to consider situational factors such as endorsement fees that drive an endorser's behavior, and thus are less likely to accept the endorsed product's promoted merits (Silvera and Austad 2004). Attributions about an endorser's liking for and use of a product are associated with attitudes toward both the advertisement and the promoted brand; this means that attributions serve as a potential underlying mechanism and could play a starring role in driving attitudes about advertisements and products (Cronley et al. 1999). In the following sections, we examine the antecedents that build attributions about endorsers and can lead to identification or internalization.

#### 4.1 Attribution process in identification

Given a likeable, attractive endorser, a simple advertisement with few arguments, and a busy, distracted consumer, how does the identification process work? We suggest that an important component of that process is the consumer's spontaneous attribution that the endorser uses and desires the featured product. The consumer must make the correspondent inference that the endorser truly likes the endorsed product as part of the identification process by which the consumer mirrors that preference herself.

Correspondence bias is the tendency for an observer to attribute causes of behavior to something internal to a person, even when situational forces might fully explain the behavior. Most consumers in the Western marketplace possess common knowledge that endorsers are paid to say positive things about products (Friestad and Wright 1994). However, correspondence bias research suggests that this persuasion knowledge might not be applied when making attributions about the endorser. For example, some celebrity endorsers have unquestioned credibility and trust from consumers (Frieden 1984). In this way, even the powerful situational constraint of being paid from an average of \$500,000 to \$2 million for a 1-year endorsement campaign (Badenhausen 2013) might not factor into an observer's attributions about an endorser.

Observers also often have difficulty correcting for situational knowledge once they have arrived at a dispositional or personality-based attribution. Even if a consumer knows that NFL quarterback Tom Brady is paid to endorse an athletic drink, it requires less cognitive effort to exhibit correspondence bias and assume that Tom Brady likes the drink than it takes to factor in the impact of Tom Brady being paid substantially to promote it (i.e., Gilbert et al. 1988). Dispositional attributions might be further facilitated by the fact that consumers tend to assume that celebrities can choose which products they endorse—because Tom Brady could be paid to endorse any drink he wants, he must truly value this drink to agree to endorse it (Frieden 1984).

The role of correspondent inferences in driving identification with an endorser highlights how believable an endorser must be to facilitate attitude change. Achieving

an implicit, automatic believability emerges as a key litmus test in the literature. Consider actor Clint Eastwood, who garners more liking for and recall of the brand when paired with rugged blue jeans vs. board games (Misra and Beatty 1990). Our framework suggests that in the low skepticism environment induced by a good endorser-product fit, positive source characteristics such as perceived attractiveness and familiarity lead to superficially processed correspondent inferences that Clint Eastwood truly uses, desires, and supports the promoted blue jeans. Conversely, a perceived sizable dissimilarity or mismatch between Clint Eastwood and board games increases consumer skepticism, and thus leads the consumer to consider the advertisement more carefully, reducing the likelihood of persuasion via spontaneous correspondent inferences.

This framework suggests that correspondent inferences about an endorser's dispositional desire for and use of a product drive outcomes in many studies. Thrifty UK chef Jamie Oliver was believable as the endorser for an inexpensive British grocery chain, which fostered more identification among shoppers (Byrne et al. 2003). Subsequent events can also cause identification to backfire, such as when news of singer Cher's plastic surgery marred her endorsement for and led to negative evaluations of a gym (Langmeyer and Walker 1991). In such studies, underlying processes are not examined; however, our framework suggests that these outcomes might be explained by implicit correspondent inferences that endorsers use and value the products they endorse, together with the disruption of such inferences when endorsers engage in behaviors that increase consumer skepticism.

In a carefully crafted endorsement, consumers' superficial processing of source and message characteristics leads to spontaneous correspondent inferences, which facilitate identification with an endorser. Perceived similarity, familiarity, likeability, and attractiveness can be processed in a consumer context of desire to be like an endorser or to have what an endorser has. In a media landscape that puts more consumers than ever in touch with peer endorsers via social media and mobile platforms, opportunities to see and be like similar others are rendered more available. Identification also occurs quite readily in the marketplace, given the relative simplicity and availability of cues needed to achieve identification (e.g., a pretty face) and the copious amounts of research that have demonstrated the effectiveness of these cues. However, the relative ease of inducing identification effects comes at the cost of more fleeting, less accessible attitudes. Marketers can only achieve long-lasting and durable attitudes, we argue, via internalization.

## 4.2 Attribution process in internalization

Because the majority of consumers' more enduring and tightly held ideas emerge from cognitive structure changes that occur after deep engagement with a message, internalization points to longer-term endorser effectiveness. Though little research has examined this link (i.e., Cronley et al 1999), it is our contention that attributions about an endorser's desire for and valuation of a product drive how willing consumers are to internalize endorsements.

There are copious potential pitfalls to achieving deeply rooted attitude change via endorsement, however. The more deeply engaged consumers are with an endorsement, the more likely they are to infer situational vs. dispositional reasons for the

endorsement (Gilbert and Malone 1995), which can eliminate internalization altogether. This is a potentially dangerous consequence of advertisers working to create the best conditions for deep processing of endorsements. The more consumers think about the endorser appearing in promotional materials, the more likely they are to correct spontaneous correspondent inferences and infer that the situation (i.e., being paid for an advertisement) inspired the endorser's support, rather than the endorser's authentic preference for a product. If advertisers take the risk of pushing consumers to internalize their message, it will therefore become especially important to craft an authentic advertising message.

Thinking about endorsement fees results in less positive endorser and brand attitudes (Sparkman 1982; Moore et al. 1994). However, even paid celebrity endorsers induce correspondent inferences among North American consumers (Cronley et al. 1999). Of note is that cultures less invested in celebrities can exhibit anti-correspondence bias: Norwegian consumers rate paid endorsers as liking the brand less than both unpaid endorsers and average people (Sorum et al. 2003; Silvera and Austad 2004). These studies further highlight the persuasive role of source characteristics in producing attitude change consistent with internalization—to be successful, advertisements must inspire trust in the endorser.

Can advertisers inspire trust in an endorser and deeper cognitions about the message without creating anti-correspondent inferences? The answer emerges in part via considerations of advertisement complexity. Advertisements that claim a combination of superior and inferior attributes are rated more credible (i.e., Settle and Gordon 1974)—consumers then are more likely to attribute promotional claims to true product characteristics instead of desire to sell the product. Advertisements with negative claims on unimportant or less-important product characteristics likewise score high marks for honesty and favorability (Pechmann 1992).

Under the right circumstances, then, dispositional attributions resulting from cognitive engagement can lead to internalization and more effective endorsers. Advertisers should seek the right mix of source characteristics and message elements in their advertisements. This results in stronger engagement, carefully thought-out correspondent inferences and internalization of deep, longer-lasting positive attitudes toward the endorser, the brand, and the product. Importantly, failure to achieve this mix can backfire and produce non-correspondent inferences and negative internalized attitudes toward the brand and product that are just as deep and long-lasting.

## 5 Implications and research directions

Formal predictions from our framework flow from the central tenet of this paper: attributions mediate the relationship between source and message factors and persuasion via endorsement.

The literature has demonstrated that central attitudes are harder to achieve but more durable, more resistant to change, and more accessible than peripheral attitudes. We propose that attributions might have the same properties and are thus more complex constructs than they have been treated as by most previous literature. Following from the framework, we also anticipate that persuasion via endorsement varies depending on which path is followed. For instance, we hypothesize that attributions formed under the

central route are less likely to be correspondent attributions, but when formed are more durable and more resistant to change and counter argumentation.

Media platform and consumer context for viewing endorsement messages may contribute some complications for persuasion, specifically involving two components we argue are chief determinants of achieving the longer-lasting, more durable and more actionable attitude change of internalization: the likelihood of correspondent inferences and the perceived credibility of endorsers. Thus, we predict that peer endorsers on social media and other digital platforms may overall benefit from enhanced persuasion outcomes via these variables. Digital endorsement messaging is also coming of age among more distracted, multi-tasking audiences and might therefore be more likely to engender smaller-scale behavioral outcomes (evaluative outcomes such as “liking” a brand on Facebook or “following” a brand on Instagram or Twitter). We propose this is an inherent challenge to a consumer’s motivation and ability to process an endorsement message via focus factors (see Fig 1).

## 6 General discussion

This paper contributes to the literature on endorsement by providing a clear, articulated framework for examining the potential impact of adding an endorser to promotional efforts. Our framework integrates findings from the persuasion literature with the endorsement process and emphasizes the centrality of attributions in endorser persuasion processes. Focus factors related to consumer motivation and the environment in which the message is consumed lead to consumer reliance on a particular set of source and message characteristics. This in turn stimulates correspondent inferences that produce either spontaneous and malleable identification with an endorser or more considered, stronger attitudes wrought from internalization processes. Importantly, this paper is among the only in the marketing literature to focus on internalization and related attitude-behavior consistent outcomes (Cronley et al. 2010).

The importance of correspondent inferences is defining: attributions about the endorser’s predisposition to appreciate, use, and value-promoted products underlie effective endorsement and transfer positive beliefs about an endorser to the endorsed product. This framework integrates theoretical elements associated with match-up, meaning transfer, attribution, source attractiveness, consumer involvement, and deep vs. superficial processing to provide a coherent model of endorsement effectiveness grounded in correspondence bias.

Our model also makes important predictions for endorser effectiveness. First, advertisers should direct consumers to the path influenced by the most favorable characteristics of the product and the endorser. One way practitioners can achieve this is by targeting specific groups of consumers (e.g., ad placement in a magazine targeted toward sound system enthusiasts for an endorsement of a high quality but expensive stereo receiver). Advertisements should also be designed in such a way as to encourage target consumers toward the desired mindset (e.g., fast-paced and flashy, but information-poor, content to induce consumers to think superficially about an endorsement of a trendy smartphone that doesn’t have particularly good features).

Second, endorsements should provide strong source and message cues for characteristics that fit the most likely processing mode for intended consumers. For example,

an endorser for shampoo (a routine, typically low involvement purchase) should be attractive but doesn't need to be a noted hair expert. An endorsement for a new diabetes treatment (likely to be high involvement because of importance to consumers' health) should include strong arguments but might not require pleasant background music. We encourage researchers to test predictions derived from our model, and we suggest these are provisional best practices for practitioners designing endorsement advertising.

The framework also indicates intriguing directions for future research. Recent research in social influence, co-consumption, and word-of-mouth makes the model's influence outcomes even more relevant to new work. The framework is responsive to changes in media platform (such as a tweet on Twitter from a brand follower vs. a traditional television commercial paired with a celebrity endorser) as well as changes in source. Word of mouth and social media have also changed the impact and reach of peer and earned endorsements. Although much previous research has focused on celebrity endorsers, our framework applies equally to other types of endorsers. The means by which peer endorsers appear authentic might be different from celebrity endorsers, but achieving that authenticity (via attributions about behavior and intention) is still a key objective for peer endorsements targeting deep processing consumers.

As early as the 1940s, consumers viewing and hearing celebrity testimonials in advertisements rated these ads as the most enjoyable (Rudolph 1947). The face of marketing campaigns is changing, though, and along with it the faces marketers use to make endorsements meaningful. In 2013, one in four advertising dollars was spent in digital advertising, amounting to \$116 billion in global internet advertising and raising digital marketing spending to the second-biggest media buys among brands, following only television advertising efforts (Nielsen 2013; Breedon 2013). And yet brand-generated content online isn't the most trusted: More than 84 % of millennials and even 70 % of Baby Boomers report that user-generated content such as online consumer reviews and peer endorsements influence their purchasing decisions (Lithium 2014). As the field learns how to orchestrate a digital endorser campaign, we suggest that our framework, which integrates decades of persuasion research and emphasizes the underlying role of attributions about endorsers liking, using, and truly desiring the products they promote, will provide a better, more attuned model for predicting the success of endorsement advertisements.

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