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I AM NOT WHAT I LIKE: HOW ENDORSING BRANDS ON SOCIAL MEDIA LEADS TO CONTRASTING EFFECTS IN CONSUMERS' SELF-EVALUATIONS

Stefan F. Bernritter*, Annemijn C. Loermans, Anniek Eigenraam,

& Peeter W.J. Verlegh

*Corresponding author

Stefan F. Bernritter, Associate Professor of Marketing, King's Business School, King's College London, Bush House, 30 Aldwych, London WC2B 4BG, United Kingdom. E-mail: stefan.bernritter@kcl.ac.uk. Telephone: +44 020 7848 5623

Annemijn Loermans, Assistant Professor of Marketing, Institute of Management Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London. New Cross, London SE14 6NW, United Kingdom. Email: a.loermans@gold.ac.uk

Anniek Eigenraam, PhD Candidate in Marketing, Department of Marketing, School of Business & Economics, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands. E-mail: anniek.eigenraam@vu.nl

Peeter W.J. Verlegh, Professor of Marketing, Department of Marketing, School of Business & Economics, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands. E-mail: P.Verlegh@vu.nl. Telephone: +31 20 5986262

I AM NOT WHAT I LIKE: HOW ENDORSING BRANDS ON SOCIAL MEDIA LEADS TO CONTRASTING EFFECTS IN CONSUMERS' SELF-EVALUATIONS

Abstract

To what extent do consumers incorporate the identity of brands they endorse on social media into their self-concept? Contrary to popular belief, we argue that online brand endorsements may not necessarily lead to inclusion of the brand into the self and may, consequently, lead to contrast effects that negatively affect consumers' self-evaluations. We test our hypotheses across five studies. We find that consumers who endorse a brand on social media subsequently negatively adjust their self-evaluations on traits that reflect the brand's key personality traits. This effect occurs only if they endorse the brand (i.e., by 'liking' or 'following' it), but not when they just visit the brand's social media page. Moreover, the effect is moderated by brand symbolism, with stronger effects if the brand is perceived to have low brand symbolism. The downwards shift in consumers' self-evaluations negatively affects brand outcomes. We also explore the role of incentives as counter mechanism. In conclusion, our findings reveal a dark side of promoting consumer endorsement of brands on social media; a dark side that has implications not only for consumers, but also for brands.

Keywords: online brand endorsements; Social Comparison Theory; assimilation and contrast effects; self-evaluation; social media; brand personality; consumer identity

Introduction

Brands spend considerable resources to get consumers to engage with them online, for example by 'liking' them on Facebook, re-tweeting branded content on Twitter, or following them on Instagram (e.g., Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012; Wallace et al. 2014). This is not surprising considering the beneficial consequences of consumers' online brand endorsements documented within the literature: online brand endorsements have, for example, been shown to positively affect consumers' brand attitude, purchase intention (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, and de Vries 2015), brand love, and electronic word-of-mouth (Loureiro, Gorgus, and Kaufmann 2017). These positive effects are often attributed to the notion that online endorsements lead consumers to include the endorsed brands more firmly into their self-concept (Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012; Wallace, Buil, and De Chernatony 2012).

Brands have always been an essential tool that consumers use to construct, repair, maintain, express and signal their identity (Escalas and Bettman 2003; Fournier 1998; McCracken 1989). With the advent of the digital age, however, this phenomenon has become a more ubiquitous consumption practice. Online displays of identity signaling through brands does not involve the same financial commitment that is typically associated with offline displays of identity, which typically require material acquisition of branded products (Belk 2013; Jensen Schau and Gilly 2003).

The relation between consumers' self-concept and online brand endorsements is receiving increasing attention (Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012; Wallace, Buil, and de Chernatony 2020).Although online endorsements are a pervasive part of consumers' online engagement with brands, it is unclear how engaging in online brand endorsements affects the consumer. If such a link exists, it also becomes important to examine whether this link then reciprocates to brands by affecting brand outcomes. The current research addresses these questions by examining whether and how online brand endorsements affect consumers' self-evaluations. By applying insights from Social Comparison Theory (Festinger 1954) and building on work in consumer research that demonstrates that consumers imbue brands with personality traits (Aaker 1997; Aggarwal and McGill 2007), we develop the idea that endorsing brands online activates the brands' identity-signaling potential, which consequently, turns brands into evaluative standards for consumers. By integrating insights from research on categorization and comparison processes (Herr 1986; Mussweiler 2003; Wänke et al. 2001),

specifically the Inclusion/Exclusion Model (IEM; Schwarz and Bless 2007; Bless and Schwarz 2010), we test the notion that engaging in online brand endorsements may not always lead to a shift in consumers' self-evaluations *toward* the identity of the brand (assimilation) but may also have adverse effects on consumers' self-evaluations and lead consumers to shift *away* from the brand's identity (contrast). This contrast effect should have negative consequences for brands, by negatively affecting brand outcomes. In other words, we predict that endorsing RedBull might not always give the consumer proverbial wings, but may, in fact, clip them[1]. And in fact, clip those of the brand as well.

Social Comparison Theory highlights that people have an innate drive to evaluate themselves – they compare themselves to others and base their self-evaluations on these comparisons (Festinger 1954). As with any evaluative judgment involving a comparison, self-evaluations are prone to assimilation and contrast effects, whereby the self-evaluative judgment of the target (in this paper, the consumer) either moves closer to the position of the standard (the other, or, in this paper, the brand) on a specific dimension (e.g., a personality trait), or away from the standard (Blanton 2001). The occurrence of assimilation versus contrast effects has been shown to depend on a variety of factors, including the ambiguity of the target (Herr, Sherman, and Fazio 1983; Pelham and Wachsmuth 1995), the extremity of the standard (Herr 1986; Herr, Sherman, and Fazio 1983), and shared 'category' membership between the target and standard (Ledgerwood and Chaiken 2007; Mussweiler and Bodenhausen 2002), with the latter two factors being particularly relevant to this current research.

An extensive literature in marketing has highlighted the fact that consumers anthropomorphize brands and imbue brands with specific personality traits (e.g., Aaker 1997; Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007). Building on this, we postulate that brands can act as a standard to which consumers compare themselves. In fact, it may be argued that brands are particularly suited as evaluative standards, because they are deliberately designed to reflect a strong, unique, and idealized identity (Malär et al. 2012). This is essential for the role of brands as symbols that communicate what a company or product stands for (Urde 2013). As a result, brand identity is often constructed in such a way that it lies in the extremes. For example, Nike, a sports brand, is very sporty, RedBull, an energy

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[1] Red Bull is a well-known and popular energy drink brand. Their slogan is "Red Bull gives you wings."

drink brand, extremely self-confident, and the WWF, a charity devoted to wilderness preservation, exceptionally sincere. Because extreme standards are more likely to induce contrast effects (Herr, Sherman, and Fazio 1983; Herr 1986; Schwarz and Bless 2007), the use of brands as evaluative standards is likely to have a negative impact on consumers' self-evaluations. This contrast effect is theorized to be compounded by the fact that online brand endorsements might not be enough to lead to inclusion of the brand within the consumer's self-concept (i.e., psychological ownership; Atasoy and Morewedge 2018; Morewedge et al. 2021).

In line with previous research on consumers' identity-related brand use (Escalas and Bettman 2005; Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli 2007; Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012), we also explore the role of brand symbolism, defined here as the perceived extent to which a brand is able to signal something about a consumer's identity to others (Escalas and Bettman 2005; for a broader discussion on symbolism and brands please consult Mick 1986) as a possible boundary condition of our proposed effect. Brands perceived as scoring high on brand symbolism, that is, brands with a high perceived potential for signaling something about a consumer's identity to others, are more likely to be included within the consumers' self-concept (Bernritter, Verlegh, and Smit 2016; Escalas and Bettman 2005; White and Dahl 2007). Research that has shown that assimilative effects occur when standards are included within the same category as the target (Ledgerwood and Chaiken 2007; Mussweiler and Bodenhausen 2002). We therefore expect that the high signaling potential of brands scoring high on brand symbolism may thus reduce and perhaps even override the proposed contrast effect.

Our research contributes to the literature in four important ways. Firstly, it responds to calls for more research on intrapersonal consequences of identity expression in computer-mediated communication (Reed et al. 2012; Stephen 2016). Secondly, it extends work on Social Comparison Theory (Festinger 1954; Hogg and Fragou 2003; Zell and Alicke 2009) and categorization and comparison processes (Bless and Schwarz 2010; Mussweiler, Rüter, and Epstude 2004), by examining how online interactions with brands, shape consumers' use of brands as standards in self-evaluative judgments. This is especially noteworthy considering that consumers' lives and identity construction are increasingly happening online, which has led to the extension of consumer self-

concepts into the digital domain (Belk 2013). While work on the extended self has focused on (ownership) of products and, for example, examined how a brands' personality can 'rub-off' on consumers via ownership (Park and John 2010), no study has looked at these effects in the online domain. In addition to the obvious practical relevance, this contribution is also of theoretical importance, as it shows how low-threshold types of behavior, such as the mere 'liking' or 'following' of a brand on social media, may alter consumers' self-evaluations. Lastly, this research contributes to work that shows how online brand engagement may not have the assumed or intended positive downstream consequences for brands (Grewal et al. 2019; John et al. 2017; Mochon et al. 2017) and may, in fact, have a negative effect on consumers (Bower 2001; Richins 1991; Strahan et al. 2006). This research presents an important caveat for the brand-building potential of social media, but also explores some of the boundary conditions of the effect that can help brands to sidestep potential negative consequences of online brands endorsements.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Social Comparison Theory

The self is a complex, multi-faceted construct which has been studied extensively within marketing (e.g., Aaker and Lee 2001; Landon 1974; Nam et al. 2016; Sirgy 1982). In essence, the self-concept, the term generally used to describe the mental representation of the self, refers to all self-knowledge organized within memory that reflects ideas about who we are (McConnell, Shoda, and Skulborstad 2012; Schleicher and McConnell 2005). It consists of different components: personality traits (e.g., confident, sincere, introverted etc.), abilities, social relations (e.g., being a daughter, part of a sorority etc.), the social and cultural groups consumers belong to, hopes, aspirations and fears about who consumers will become (future, ideal, and feared selves), who they used to be (past selves), as well as their possessions and digital profiles (Belk 2013; John 1990; Markus and Nurius 1986; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Tajfel et al. 1971).

Each of the different components of the self has been shown to fundamentally shape our (online) consumption behaviour and has important implications for online brand endorsements (Mishra, Roy, and Bailey 2015; Stuppy, Mead, and van Osselaer 2020). For example, Marbach and

colleagues (2016) investigated which personality traits lead certain consumers to engage with brands online and found that extraversion and openness to experience are both positively associated with online brand engagement. Furthermore, research by Bernritter and colleagues (2017) has shown how consumers with an interdependent self-concept, characterized by seeing oneself as interconnected to others, are more likely to endorse brands online compared to consumers with an independent self-concept, characterized by seeing oneself as independent from others.

Social Comparison Theory highlights that the self-concept is, in part, the result of comparative processes (Festinger 1954). Consumers compare themselves to others to determine how they 'score' on a certain dimension, for example, whether or not they are high or low in self-confidence or sincerity. These comparisons form the basis of the self-related judgments about traits and other attributes of one's actual self (i.e., the part of the self that represents who consumers think they currently are; Bosch and Wilbert 2020; McConnell et al. 2012). These judgments are commonly referred to as 'self-evaluations' (e.g., Wood 1989).

Self-evaluations can be fuelled by upward or downward comparisons. Upward social comparison refers to the process of comparing oneself to someone who scores higher on a specific dimension, whereas downward social comparison refers to the process of comparing oneself to someone who scores lower on a specific dimension (Festinger 1954). Both processes have been studied within marketing with several studies, for example, showing how an upward social comparison to a very attractive model shown in an advertisement negatively affects consumers' self-esteem (Martin and Kennedy 1993; Richins 1991), and consequently also the evaluation of the spokesperson and the product argument (Bower 2001). However, are these evaluations always fair and free from bias? And what exactly determines who consumers compare themselves to?

Categorization and Evaluative Processes: The Inclusion/Exclusion Model

Research within social cognition on categorization and evaluative processes highlights how any evaluation is prone to biases (Bless and Schwarz 2010; Kahneman 2003; Wänke, Bless, and Igou 2001) and thereby forms an essential piece in explaining why we predict that endorsing brands online might affect consumers self-evaluations. All evaluative judgements depend on information that is brought to mind in the moment of judgment (Smith and Semin 2004; Smith and Semin 2007; Bless

and Schwarz 2010). This may include information about features of the evaluated object/person that is retrieved from memory, but also contextual information that is brought to mind (Schwarz and Bless 1992; Bless and Schwarz 2010). Often, this contextual information functions as a standard (another object) against which the target can be compared (Schwarz and Bless 1992; Wänke, Bless, and Igou 2001; Bless and Schwarz 2010). For example, consumers' judgment of whether or not they have a large following on Instagram, will be different when Ariana Grande, with many followers, or Arnold from next door, with very few followers, are brought to mind.

The IEM (Schwarz and Bless 2007; Bless and Schwarz 2010) further details the central role of the standard in self-evaluations. The model proposes that the impact of a standard on one's self-evaluative judgments depends on whether or not the comparison standard is included in the self-concept. When the standard is *included*, an assimilative effect will occur, meaning that the evaluation of the target on a certain dimension will shift *towards* the position of standard on that dimension. If the standard is *not* included in the self, a contrast effect will occur, meaning that the evaluation will shift away from the position of standard (Blanton 2001; Morse and Gergen 1970; Mussweiler, Rüter, and Epstude 2004; Mussweiler 2003).[2]

One factor that affects whether or not the standard is included in the representation of the self, is the extremity of the standard (Mussweiler and Strack 2000; Herr 1986; Herr, Sherman, and Fazio 1983). Several studies have shown how using extremely attractive (often photo-shopped) models as a standard for self-evaluations can negatively impact women's affect as well as their evaluation of and satisfaction with their appearance (Birkeland et al. 2005; Bower 2001; Richins 1991; Strahan et al. 2006).

Analogously, Weiss and Johar (2013; 2016) have shown that products that consumers own are included in the self, whereas products that consumers do not own are not included in the self.

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[2] Note that the terms assimilation and contrast do not say anything about the direction, but about whether or not the shift in evaluation is displaced *away* from or *towards* the position of the standard on the dimension in question. When a consumer evaluates the size of their following on Instagram and comparing themselves to either Ariana Grande or Arnold from next door a contrast effect is likely to occur in both scenarios, as neither is likely to be included in the representation of the self. When Ariana Grande is called to mind, an upward social comparison is made, resulting in a downward shift in the evaluation of the size of followers the consumer has themselves; when Arnold from next door is called to mind, a downward social comparison is made, resulting in an upward shift in the evaluation of the size of followers the consumer has themselves.

Consequently, when consumers evaluated themselves on personality traits (e.g., sincerity), they assimilated their evaluations towards the position of a product they owned on that dimension (e.g., headphones that scored high or low on the sincerity dimension) but contrasted their self-evaluations away from the position of the product they did not own on that dimension (Weiss and Johar 2016). A parallel effect is observed when the product is the target to be evaluated and the self is the standard against which it is compared: evaluations of owned products are judged in assimilation with one's own traits, whereas evaluations of owned products are judged in contrast with one's own traits (Weiss and Johar 2013).

The last two studies on the assimilation and contrast effects in respect to products show how products can act as a standard, in part because they are perceived to possess personality traits. This notion is corroborated by the concept of the extended self, which refers to the notion that our possessions are included within the self-concept (Belk 1988; Sayre 1994). With the advent of the digital age, Belk (2013) updated this concept to also incorporate our digital possessions. The question then becomes whether these findings can be extended to brands and whether similar type of assimilation and contrast effects might be observed when considering online brand endorsements. As will be detailed below, brands can serve as evaluative standards precisely because they are imbued with personality traits. However, because (physical) ownership of products is consequentially different from online brand endorsements, we predict that using brands as standards has outcomes that are notably different from using of products.

Brand Representations: Anthropomorphism and Brand Personality

Consumers think about and relate to brands much like they think about and relate to other people (Fournier and Alvarez 2012; MacInnis and Folkes 2017). Imbuing brands with personality traits is a consequence of consumers' tendency to anthropomorphise brands, that is their tendency to attribute humanlike traits and intentions to nonhuman entities (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007). The traits that are attributed to brands, which make up brands' personality (Aaker 1997; Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner 2010; Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012) have received a lot of attention within the marketing literature. Aaker (1997) for example, has delineated five dimensions of brand personality: competence, excitements, ruggedness, sincerity, and sophistication. More recent work has focused on

two dimensions that are also typically used to judge and describe other people (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2007): warmth and competence (Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner 2010; Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012). Moreover, a brand's personality traits have been found to affect online brands endorsements. For example, Bernritter et al. (2016) found that consumers were more likely to endorse brands that were perceived as having a particularly warm personality.

Brands are often designed to reflect a strong, unique and idealized identity (Malär et al. 2012). Distinctiveness is a key component of a strong brand personality (Florack and Palcu 2017) and has been shown to positively affect the appeal of the brand and the brand identification (and consequently, word-of-mouth; Kim, Han, and Park 2001). Seeing how distinctiveness is hard to be achieved by scoring averagely on a typical dimension, brand personalities are often configured at the extreme: Nike is very sporty, RedBull extremely self-confident, and the WWF exceptionally sincere.

Interestingly, the interaction, or more accurately, the match between the brand's personality and the consumer's identity is also an important factor to consider when explaining consumers' brand preferences. A range of studies have documented how consumers prefer to consume brands whose personality mirrors theirs, something that is often referred to as consumer-brand self-congruency (Aaker 1999; Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli 2007; Malär et al. 2012).

Research on the antecedents of online brand endorsements, defined as "online behavior that affiliates consumers with brands in ways that are public, positive, and perceived by others" (Bernritter et al. 2016, p. 28), has highlighted that online brand endorsements are used to *signal* one's identity. For example, Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) found that it helps consumers *maintain*, *enhance* and *protect* aspects of their self-concept. Likewise, Wallace and colleagues (2020) describe how engaging with charities on Facebook allows consumers to feel better about themselves and *signal* their virtuous behavior to others. These findings echo earlier findings concerning offline brand consumption which also highlight the identity-construction potential of brands (Aaker 1997; Berger and Heath 2007; McCracken 1989; Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli 2007). Escalas and Bettman (2003; 2005), for example, show how brands used by reference and aspirational groups of consumers, drive consumers to form connections with that brand as well.

We postulate that engaging in (online) brand endorsements will trigger the representation of the brand as having specific traits associated with it, which in turn, will make it into a comparative standard to which consumers can compare themselves. Consequently, assimilation and contrast effects should be observed between consumers and brands, like they have been observed between consumers (Mussweiler and Bodenhausen 2002) and consumers and products (Weiss and Johar 2016; Park and John 2010). Initial proof for this idea comes from a study by Park and John (2010), who found that brand use can lead to an assimilation effect: consumers who used a Victoria's Secret shopping bag evaluated themselves as better looking, more feminine, and more glamorous, while consumers who used an MIT pen evaluated themselves as more intelligent, more of a leader, and harder working. Crucially though, the study by Park and John (2010) looked at brand use, and thereby closely resembles the ownership manipulations that were used in the studies by Weiss and Johar (2013; 2016), which showed assimilation and contrast effects for products. We thus contend that feelings of psychological ownership are crucial for incorporation of brands into the self. This is further supported by research which has shown that digital goods are valued less than their physical counterpart, precisely because consumers feel less psychological ownership over digital goods, postulated to be dependent on the fact that they can't physically manipulate them (Atasoy and Morewedge 2018; see also, Morewedge et al. 2021). Not surprisingly perhaps, conceptualizations of the (digital) extended self have consequently mostly focused on (digital) products, and not so much on brands (Belk 1988; Belk 2013).

Conversely, we hypothesize that engaging in online brand endorsements will be enough to highlight the signaling potential of brands, but not enough to warrant inclusion in the self. This is further compounded by the fact that brands tend to mimic extreme standards, which would also make exclusion likelier (Herr, Sherman, and Fazio 1983; Schwarz and Bless 2007). We thus hypothesize that online brand endorsement will lead to a contrast effect whereby consumers' self-evaluations will shift away from that of the brand. Basing ourselves on research which shows that no effects on self-evaluations occurs when the comparison standards are deemed irrelevant (Lockwood and Kunda 1997; see also Heinberg and Thompson 1995), we further predict that merely encountering a brand

will not be enough to 'activate' the identity-signaling potential of brand and will consequently have no effect on consumers' self-evaluations.

H1: After endorsing a brand on social media, in comparison to merely visiting the social media page of the brand, consumers' self-evaluation score on the focal traits of the endorsed brand will decrease.

Brand Symbolism

Even though all brands are, to a certain degree, anthropomorphized and imbued with personality traits, and thus have the potential to be used by consumers to signal their identity, brands are not equal in this regard. Specifically, brands differ in their perceived ability to signal something meaningful about the identity of the consumer to others (Escalas and Bettman, 2005; 2009). For example, a popular brand that is widely used by a diverse group of consumers (e.g., Honda) is unlikely to be perceived (by consumers) as being able to signal something specific about the consumer's identity to others (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). Conversely, a brand that is used by a homogenous group of consumers who are (perceived to be) similar in terms of their personality and/or values, is likely to be recognized (by consumers) as being able to signal something about the consumer's identity to others. Escalas and Bettman (2005) have coined this perceived difference in the identity-signaling potential of brands as brand symbolism and define it as the extent to which a brand is able to "communicate something about the person using [the brand]" (p. 380).

Brand symbolism, as it is used in this research, should be understood as a dimension of brands that captures the perceived extent to which a brand is thought to generally be able to signal a consumer's identity to others. Although one might expect some consensus amongst consumers – most consumers are likely to, for example, perceive a brand such as Harley Davison as having a high identity-signaling potential and thus scoring high on the brand symbolism dimension – it should be noted that brand symbolism is in the eye of the beholder, as in, it is about how an (individual) consumer perceives the identity-signaling potential of that specific brand. Consequently, a brands' brand symbolism will vary across consumers. It is further important to note that brand symbolism does not depend on the congruency between the identity of the consumer and the brand (i.e., consumer-brand self-congruency) or on the extent to which consumers have incorporated the brand

into their self-concept (i.e., self-brand connections). It simply denotes the general potential of a brand to signal (any) identity to others.

The important role of brand symbolism in consumers' brand use and identity construction has been documented in various contexts (Bernritter, Verlegh, and Smit 2016; Escalas and Bettman 2005; White and Dahl 2007). For example, research by Escalas and Bettman (2005) found that the positive effect on self-brand connections, that is "the extent to which individuals have incorporated brands into the self-concept" (Escalas and Bettman 2003, p. 340), for brands that were associated with an in-group (vs. an out-group), was more pronounced for brands scoring higher on brand symbolism compared to brands scoring lower on brand symbolism. Similarly, White and Dahl (2007) found that "self-brand connections were weaker for dissociative brands [brands that are seen as being associated with an out-group] when the [brand] was seen as being more symbolic" (p. 528). Moreover, Bernritter, Verlegh, and Smit (2016) found that the positive effect of the perceived warmth of a brand on the consumer's intention to endorse the brand online, was more pronounced for brands perceived as highly symbolic compared to brands perceived as less symbolic.

We argue that endorsing a brand which one perceives as scoring high on brand symbolism serves as an implied social label (Summers, Smith, and Reczek 2016), which enhances the extent to which brands are connected to and incorporated within the self (Escalas and Bettman 2005). This happens, in part, because endorsing a brand perceived to be highly symbolic sends a stronger social signal to others than endorsing a brand which is perceived to be less symbolic (i.e., a brand which is perceived to be less able to signal something about the consumer's identity to others; Berger and Heath 2007). Online brand endorsements are particularly likely to act as implied social labels, because they are public (they are observed by others who 'follow' or are 'friends' with you), and often displayed on a person's social media profile. Seeing how contrast and assimilation effects are dependent on whether the standard is included in the self, with assimilation effects occurring when the standard is included in the same 'category' as the self (Schmitt et al. 2006; Ledgerwood and Chaiken 2007), we predict that brand symbolism will moderate the relation between online brand endorsements and consumers' self-evaluations. Specifically, we predict that endorsing a highly symbolic brands is more likely to lead to an assimilative effect (because of the enhanced likelihood of

inclusion of the brand in the self), whereas the endorsement of a brand that is low in symbolism is more likely to lead to contrast effects.

> **H2:** Brand symbolism moderates the effect of online brands endorsements on self-evaluations: while endorsement of a brand perceived to be low in brand symbolism is most likely to lead to a contrast effect, higher levels of perceived brand symbolism will make an assimilation effect more likely. As a result, self-evaluations on personality traits related to the brand's focal trait are expected to increase for brands with high levels of brand symbolism.

Downstream Consequences of Contrasted Self-Evaluations

Basing ourselves on the earlier discussed preference for brands that are self-congruent, and on research that has shown that such contrast effects may induce negative affect, and consequently lead to negative brand outcomes (Bower 2001), we hypothesize that the proposed contrast effects will negatively affect brand outcomes (i.e., brand attitudes and purchase intentions):

> **H3**: Contrasting with the traits of an endorsed brand will negatively affect consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention. Consumers' decrease in in self-evaluations will thus mediate the effect of online brand endorsement on brand outcomes.

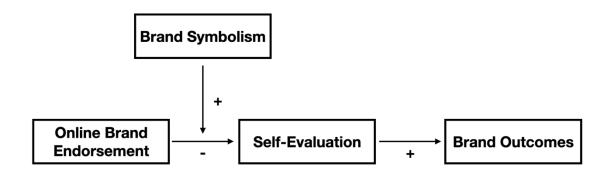The outlined hypotheses are summarized in our conceptual model (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Overview of studies

We test our hypotheses across five studies. Study 1A and Study 1B use a pretest-posttest design to test whether engaging in online brand endorsements leads to contrast effects in respect to consumers' self-evaluations (H1). Study 2 replicates this using a real brand instead of a fictious brand

and tests whether brand symbolism moderates this relationship (H2). Study 3A further extends this be assessing whether the contrast effect is ephemeral or more persistent by including a follow-up measure of consumers' self-evaluation two to seven days after the initial study with our online brand endorsement manipulation. Combined with Study 2, Study 3B tests whether consumers' decrease in self-evaluations will mediate the effect of endorsement (vs. exposure) on brand outcomes (H3).

Study 1A

Method

Participants and design. This first study employed a lab experiment with a within-subjects pre-test post-test design. Restriction on the availability of participants for this study (which was conducted as part of a class) led to a relatively small sample size, but the use of a one factor within-subjects design provides ample statistical power (Meyvis and Van Osselaer 2018). Forty students at a large Western European University participated for course credit or financial compensation. Six participants dropped out because they indicated that they did not want to follow the experimental procedure that required them 'like' the Facebook page of the brand that was designed for this experiment. The final sample thus consisted of 34 participants (67% female; $M_{age} = 21.5$; $SD_{age} = 2.29$).

Procedure and measurements. To obtain the pre-measurement of the focal personality trait, we asked participants to evaluate themselves on a list of ten personality traits that included the focal trait (non-conformism) as well as nine other traits from Aaker (1997)'s list of brand personality items that served as filler items to obscure the goal of the research. Evaluations were made on a 101-point scale (0 – doesn't fit me at all; to 100 – fits me perfectly). All items were presented in random order.

After filling in the self-evaluation scales, participants were – under the cover story of a brand evaluation task – asked to log in to their Facebook account and 'like' the brand page of the fictitious brand MatchMobile (for a similar approach, see Beukeboom, Kerkhof & de Vries, 2015)[3]. We created

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[3] Note. To avoid that participants felt obliged to like the brand on Facebook, we informed participants that they could stop the experiment at every moment in time without any consequences across all five experiments. In each of the studies, a limited number of participants chose not to complete the experiment. We report this number for each study.

this fictitious brand for this experiment and designed it to be perceived as a non-conformist/'rebellious' brand.

The post-measurement of the focal trait was measured in the same way as the pre-measurement: participants were asked to evaluate themselves by answering questions about ten traits of Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale. This time, we mixed in the focal trait with nine new filler traits, to avoid participants' suspicion. Afterwards, participants answered some demographic questions, were debriefed and thanked.

Pre-tests. To avoid that the desirability of a brand's personality might bias the results, in the first study, we aimed to demonstrate the hypothesized shift in consumers' self-evaluation for a neutrally desirable trait. Results of a pre-test revealed that being a non-conformist was the most neutral trait among a selection of 38 traits based on Aaker's (1997) and Smit et al.'s (2003) work ($M = 4.96$; $SD = 1.80$; 1 = very undesirable; 10 = very desirable). In a second pre-test we tested the assumption that our focal fictitious brand Match Mobile was perceived to be non-conformist. Here, 31 student participants were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert-scale to what extent they found the brand to be non-conformist. Results support that the fictitious brand was perceived to be extremely non-conformist ($M = 4.97$; $SD = 1.35$).

Results

Supporting H1, a paired-samples t-test revealed that participants perceived themselves to be more non-conformist before endorsing the brand on social media ($M = 56.68$; $SE = 4.23$) than afterwards ($M = 52.76$; $SE = 4.76$). This difference, 3.91, BCa 95% CI [0.52, 7.51], was significant $t(33) = 2.19$, $p = .036$, $r = 0.36$.

Discussion

This study provides initial support for the hypothesis that consumers' self-evaluations contrast to a brand's identity after endorsing the brand on social media. After endorsing a non-conformist brand on Facebook, participants evaluated themselves as less non-conformist that before they made this endorsement. In the next study, we replicate our findings with a different trait: sincerity.

Study 1B

Method

Participants and design. This study employed an online experiment with a within-subjects pre-test post-test design. One-hundred-and-twenty-nine students enrolled at a large Western European University participated for course credit or financial compensation. Thirty-two participants dropped out because they indicated that they did not want to 'like' the focal brand of this experiment on Facebook. The final sample consisted of 97 participants (64.9% female; M_{age} = 25.4; SD_{age} = 6.96).

Procedure and measurements. The procedure was identical to that of Study 1A. We created a different fictitious brand, Ultra Sound (a headphone brand), that we designed to be a sincere brand. We, again, exposed participants to ten different traits before and after endorsing the brand on Facebook. This time, however, we measured these traits on 7-point Likert-scales (I consider myself to be a [trait] person; 1 = not at all; 7 = very much) to make sure that our effects are not affected by participants not being able to remember their answers on the 101-scale used in Study 1A.

Pre-test. Similar to Study 1A, we conducted a pre-test to test the assumption that the fictitious brand UltraSound that we created for this study was perceived to be a 'sincere' brand. We asked fifteen student participants to indicate on a 5-point Likert-scale to what extent they found the brand to be sincere. Results support that the fictitious brand was perceived to be sincere (M = 4.47; SD = 1.25).

Results

We conducted a paired-sampled t-test to test H1. Supporting H1, participants perceived themselves to be more sincere before endorsing the brand on social media (M = 5.82; SD = 1.00) than afterwards (M = 5.63; SD = 1.01). This difference, 0.19, 95% CI [0.06, 0.33], was significant $t(96)$ = 2.94, p = .004, Cohen's d = 0.30.

Discussion

The results of this study replicate the findings of Study 1A. Taken together, so far, we demonstrated a contrast effect on consumers' self-evaluations after online brand endorsements for two different personality traits and two different types of products. This substantiates the generalizability of these effects. These two initial studies do not include a control condition in which participants are not actively endorsing a brand. Although our within-subjects pre-test post-test design allows us to

establish causality of the shown contrast effect, including a control condition would allow us to further underscore the robustness of our findings. Furthermore, to increase generalizability to known brands in the real-world, it would be beneficial to test our framework using existing brands. Using existing brands will also allow us to test our hypothesized effects regarding brand symbolism (Escalas & Bettman, 2005) as boundary condition for the post-endorsement self-evaluation shift. The next study thus consists of an experiment that includes a control condition and relies on existing brands, using yet another focal personality trait. Finally, we focus on the managerial implications of this effect by examining to what extent it affects consumers' purchase intention for a brand.

Study 2

Method

Participants and design. One-hundred-and-eight students participated in a lab-experiment in exchange for partial course credit or financial compensation. Thirty-five participants dropped out: Nine participants dropped out because they indicated that they did not want to like the focal brand of this experiment on Facebook. Three others in the exposure condition indicated to have liked the focal brand earlier on Facebook and were consequently removed from the sample, thirteen failed to show up at the second measurement and ten did not finish the experiment. This leaves us with a sample of 73 (76.7% female; $M_{age} = 23.4$), who were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions of a single factor (endorsement vs. visiting Facebook page) between-subjects design. Forty participants were in the visiting Facebook page condition and 33 in the endorsement condition.

Procedure and measurements. Participants filled in an online survey in which they evaluated their own personality on twelve items of Aaker (1997)'s brand personality scale (see Study 1A) one week prior to their visit to the lab. Next, they indicated attitudes and purchase intentions for the two focal brands (Nike, and RedBull), and three fillers. A pre-test among ten brands had indicated that Nike and Red Bull scored highest on self-confidence, which serves as focal trait in this study. The brands were presented in random order. Brand attitude was measured by a three-item 7-point differential scale (bad/good, negative/positive, not sympathetic/sympathetic) and purchase intention by means of a slider that asked consumers to indicate the chance that they would buy the brand (0 –

100%).

The second part of the experiment took place one week later. Participants came to the lab and were randomly assigned to one of the focal brands (Nike or RedBull) and asked to either like the brand on Facebook (endorsement condition, similar to Study 1), or to just visit the Facebook page of the brand (control condition). Subsequently, participants completed the same measures on self-evaluation, brand attitude, and purchase intention as in the pre-measurement. We then measured the perceived identity-signaling potential of the brand using Escalas and Bettman (2005; see also Bernritter, Verlegh, and Smit, 2016 and White and Dahl, 2007)'s two-item Brand Symbolism scale. This Brand Symbolism scale (Cronbach's alpha > .80 for all brands) assesses consumers' perception of brand symbolism by 5-point Likert scales on the two items: 'How much does this brand symbolize what kind of person uses it?' (1: not at all symbolic; 5: highly symbolic); and 'To what extent does this brand communicate something specific about the person who uses it?' (1: does not communicate a lot; 5: communicates a lot). Finally, participants answered demographic questions, were debriefed and thanked.

We operationalized our dependent variable, the shift in self-evaluation, as the difference score of the two measurements of the focal trait (T2 – T1). A negative score indicates that participants shifted away (contrast) from the identity of the brand whilst a positive score indicates that they shifted towards the brand's identity (assimilation). Similarly, we also measured a shift in purchase intention as the difference between the two scales mentioned above (PI T2 – PI T1).

Results

We first regressed consumers' shift in self-evaluation on the focal trait (i.e., self-confidence T2 – T1) on the experimental condition (endorsement vs. visiting Facebook page), perceived symbolic value of the brand, and their interaction (R^2 = .20). Moreover, we controlled for brand, gender, and – to preclude that our results are biased by consumers' brand attitude – a shift in their brand attitude (T2 – T1). We present results of this extra analysis without covariates in the Web Appendix. Supporting H1, results show a main effect of brand endorsements (b^* = -.98, $t(66)$ = -2.17, p = .033): the self-evaluation of consumers who endorsed (vs. visited the Facebook page of) the brand shifted away from the focal trait of the brand. Moreover, this analysis showed a significant interaction

between endorsements and consumers' perceived brand symbolism ($b^* = -.94$, $t(66) = 2.05$, $p = .045$), and a main effect of gender ($b^* = .27$, $t(66) = 2.46$, $p = .016$), which indicates that men, compared to women, felt more self-confident at T2 than at T1. The other predictors did not reach statistical significance.

To gain more insight in the interaction effect we conducted a floodlight analysis using the Johnson-Neyman technique. This analysis confirmed the shown interaction effect ($B = 7.17$, 95% BCBCI [0.18, 14.15]). Supporting H2, if consumers perceived a brand to be of low symbolic value (with a brand symbolism score of 2.43 or lower), endorsing (vs. visiting the Facebook page of) the brand makes consumers to contrast to the focal trait of the brand (i.e., they felt less self-confident than before). If consumers perceive the brand to be highly symbolic, there is no significant difference between both conditions (Figure 2). Simple slope analysis revealed that participants in the endorsement condition assimilated more to the brand's identity if they perceived the brand to be higher on brand symbolism ($\beta = 0.429$, $p = .013$), but brand symbolism had no effect in the visit Facebook page condition ($\beta = 0.006$, $p = .969$).
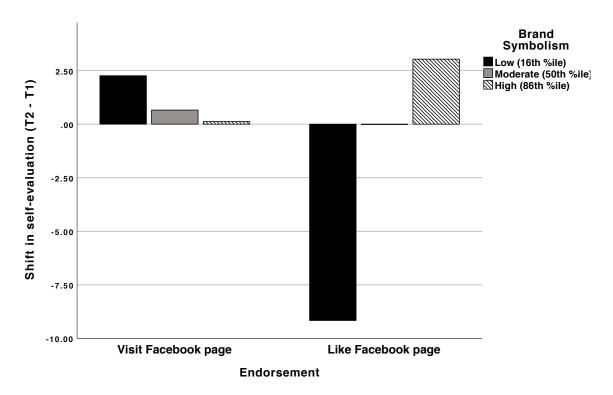

Figure 2. Consumers' shift in self-evaluation as a function of brand endorsements and brand symbolism. A negative value on the y-axis represents contrast.

Moderated mediation analysis. To further investigate the conditional indirect effects of endorsements on purchase intent via a self-evaluation shift, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis, using Hayes (2013)'s PROCESS macro (model 7). We present the results of this analysis in Table 1. Results confirmed the earlier findings and additionally showed that a positive shift in self-evaluation (i.e., assimilation) positively affects consumers' shift in purchase intention ($B = 0.39$, 95% BCBCI [0.14, 0.63]). Importantly, this analysis also revealed a process of moderated mediation (index of moderated mediation = 2.79, SE = 1.65, 95% BCBCI [0.32, 7.01]. That is, consumers' perceived symbolism moderated the indirect effect of endorsements (vs. visiting the Facebook page of the brand) on shift in purchase intention via a shift in self-evaluation.

Table 1 Study 2: Results moderated mediation analysis

	Shift in self-evaluation				Shift in purchase intention			
	Coef.	SE	t	*p*	Coef.	SE	t	*p*
Constant	-19.07	7.27	-2.62	.011	7.73	5.25	1.47	.145
Endorsement (like)	-25.76	11.86	-2.17	.033	3.74	3.07	1.22	.226
Brand symbolism	2.52	1.73	1.45	.152	----	----	----	----
Endorsement × brand symbolism	7.17	3.50	2.05	.045	----	----	----	----
Shift in self-evaluation	----	----	----	----	0.39	0.12	3.18	.002
Control variables								
Gender	8.50	3.45	2.46	.016	-3.87	3.76	-1.03	.306
Brand	-0.90	2.92	-0.31	.759	-4.24	3.04	-1.40	.167
Shift in brand attitude	2.89	1.45	1.99	.051	1.26	1.51	0.83	.408
	$R^2 = .199$				$R^2 = .185$			
	$F(6, 66) = 2.72, p = .020$				$F(5, 67) = 3.04, p = .016$			
	$N = 73$				$N = 73$			

Discussion

Study 2 demonstrates that the effects of endorsing brands online on consumers' shift in self-

evaluation depends on the perceived brand symbolism of the brand. It thereby supports research which has postulated that brands perceived to have a high identity-signaling potential (i.e., high brand symbolism), have a higher chance of being included within the self-concept (White and Dahl 2006; White and Dahl 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Bernritter, Verlegh, and Smit 2016) Moreover, we show that a shift in self-evaluation negatively affects brand outcomes. This is in line with research by Bower (2001) who showed a similar negative effect for advertising effectiveness. Given the consistent and robust evidence that endorsing brands on social media leads to contrast effects and that these have negative downstream consequences for brands, it is important to examine how brands potentially can mitigate these negative effects.

One possibility might be presented in the form of incentives. Incentives are often offered by brands in exchange for online brand endorsements. For example, 'like and win' promotions are common on Facebook, as are sweepstakes among all consumers who liked (and/or shared) branded content. Offering incentives to (online) consumers has been shown to decrease intrinsic motivation (Garnefeld, Iseke, and Krebs 2012; Sun, Dong, and McIntyre 2017; Vilnai-Yavetz and Levina 2018; see also Kivetz 2005), in part because it provides people with an external justification for their behavior (Folkes 1988). The use of incentives to instigate consumers to like brands on Facebook and other social media may thus weaken the effects of online endorsements on self-evaluations. This reasoning is in line Cognitive Dissonance theory and research on counter attitudinal advocacy, which has shown that people will only shift their attitudes and beliefs to match their behavior, if they do not have ample external justification for engaging in that particular behavior (i.e., they were not offered enough money in exchange for engaging in that particular behavior by the experimenter to justify their behavior to themselves; Harmon-Jones et al. 1996; Festinger and Carlsmith 1959). Study 3A and 3B both explore the possible role incentives might play in moderating the effect of endorsements on self-evaluations.

Moreover, we wanted to test the persistency of our effect considering how, in the real world, certain brand outcomes, like product purchase, might occur a while after the online brand endorsement takes place. Study 3A does this by including a follow-up measure of consumers' self-evaluations several days after our manipulation.

Study 3A

Method

  Participants and design. We recruited 396 UK citizens via Prolific. They were pre-screened to be Facebook users and were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions of a 2 (endorsement vs. visiting Facebook page) x 2 (incentive: no incentive vs. 50% off) between-subjects design. In total, 111 participants had to be removed from the sample: 48 dropped out because they did not want to like the focal brand on Facebook, 45 indicated to have already liked the brand on Facebook before, and 18 erroneously liked the brand while they were asked to only explore the brand's Facebook page. The final sample thus consists of 285 participants (M_{age} = 36.31; 76.8% female, 22.1% male, 1.1% non-binary).

  Procedure and measurements. Participants first evaluated their own personality on twelve traits, including self-confidence (focal trait) on the same type of 101-point scales as in the previous study. They were then asked to like (or visit, depending on the experimental condition) the Facebook page of RedBull. Dependent on their experimental condition, they were offered a coupon for a 50% discount on a can of RedBull (vs. no coupon) as incentive to like/visit the brand page. After liking (vs. visiting) the brand on Facebook, participants again evaluated their own personality on the same traits as in the beginning of the experiment. As the effects of an incentive might be biased by participants' purchasing power, we also measured participants annual gross income. We also measured consumers' product category involvement (how often do you drink carbonated energy drinks such as, for example, RedBull or Monster?; 1 – never | 7 – all the time). Finally, participants answered demographic questions, were thanked and debriefed.

  Manipulation check. At the end of the study, we asked those participants who were offered a coupon for 50% off a can of RedBull what the value of that coupon was. 96.9% of the participants correctly answered that the coupon's value was 50%, suggesting that our manipulation was successful.

Results

  We used a two-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to test the interactive effects of online brand endorsements and offered incentives on consumers' shift in self-evaluation (measure of self-

confidence T2 – T1). We included gender, product category involvement, and annual gross income as control variables in the model, but the results are also robust without inclusion of these covariates (see Web Appendix). None of the control variables had a significant effect on the shift in self-evaluation (all p's > .199). Importantly, this analysis revealed a statistically significant endorsement × incentive interaction, $F(1, 278) = 4.55$, $p = .034$, $\eta^2 = .016$ (Figure 3). Follow-up comparisons showed that, in further support of H1, if no incentive has been offered, after endorsing a brand on Facebook, consumers' self-evaluation shifts away from the identity of the brand ($M = -3.89$, $SD = 14.36$). That is, they felt less self-confident after the endorsement than they did before. This is not the case if consumers merely visited the Facebook page ($M = 1.29$, $SD = 9.27$), $t(149) = 2.70$, $p = .008$, d = 0.45. If consumers were offered an incentive to endorse or visit the Facebook page of the brand, there was no statistically significant difference between those who visited the Facebook page ($M = -0.69$, $SD = 12.71$) and those who endorsed the brand on Facebook by means of a like ($M = 0.35$, $SD = 10.89$), $t(132) = -0.48$, $p = .634$, d = -0.09. This suggests that offering incentives can be an effective means to counter the negative effects of online brand endorsements on consumers' self-evaluation.
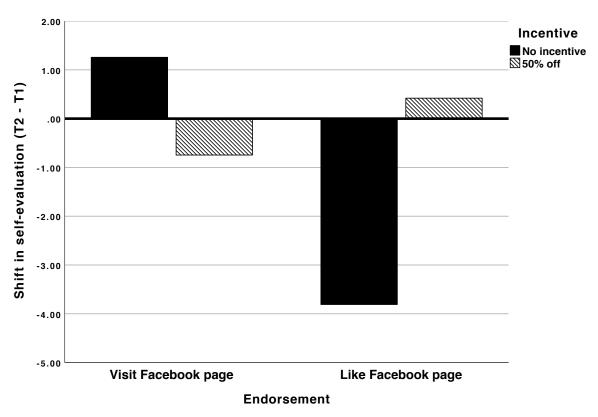

Figure 3. Consumers' shift in self-evaluation as a function of brand endorsement and incentive offered (Study 3A).

Examining long-term effects. To examine the longevity of our effects, we invited participants of this study to complete a follow-up survey a couple of days later. The participants completed this survey 2-7 days after completion of the first part of the study. In this survey, we first reminded participants that the previous study was about the brand RedBull and RedBull's presence on Facebook and we showed them a picture of a can of RedBull to make the brand salient again. We then asked them to complete the same questions about their self-evaluation as in the first part of the study. Of the initial 285 participants that completed the first part of the study, 264 also completed the second part.

We computed a new self-evaluation shift variable (self-confidence T3 – T1) to capture the change in perceived self-confidence from T1 (before the endorsement/visit) to T3 (a couple of days after the study). To test the effects of online brand endorsements and incentives on consumers' shift in self-evaluation days after the endorsements, we ran an ANCOVA with the same specifications as in the first part of the study and furthermore added the number of days that had passed since the first part as a covariate. We, again, found a statistically significant endorsement × incentive interaction, $F(1, 256) = 4.26$, $p = .040$, $\eta^2 = .016$. None of the other coefficients were statistically significant. Follow-up comparisons showed that, similar to the measurements taken directly after the endorsements, a couple of days later there was still a difference in self-evaluation shift between consumers who endorsed the brand on Facebook ($M = -1.78$, $SD = 17.10$) and those who just visited the Facebook page ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 15.3$), $t(139) = 1.71$, $p = .089$, d = 0.30. Given the directionality of the hypothesis tested at this time, we can correct p to $p = .044$ using one-tailed tests. For consumers who were offered an incentive, we again did not find a difference between those who endorsed the brand on Facebook ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 15.1$) and those who just visited the Facebook page ($M = -1.62$, $SD = 19.6$), $t(121) = -1.21$, $p = .230$, d = -0.23.

Discussion

This study provides further support for our central hypothesis (H1) that consumers' self-evaluation shifts away from the identity of a brand they endorsed online. We furthermore provide initial evidence that offering incentives can effectively counter this negative effect. Moreover, we

show that shifts in self-evaluation after an online brand endorsement can be persistent for at least a couple of days. In the next study, we aim to extend our understanding of how incentives affect effects of online brand endorsements on self-evaluation shifts and further investigate the effects of shifts in self-evaluation on downstream consequences for brands.

<center>**Study 3B**</center>

Method

  Participants and design. We recruited 700 UK citizens via Prolific (participants of the previous study were not allowed to take this study). They were pre-screened to be Facebook users and were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions of a 2 (endorsement vs. visit Facebook page) x 2 (incentive: no incentive vs. 50% off) between-subjects design. In total, 181 participants had to be removed from the sample: 81 dropped out because they did not want to like the focal brand on Facebook, 60 indicated to have already liked the brand on Facebook before, 33 erroneously liked the brand while they were asked to only explore the brand's Facebook page, and six did not pass an attention check. The final sample thus consists of 519 participants (M_{age} = 36.89; 68.8% female, 30.6% male, 0.6% non-binary).

  Procedure and measurements. The procedure of and measurements used in this study were mostly identical to those used in Study 3A. The only exceptions are: i) we introduced a filler task in-between the first self-evaluation measurement (before interacting with the brand) and the second self-evaluation measurement (after interacting with the brand); ii) we did not assess long term effects a few days later in this study; and iii) we measured consumers' brand attitude after the second self-evaluation measurement using the same 7-point differential scale as in Study 2. The focal trait of this study was also self-confidence.

  Manipulation check. At the end of the study, we asked those participants who were offered a coupon for 50% off a can of RedBull what the value of that coupon was. 86.8% of the participants correctly answered that the coupon's value was 50%, suggesting that our manipulation was successful.

Results

We used a two-way ANCOVA to test the interactive effects of online brand endorsements and offered

incentives on consumers' shift in self-evaluation (measure of self-confidence T2 – T1). We included gender, product category involvement, and annual gross income as control variables in the model, but the results are also robust without inclusion of these covariates (see Web Appendix). None of the control variables had a significant effect on the shift in self-evaluation (all p's > .350). This analysis revealed a statistically significant main effect of online brand endorsement $F(1, 512) = 6.62$, $p = .010$, $\eta^2 = .013$ (Figure 4), showing that the shift in self-evaluation for consumers who endorsed the brand online (M = -1.30; SE = 0.69) differed from those who just visited the Facebook page of the brand (M = 1.02; SE = 0.57), d = 0.23. This further supports H1. The endorsement × incentive interaction was not statistically significant $F(1, 512) = 0.61$, $p = .436$, $\eta^2 = .001$.
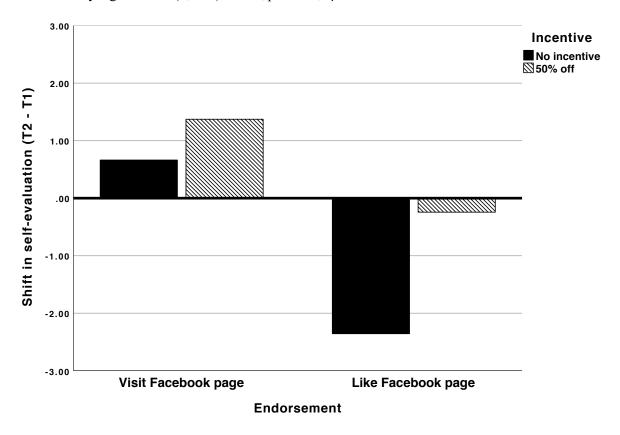

Figure 4. Consumers' shift in self-evaluation as a function of brand endorsement and incentive offered (Study 3B).

Mediation analysis. To examine the downstream consequences of these effects for brands, we conducted a mediation analysis using Hayes (2013)'s PROCESS macro (model 4). The dependent variable of this analysis was consumers' brand attitude. This analysis estimated the indirect effects of endorsing (vs. visiting) the brand on Facebook on consumers' brand attitude, via a shift in self-

evaluation. In absence of a significant endorsement × incentive interaction, we used the incentive variable as covariate, to hold the received incentive constant. Further, the used control variables were identical to those used in the previous full-factorial ANCOVA.

We present the results of this mediation analysis in Table 2. Results confirm the earlier findings: endorsing a brand online (vs. visiting the Facebook page) leads to a negative shift in self-evaluation. That is, self-evaluation shifts away from the identity of the brand (B = -2.38, 95% BCBCI [-4.141, -0.619], p = .008). Additionally, showed that a positive shift in self-evaluation positively affects consumers' brand attitude (B = 0.15, 95% BCBCI [0.003, 0.028], p = .017). That is, if consumers' self-evaluation shifts away from the brand's identity, this negatively affects their attitude towards that brand. The indirect effect of endorsing a brand online (vs. visiting the Facebook page) on brand attitude via a shift in self-evaluation is negative and significant (indirect effect = -0.036; SE = 0.02; 95% BCBCI [-0.094, -0.003]). Taken together, this means that if consumers endorse a brand online (vs. visit the Facebook page) this leads to a shift in self-evaluation away from that brand's identity, which in turn negatively affects consumers' attitude towards the brand.

Table 2. Study 3B: Results mediation analysis

	Shift in self-evaluation				Brand attitude			
	Coef.	SE	t	*p*	Coef.	SE	t	*p*
Constant	6.23	7.80	0.80	.425	-0.99	1.11	-0.89	.373
Endorsement (like)	-2.38	0.90	-2.66	.008	0.13	0.12	1.02	.309
Shift in self-evaluation	----	----	----	----	0.02	0.01	2.40	.017
Control variables								
Income	-0.36	0.17	-0.21	.831	0.02	0.02	0.72	.473
Product cat. involvement	-0.20	0.24	-0.84	.403	0.32	0.03	9.30	<.001
Gender	-0.81	0.93	-0.87	.383	-0.24	0.13	-1.80	.072
Incentive offered	1.28	0.88	1.45	.147	-0.13	0.13	-1.01	.311

$R^2 = .022$ $R^2 = .165$

$F(5, 513) = 2.36, p = .039$ $F(6, 512) = 16.83, p < .001$

$N = 519$ $N = 519$

General Discussion

Brands increasingly focus on increasing consumers' engagement on social media. Reflecting this trend, brands often use low-threshold engagement metrics such as, for example, likes on Facebook as KPIs. Therefore, many marketing campaigns aim to increase these KPIs by prompting consumers to endorse them on social media. We investigate a darker side of consumers' online brand endorsements. Applying an identity-signaling perspective on both the endorsing consumer and the brand, we examine how the seemingly innocuous act of liking a brand on Facebook can have a negative impact on consumers' self-evaluations (by lowering their evaluations of themselves on the brand's focal trait), which in turn has unfavorable downstream consequences for brand outcomes. Five experiments demonstrate that endorsement of brands on social media causes a shift in self-evaluation, away from the focal brands' identity, especially when a brand is perceived as having low brand symbolism. This shift has negative downstream consequences for brand evaluations. If consumers are incentivized to endorse brands online, however, the negative effect of online brand endorsements on the shift in self-evaluations seems to vanish. Brands might thus be able to counteract the negative effects of online endorsements on self-evaluations by offering consumers incentives in exchange for their online endorsements.

Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

Online brand endorsements are often linked to a greater sense of commitment and loyalty to a brand. From a theoretical point of view, online brand endorsements seem to illustrate the notion that consumers integrate brands, like products, into their (extended) self (cf., Belk, 2013). Our results, however, provide evidence to the contrary, engaging in online endorsements does not seem to lead to inclusion of the brand into the consumers' self-concept, and consequently, rather than an assimilation effect, a contrast effect is observed, and consumers' self-evaluation shifts away from the brand's identity. This finding provides a possible mechanism for reported results in earlier studies that online

brand engagement, such as likes on Facebook, is not always beneficial for brands (John et al. 2017; Mochon et al. 2017), and might thus even be harmful (Grewal, Stephen, and Coleman 2019).

By demonstrating that brands can serve as self-evaluation standards and that their identity-signaling value can affect consumers' self-evaluations, we extend literature on Social Comparison Theory, self-evaluations and the IEM (e.g., Mussweiler 2003; Mussweiler, Rüter, and Epstude 2004; Weiss and Johar 2016; Weiss and Johar 2013) to the domain of brands and online consumer behavior. Extending this stream of literature to the more abstract and intangible construct of brand endorsements further strengthens the view that brands are social constructs used for consumer identity construction (e.g., Reed et al. 2012) and supports the notion that consumers perceive brands very much like people (e.g, Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012).

Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge, we are among the first to show how shifts in consumers' self-evaluation can have downstream consequences for brands. Previous marketing literature that has investigated self-evaluation shifts has mainly focused on the shift itself as a final outcome (e.g., Weiss and Johar 2013; 2016). We extend this work by showing that shifts in self-evaluation have significant implications for brands. Furthermore, by examining incentives offered in exchange for endorsement, we introduce a novel boundary condition for this phenomenon.

Our findings are of value to brand managers, as they suggest that actively acquiring endorsements for brands on social media comes with a price-tag, that marketers might want to consider when deciding when and how to incentivize social media engagement (cf., John et al. 2017). Considering the role of brand symbolism, this might be especially relevant for new brands that are (relatively) unknown, and that are likely to be perceived as low in terms of brand symbolism. Finally, and at a more general level, our study triggers the question of the value of social media endorsements for brands: can a brand's pursuit for followers on social media result in more negative brand evaluations by the brand's followers? We would suggest that the answer depends on brands' social media marketing strategy. If a brand provides relevant and attractive content on their social media channels, the mechanism shown in this study may be countered by the exposure to a stream of entertainment and information that helps a brand build valuable relationships with consumers (cf., Beukeboom, Kerkhof, and de Vries 2015). However, a strategy that is mainly driven by the goal

of acquiring a large number of endorsements on social media may have detrimental consequences.

On a brighter note, for marketers that aim to use prompted endorsements as part of their social media marketing strategy, our studies can provide suggestions to minimize its negative consequences. As a first step, our results suggest that marketers should start by assessing the brand's brand symbolism, that is the average perceived identity signaling potential, before deciding on whether prompting consumers to follow the brand on social media. For brands scoring high on brand symbolism, our results indicate that there is no harm in asking consumers for endorsements. Our studies 3A and 3B provide another interesting result, suggesting that offering incentives for endorsement may reduce the negative effects on self-evaluation that could otherwise occur.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As with any research, this work has some limitations. Our studies provide suggestive evidence for why self-evaluations shift as a result of online brand endorsements may happen. We propose that the lack of psychological ownership presented via brand endorsements may act as an explanation for the shown effects, but future research should more firmly establish the mechanism(s) underlying our effect and possibly explore ways how feelings of psychological ownership can be increased by brands (see Morewedge et al. 2021 for a discussion on how this can be achieved for [online] non-tangible goods). More research is also needed to explore possible long-term effects of brand endorsements on shifts in self-evaluation. While our findings are supported by a growing body of literature on the negative effects of online brand engagement (e.g., Grewal, Stephen, and Coleman 2019; John et al. 2017; Mochon et al. 2017), it would be worthwhile to examine whether brands' communication via social media can counteract the negative effects shown in our study in the long run.

Future research could also focus on the extent to which consumers perceive certain personality traits of a brand as a vital element of their evaluations of the brand and of the self. It is conceivable that the shown contrast effects are more pronounced for traits that consumers perceive to be essential for themselves and the brand compared to traits they care less about. In a similar vein, it would be worthwhile exploring whether brands that appeal to ideal vs. actual selves (cf., Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012) differ in their potential to evoke contrast effects after online endorsements.

The focus of this paper lies on how prompted online brand endorsements affect consumers' self-evaluation. We therefore cannot draw conclusions about the effects of non-prompted endorsements. Based on our theorizing we would suggest that the effects of organically acquired endorsements might be weaker than those of prompted endorsements because they might lead to higher likelihood of having the brand included in the representation of the self. However, even organically acquired endorsements are perhaps not likely to lead to feelings of psychological ownership and might thus equally result in an exclusion of the brand from the self, and consequently lead to contrast effects.

Another avenue for future research concerns how the type of endorsement affects shifts in self-evaluation. We focused on low-threshold endorsements (i.e., likes on Facebook) that do not require considerable effort from the consumers' side. One might argue that the effort consumers make to endorse a brand might affect to what extent consumers shift their self-evaluation after an endorsement. In line with our reasoning that consumers use of endorsed brands as self-evaluative standard is driving shifts in self-evaluation, more effortful endorsements might have stronger contrast effects, compared to less effortful endorsements such as likes. In that sense, our findings might be an underestimation rather than an overestimation.

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Table A1: Overview of multi-item measurements

Brand Symbolism (Escalas & Bettman, 2005)

How strong does (Brand) symbolize a person who is using it?
(1 to 5: Does not symbolize at all – Symbolizes a lot)

To what extent does (brand) tell something specific about the person who is using it?

(1 to 5: Tells nothing – Tells a lot)

Brand Attitude

I think (Brand) is:

(1 to 7: Bad – Good; Unlikeable – Likeable; Negative – Positive)