Celebrity Endorsement: The Effects of Social Comparisons on Women's Self-Esteem and Purchase Intensions

Abstract

In this research we investigated the interplay between celebrities holding positive vs. negative media images and women's self-esteem and purchase intensions. Study 1 documents that "good" celebrities decrease consumers' self-esteem while a "bad" celebrity increase self-esteem. Study 2 shows that changes in self-esteem transfer to the product if consumers engage in an assimilating comparison process. Study 3 demonstrates that for consumers low in true self-esteem, a bad celebrity increases and a good celebrity decreases purchase intentions. In contrast, for women high in true self-esteem, a positive celebrity leads to greater intentions to purchase the celebrity-endorsed product.

Keywords: celebrity endorsement, self-esteem, women

Celebrity Endorsement: The Effects of Social Comparisons on Women's Self-Esteem and Product Evaluation

Anecdotal evidence suggests that firms should hire "good" celebrities, i.e. persons with idealized media images who enjoy good reputations among the target market, to endorse products. In contrast, firms should avoid "bad" celebrities, i.e. people holding a negative media image among the target market. The underlying belief is that the positive image of good celebrities will spill over to the product. However, research on social comparisons suggest that comparing oneself to people who are better off typically decreases self-esteem while comparisons to people who are worse off enhances self-esteem (Heatherton and Polivy, 1991; Smith, 2000). Applying these findings into the celebrity endorsement literature, since "good" celebrities are well off, they may decrease women's self-esteem, where "bad" celebrities that most often are much worse off, they may enhance women's self-esteem. Across three studies, the interplay between celebrity type (good vs. bad) and women's self-esteem on purchase intensions was investigated.

Study 1 focused on the impact of "good" and "bad" celebrities versus non-celebrities on consumer's self-esteem. By means of a story, we manipulated positive and negative information about a celebrity (Jessica Alba) vs. a non-celebrity (young female named Jessica Melba). Sixty women read a story, depending on the condition, and answered questions about their temporal self-esteem (Heatherton and Polivy, 1991). Temporal self-esteem refers to a person's perception about the goodness of the self that shifts to a more or less extent in the short-term as a response to positive and negative feedback about the self. A 2 (celebrity portrayal: negative, positive) x 2 (type of person: celebrity vs. regular girl) between-subjects ANOVA showed a significant interaction effect between the two factors, $F(47, 5) = 7.64$, $p < .01$). The main effect of celebrity portrayal was marginally significant, and the main effect type of person was significant. Subsequent mean comparisons showed that a "bad" celebrity, i.e., the negative story condition) lead to greater temporal self-esteem than a "good" celebrity (i.e., a positive story about the celebrity). The reverse pattern was obtained in the non-celebrity condition; where the negative story lead to a decrease in self-esteem while the positive story to an increase (See Figure 1 and Table 1).

The purpose of Study 2 was to study the possible spillover effect of changes in self-esteem to the endorsed product. A similarity-strategy test measuring consumers' level of assimilation or contrasting (Gentner and Markman 1996; Mussweiler, Ruter and Epstude, 2004) was employed. It was expected that the extent to which a similarity-(vs. contrast) focus is induced by the celebrity, the temporary feelings related to self-esteem will be transferred (vs. not be transferred) to purchase intensions. A similarity focus means that people focus on the similarities between themselves and another person, and a dissimilarity focus means that people focus on the dissimilarities between themselves and another person (Markman and Gentner, 1996). 91 women participated in the study. To measure similarity/dissimilarity focus, we used the picture comparison task (Markman and Gentner, 1995; Mussweiler, Ruter and Epstude, 2004). There was a significant interaction effect between similarity/dissimilarity focus and self-esteem on purchase intension: $\beta = .141$, $t = 1.87$, $p < .05$. The interaction effect shows that the extent to which a similarity- (vs. difference) focus is induced by the celebrity, the temporary feelings related to self-esteem evoked by the celebrity will be transferred (vs. not be transferred) to purchase intension (See Table 2).

Study 3 was designed to examine whether the effects tested in Study 1 and 2 for temporal self-esteem also hold for true self-esteem. True self-esteem refers to the stability of self-esteem and depends on the degree to which a person's basic needs are fulfilled (Deci and Ryan, 1995; 2000; 2002; Gagné and Deci, 2005; Kernis, 2005). A person whose basic needs are thwarted is prone to self-esteem instability while someone whose basic needs are fulfilled enjoys a stable level of self-esteem. Therefore, the effects observed should also hold for true self-esteem and consumers low and high in true self-esteem should differ in their sensitivity to "good" and "bad" celebrities. 527 participants viewed a clothing advertisement endorsed by "good" and "bad" celebrities and answered questions about their true self-esteem (Deci and Ryan, 2002) ($M_{\text{true self-esteem}}$ = 15.93, SD = 1.45) and purchase intension ($M_{\text{purchase intension}}$ = 4.56, SD = 1.88). The results were analyzed with ordinary least squares regressions. The independent variables were centered before creating the interaction effect (Aiken and West, 1991). The results show that there were two significant main effects: the main effects of type of celebrity (good, bad) and self-esteem on purchase intension (β = -.306, t = -7. 48, p <.01) and (β = .254, t = 4. 58, p <.01). Importantly, we found a significant interaction effect between the two variables (β = -.169, t = -3. 05, p <.01), showing that for people whose self-esteem is high (vs. low), a "good" (vs. "bad") celebrity leads to more positive purchase intension (See Table 3).

Across three studies we find that the success of celebrity endorsement is impacted by how the celebrity affects consumers' self-esteem and which comparison strategy the consumer engages in. The findings suggest that firms may be better off hiring "bad" celebrities if their target group suffers from low true self-esteem. Regarding the ethical debate on advertising and its possible negative effects on women, these results, like the results obtained in previous research, indicate that changes in self-esteem when exposed to idealized images is only temporal and that true self-esteem can protect women from temporal self-esteem drops. Therefore, idealized media images may not be as harmful for most women as previously speculated. Helping women to fulfill their basic needs, i.e. fostering interpersonal relationships as well as developing real competences and skills, is likely to be a more fruitful approach to building self-esteem than trying to reduce the prevalence of media images.

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TABLE 1
RESULTS STUDY 1

	Endorser Manipulation							
	Celebrity				Non-celebrity			
	Positive Story		Negative Story		Positive Story		Negative Story	
	Mean	SD	*Mean*	SD	*Mean*	SD	*Mean*	SD
Self-esteem	5.26	(.91)	5.53	(.65)	5.43	(.76)	3.99	(1.25)

Notes: The F-test for the whole model was significant, $F(5, 47) = 7.64$, $p < .01$.

TABLE 2
REGRESSION RESULTS FROM STUDIES 2 AND 3

	Outcome	Predictor	β	t-value
Study 2	Purchase intention	Similarity/dissimilarity focus	-.070	-.99^{+}
		Self-esteem	.098	1.29^{+}
		Similarity/dissimilarity focus x Self-esteem	.141	1.87*
Study 3	Purchase intention	Type of celebrity	-.306	-7.48**
		Self-Esteem	.254	4.58**
		Type of celebrity x Self-esteem	-.169	-3.05**

$^{+}$p = .10
*p = .05
**p = .01

FIGURE 1
STUDY 1: RESULTS

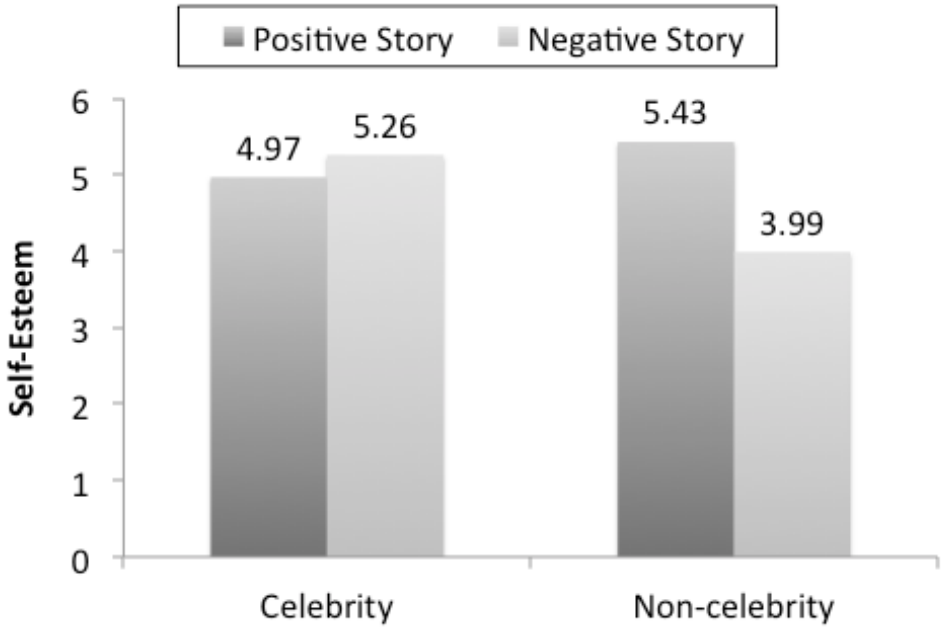

FIGURE 2
STUDY 2: RESULTS

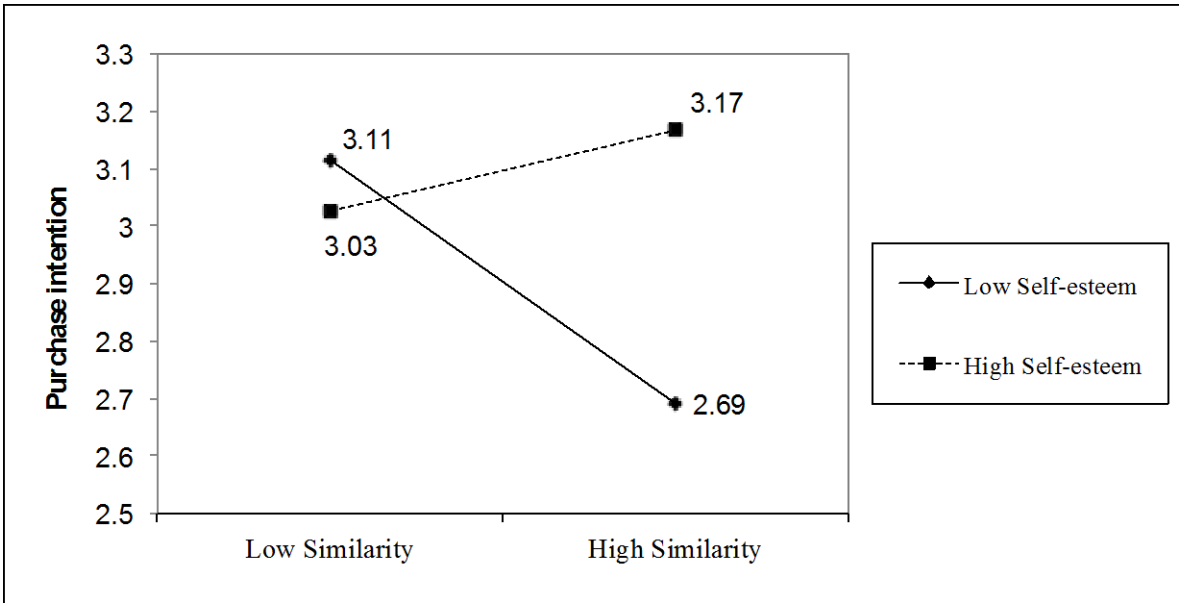

FIGURE 3
STUDY 3: RESULTS