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Connecting With Celebrities: How Consumers Appropriate Celebrity Meanings for a Sense of Belonging

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We propose that consumers appropriate brand symbolism that comes from celebrity endorsements to construct and communicate their self-concepts. We also argue that consumers with high need to belong (NTB) look to celebrities to a greater extent than those who have lower needs to belong, because high-NTB consumers are more likely to look to celebrities for cues about which brands may aid these consumers' attempts to meet their affiliation needs. High-NTB consumers are also prone to develop one-sided (parasocial) relationships with celebrities, and these parasocial relationships mediate the celebrity endorsement effect on self–brand connections. Three studies support these proposed relationships. Furthermore, the third study also manipulates the degree to which the celebrity's image matches that of the brand being advertised, revealing that a symbolic match between the celebrity image and brand image is important for consumers who do not form parasocial relationships with celebrities (i.e., low-NTB consumers).

At a reception following my daughter's high school graduation, I chatted with a young graduate who had recently dyed the bottom of her long black hair purple. When I complimented her hair, she told me that she had dyed it based on the recommendation of a YouTube celebrity, who had posted a "how-to" video online. I jokingly told her that I thought it was rather risky to dye one's hair based on a YouTube video. She laughed and told me that she knew this "YouTuber" extremely well, because she follows her on Twitter and Instagram, and has watched every YouTube video she's made multiple times. The young graduate insisted that she knew this YouTube celebrity better than she knew most of the students in her graduating class (class size

just over 90 students, the majority of whom had attended the small private school since kindergarten).

This story demonstrates a shift in how celebrity endorsements work. With the rise of social media and reality television, some refer to our times as the social era of celebrity (Gullov-Singh 2011): Kim Kardashian receives $10,000 to tweet about products. Stars like Katy Perry, Justin Bieber, and Taylor Swift have more Twitter followers than the populations of many countries (e.g., Katy Perry has nearly 90 million followers as of April 2016; Twittercounter.com). Adly.com offers more than 1,000 celebrities for endorsement deals through Twitter, boasting more than 24,000 endorsements by 2013. Apart from social media, it is estimated that about 20% of U.S. ads in traditional media feature celebrities (Solomon 2009), and the percent of ads using celebrities in other countries, such as Japan, is thought to be even higher. Given the prevalence of celebrity endorsements and the rise of social media endorsements, it is important to understand the effects of celebrities on consumers.

In particular, we examine when consumers look to celebrity endorsers and argue that brands promoted by celebrities can play a role in consumers' identity construction endeavors. In our postmodern culture, consumers' identity construction needs are more complex than ever. Consumers no longer simply seek to construct a stable, consistent, and authentic identity. Postmodern consumers frequently change their self-concepts depending on the context or other factors that make one aspect of self-identity more salient than another, which requires them to manage complex self-concepts that are malleable (Firat, Dholakia, and Venkatesh 1995). This results in an active, ongoing identity construction process by consumers that may be informed by meanings that emerge from celebrity endorsements.

Traditional explanations of celebrity endorsement persuasion effects are based on the source effects literature and find that (1) celebrity endorsement increases the attention paid to an ad (Buttle, Raymond, and Danziger 2000); (2) celebrities are generally attractive, which helps persuasion when the

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product is attractiveness related (Kahle and Homer 1985; Kamins 1990) or when consumers are worried about social acceptance and others' opinions (DeBono and Harnish 1988); (3) celebrities may be credible sources if they have expertise in a particular area, such as an athlete endorsing shoes (Ratneshwar and Chaiken 1991) or a beautiful model endorsing makeup (Baker and Churchill 1977); and (4) celebrities are often well liked, possibly leading to identification and consumer persuasion in an attempt to seek some type of relationship with the celebrity (Belch and Belch 2007).

In traditional dual process models (e.g., the elaboration likelihood model [ELM]; Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983), celebrities are most often considered a peripheral cue: They are important in persuasion only when consumers are not involved in the product category or in processing the ad. However, celebrities may provide central information when an aspect of the celebrity matches the product (as with beauty products and attractiveness; Kahle and Homer 1985). In addition, research has shown that source congruence, that is, the match between the celebrity's image and the brand's image, is an important influence on brand beliefs and attitudes under conditions of high involvement/elaboration (Kirmani and Shiv 1998), especially in situations with multiple endorsers and multiple endorsements (Rice, Kelting, and Lutz 2012).

Our approach differs from these more traditional explanations of celebrity endorsement effects on persuasion, focusing instead on the cultural meanings associated with celebrities, which are relevant to consumers' identity-construction goals. Thus, we step away from a purely analytical evaluation of decision attributes, as posited by dual process models, to incorporate what might be thought of as a more holistic or intuitive evaluation frame. Our ideas are based on the notion that people engage in consumption behavior in part to construct their self-concepts and to create their personal identities (Richins 1994; McCracken 1989; Belk 1988). We examine celebrity endorsement based on McCracken's (1989) perspective: As consumers construct their self-concept by using brands, they appropriate the symbolic meanings of brands. These meanings may be derived, in part, from celebrity endorsement (see also Miller and Allen 2012). The symbolic properties associated with brands via celebrity endorsers are used by consumers to construct the self or to communicate their self-concept to others. In our research, we focus on how celebrity endorsements may influence self–brand connections, rather than specific brand associations or brand attitudes, because we believe that self–brand connections measure the extent to which symbolic brand meanings are incorporated into a consumer's self-concept (Escalas 2004).

Furthermore, we go beyond the research of McCracken (1989) and others (e.g., Miller and Allen 2012) by examining the therapeutic function of celebrity in modern consumer culture. In particular, in this article we look at need to belong (NTB) as an important variable in predicting the extent to which consumers become connected to celebrities and are affected by celebrity endorsements. We believe that high NTB is a potential indicator of concern about social self-identity. Prior research has shown that when self-esteem is threatened, consumers will appropriate symbolic meaning from celebrity endorsements to repair their self-esteem (Escalas and Bettman 2015). Here, we build on Leary's (1999) notion that self-esteem is intrinsically linked to an individual's inclusionary (belonging) status. Thus, NTB, that is, the extent to which individuals have a strong need for acceptance and belonging, is a relevant self-motive to study in the context of celebrity endorsements. For example, high-NTB consumers may look to celebrities for meaningful cues about how products and brands can meet affiliation needs.

In addition, we propose that celebrity endorsement effects heightened by high social inclusion needs will be mediated by the formation of parasocial relationships with celebrities. Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships that a media user establishes with a media figure (Horton and Wohl 1956), leading to a false sense of intimacy. When a consumer's concern about identity issues stems from a high NTB, the appeal of parasocial relationships with celebrities increases, in the hopes of meeting affiliation needs from the celebrity himself or herself. In turn, the advice of a celebrity with whom a consumer has a parasocial relationship is more persuasive, in the same way that consumers trust friends' recommendations (Forrester 2012).

After developing our conceptual model in more detail, we present three studies that provide empirical support for the notion that consumers with a high NTB are more likely to look to celebrities to provide meanings useful for affiliation needs than those with lower NTB. In the first two studies, high-NTB consumers form self–brand connections to a new moisturizer or shampoo product endorsed by a favorite celebrity, and this process is mediated by the parasocial relationship with the celebrity. The final study replicates these findings and also manipulates the degree to which the celebrity's image matches that of the brand being advertised, examining further how celebrity symbolism is an important component of endorsement effects.

THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

Brand meanings can be and often are used to create and define a consumer's self-concept (Levy 1959). McCracken (1986) asserts that such meaning originates in the culturally constituted world, moving into goods via the fashion system, word of mouth, reference groups, subcultural groups, the media, and, importantly for our purposes, celebrities. As an example of meaning transfer, research has shown that consumers construct their self-identity and present themselves to others through their brand choices based on the congruency between brand–user associations and self-image associations (Escalas and Bettman 2003, 2005). Meanings can also "get into" a brand through advertising, because ads reference the

general cultural symbols needed to provide meaning (McCracken 1986). In particular, a celebrity endorser may provide a bundle of meanings that become associated with the brands she or he endorses (Miller and Allen 2012). Meaning then moves to consumers as they construct their identities through brand choices based on congruency between brand meaning and desired self-image. Thus, the meaning and value of a brand is not just its ability to express a given self but also its role in helping consumers create and build their self-identities (McCracken 1989).

Celebrity as Source of Meaning

As noted, celebrity endorsement provides an important source of meaning. Our research empirically examines this role of celebrities as vessels of cultural meaning. Why celebrities? Celebrities are individuals who are "known to many, but know far fewer, and are the object of considerable attention" (O'Guinn 1991, p. 102). Boorstin ([1961] 1982) famously quipped that a celebrity is "a person who is well known for his well-knownness" (p. 57). In the age of social media and reality television, this is truer than ever. In essence, there are now many types of celebrities: traditional celebrities, famous for a talent, such as acting or sports; reality celebrities, famous from exposing their "real lives" on traditional media; and social media celebrities, whose star power comes from self-promotion via digital content. Furthermore, these types may overlap, as a celebrity may be an amalgamation of all these types and more.

In our consumer society, people look to all of these types of celebrities for meaning (Klapp 1969; Ferris 2007). In Gabler's (2000) view, celebrities are a narrative that society looks to for entertainment. At times, celebrities as stories provide life lessons valued by our culture, such as illustrating the wages of sin, punishment for hubris, or the benefits of self-mastery. Celebrity creates a source of common experience around which society can build a nationwide, perhaps even global, community (Gabler 2000). Thus, being a fan of celebrities allows consumers to connect with American culture (Klapp 1969).

Celebrities provide meaning to objects through product endorsements; in a circular fashion, their own meaning is also created by the products they endorse (Ferris 2007). In 1977, Marshall proposed that celebrities use mass media to create their identity, which the consumer culture interprets, and then consumers use the meanings they themselves fashion for celebrities to construct their own personal identities. In the era of social media, we should add that celebrities also use social media in their identity creation and dissemination efforts. Through these processes, celebrities encapsulate meaning on a number of levels, including both broad cultural ideas, such as values and norms, and more idiosyncratic individual meanings, such as what it means to be cool or smart or successful. In this research, we assert that consumers appropriate desired celebrity-based meanings by using brands associated with the celebrity to construct and communicate their own self-concepts. In our framework, celebrity-based brand associations can help consumers achieve self-motivated goals when these associations are linked or connected to the self. Thus, associations may be captured from celebrity endorsement and used by individuals constructing their self-concepts in a manner consistent with their predominant or currently activated identity goals (Escalas and Bettman 2003).

Need to Belong Motivations

In this article, we focus on NTB as an important consumer motivation in the context of celebrities. Baumeister and Leary (1995) define NTB as the "pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). People satisfy this drive by having frequent, pleasant interactions with other people that are stable and enduring, with reciprocal concern for one another's welfare. NTB emerges from sociometer theory, a theory of self-esteem based on an evolutionary psychological perspective that proposes that state self-esteem is a gauge (or sociometer) of interpersonal relationships (Leary et al. 1995). In other words, self-esteem is a measure of effectiveness in social relations and interactions that monitors acceptance and/or rejection from others, thus emphasizing relational value and how it affects day-to-day life. A feeling that one does not belong leads to loneliness (Peplau and Perlman 1982; Williams and Sommers 1997) and other powerful negative consequences, such as anxiety, anger, and antisocial and self-defeating behaviors (Pickett, Gardner, and Knowles 2004).

Leary and his colleagues find that some individuals persistently experience a high need for social inclusion and belonging, or high NTB (Leary et al. 2013). These people seek a large number of relationships, worry about how they are valued by others, and put a great deal of effort into sustaining interpersonal relationships. The NTB construct measures desire for acceptance and belonging in many relationships and reflects the importance of close relationships with friends, partners, and family (Leary et al. 2013). Pickett, Gardner, and colleagues have found that high-NTB individuals are especially attuned to and have memory for social cues, events, and information, because this may help them foster connections with others (Pickett, Gardner, and Knowles 2004; Gardner, Pickett, and Brewer 2000). In another study, people who were high in NTB demonstrated greater cooperation when working in groups, which is again interpreted to be the result of a heightened desire to be part of the group (DeCremer and Leonardelli 2003). Therefore, high-NTB consumers are more sensitive to and concerned about issues related to social identity and inclusion.

In the case of high-NTB consumers, celebrity endorsement can be perceived as providing socially relevant meanings for

brands and hence socially relevant meanings for consumers to use to build their identities. Celebrities are pertinent to belongingness needs in a number of ways. For example, Thomson (2006) asserts that attachment to celebrities comes from celebrities' perceived abilities to meet consumers' autonomy and relatedness needs (and not harm competence needs). O'Guinn (1991) finds that consumers are motivated to worship celebrities to fulfill social (and even spiritual) needs. Thus, celebrity endorsement can serve as a route to social inclusion by providing useful meanings and connections that help consumers meet social identity needs.

Celebrity endorsements also may provide cues regarding which brands are useful to achieve affiliation needs. Celebrities should be credible spokespeople for social affiliation, because fame can be thought of as widespread acceptance by a community of fans. As consumers with high NTB adopt celebrity-endorsed brands as aids in their social identity and belongingness pursuits, these brands may become linked to the self, forming a self–brand connection, because these consumers' identity concerns are an important part of their quest for social relationships. That is, they desire to construct themselves in such a way that their consumption signals attract affiliation with others. The celebrity meaning also helps them connect with popular culture and their community in a broader sense, which may also help them meet their affiliation concerns. Furthermore, we propose that the formation of parasocial relationships with celebrities mediates the relationship between consumer affiliation needs and the formation of self–brand connections, which result from consumers' use of brands that appropriate celebrity symbolism in their identity construction endeavors, as discussed next.

Parasocial Relationships

As mentioned, people need social interaction and caring relationships to maintain positive self-esteem (Leary et al. 1995). Deprivation in belongingness leads to decreased health, happiness, and adjustment. Thus, NTB motivates attempts to form lasting, positive social bonds. With the rise of mass media in the 1920s, a false sense of intimacy with celebrities was born, as public and private lives of celebrities became interchangeable (Leff 1999). This false sense of intimacy has risen even further with the advent of social media and reality television, which enable consumers to connect with the most mundane aspects of celebrities' lives. Despite the reality of not truly knowing celebrities, people feel as if they do know them intimately, often forming intense emotional and psychological connections to them (Schnickel 1985). Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships that a media user establishes with a media figure (Horton and Wohl 1956). They create a false sense of friendship or intimacy with this distant media figure.

When a consumer has a pervasive need for social inclusion and belonging, the appeal of parasocial relationships increases to meet that consumer's need for affiliation. In an interesting twist, although research in communications has hypothesized that people with strong parasocial relationships may feel less lonely as a result of such false relationships (Rubin, Perse, and Powell 1985), no correlation was found. Thus, although the motivation to form parasocial relationships exists, the efficacy of such relationships has not been conclusively demonstrated. According to Baumeister and Leary's (1995) work in this area, if a person does not have both aspects of social inclusion in his or her life (i.e., social interaction and caring relationships), one aspect is better than none for mental health. Thus, there should be a benefit from connecting with celebrities, which provides social interaction (often via social media), even if there is not a reciprocal caring relationship.

Parasocial relationships augment the influence of celebrity endorsements. In the same way that consumers trust friends' recommendations (Forrester 2012), the advice of a celebrity with whom they have a parasocial relationship is more persuasive. We are not the first in consumer research to explore the notion of parasocial relationships. Russell and Stern (2006; Stern, Russell, and Russell 2007) have looked at the impact of parasocial relationships on product placement. Russell and colleagues also found that parasocial relationships augment the degree of connection consumers feel with television characters (Russell, Norman, and Heckler 2004). Ballantine and Martin (2005) studied parasocial relationships in online communities, and Colliander and Dahlén (2011) studied how parasocial relationships affect the persuasiveness of blogs versus online magazines. While Jin and Phua (2014) did not explicitly study the notion of parasocial relationships in their article about celebrity endorsements via Twitter, our ideas are consistent with their finding that consumers are motivated to "build an online friendship" with celebrities that have high social capital (due to many online followers; p. 184). And most relevantly, Hung, Chan, and Tse (2011) studied the effects of parasocial relationships in the context of celebrity worship in collectivist cultures. In all these studies, parasocial relationships enhance persuasion. However, we specifically address what needs such relationships might meet and, hence, when these relationships may have the greatest impact.

Thus, we propose that consumers who are high in NTB will be motivated to pay attention to and respond favorably to celebrity endorsements. When the celebrity's image is congruent with the consumer's own self-image (or an aspirational, desired self-image), the celebrity endorsement can provide symbolic meaning for the brand that the consumer can appropriate to create his or her own social identity and help meet affiliation needs. This will lead the consumer to feel more connected to the brand. Furthermore, we hypothesize a new underlying process for these symbolically based celebrity endorsement effects, namely that consumers with strong affiliation needs (i.e., high NTB) will form

parasocial relationships with their favorite celebrities, bolstering the persuasive effect of the endorsement because it is also a recommendation from a friend (Forrester 2012).

> **H1**: NTB will have a positive effect on self–brand connections in response to a celebrity endorsement.

> **H2**: The effect of NTB on self–brand connections in response to a celebrity endorsement will be mediated by the parasocial relationship with the celebrity.

Next, three studies show that consumers with high NTB are more likely to look to celebrities for meaning, thus forming self–brand connections to the brand being endorsed. All three studies demonstrate that the effect of celebrity endorsement is stronger for consumers with a high NTB (hypothesis 1) and that parasocial relationships mediate this process (hypothesis 2). Study 2 includes a manipulation of the celebrity's image match with the brand, which will be discussed following Studies 1A and 1B.

STUDIES 1A AND 1B

Studies 1A and 1B examine the influence of celebrity endorsement on self–brand connections for consumers who vary in the extent to which they have a strong NTB (hypothesis 1) and test whether this effect is mediated by parasocial relationships (hypothesis 2). Study 1A uses female participants in the context of a moisturizer product, while study 1B includes both men and women in the context of a shampoo product.

Common Method

Procedure. Participants were asked to complete a battery of individual difference scales, including the Leary et al. (2013) Need to Belong Scale. (Other scales, which turned out to be unimportant for this research, included materialism, brand extended self-construal, and global self-esteem). After this, participants filled in five "celebrities that you like" of their own gender, without reference to type of celebrity, followed by a sorting task to rank the five from most favorite to least favorite. Participants were then told that the company we were conducting research for had decided to launch a new moisturizer (Study 1A) or shampoo (Study 1B), described in high-quality terms. We next asked participants to indicate how they would feel about this new brand if it were endorsed by the celebrity they had listed as their second favorite in the prior task, to avoid participant suspicion about the nature of the study. These evaluations included self–brand connections, followed by parasocial relationship items. Finally, participants filled in some demographic questions and were debriefed.

Independent and dependent variables. We used the Leary et al. (2013) 10-item Need to Belong Scale that includes items such as "I need to feel that there are people I can turn to in times of need," "I want other people to accept me," and "I do not like being alone" (0 to 100 points). Our primary dependent variable, self–brand connections (SBC), was measured using the 7-item scale developed by Escalas (2004), which includes such items as "This brand reflects who I am," "I feel a personal connection to this brand," and "I consider this brand to be me" (0 to 100; see Table 1). To measure the extent to which participants formed parasocial relationships with the celebrity endorser, we modified the Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) Parasocial Relationship Scale, originally designed specifically for newscasters. These items include "I think *CELEBRITY* is like an old friend," "I follow what *CELEBRITY* is saying and doing," and "When I'm watching *CELEBRITY* in the media, I feel as if I am part of her group," where *CELEBRITY* was filled in with the name they had indicated as their second favorite (0 to 100; see Table 2 for all 13 items).

Study 1A Participants and Results

Participants. This study was administered via a web-based facility associated with a major research university. A total of 209

TABLE 1
Self–Brand Connection Scale Items

Studies 1A and 1B[a]	Study 2
1. The moisturizer (shampoo) could reflect who I am.	1. Montrex reflects who I am.
2. I could identify with the moisturizer (shampoo).	2. I can identify with Montrex.
3. I could feel a personal connection to the moisturizer (shampoo).	3. I feel a personal connection to Montrex.
4. I could use the moisturizer (shampoo) to communicate who I am to other people.	4. I could use Montrex to communicate who I am to other people.
5. I think the moisturizer (shampoo) could help me become the type of person I want to be.	5. I think Montrex could help me become the type of person I want to be.
6. I would consider the moisturizer (shampoo) to be "me" (it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others).	6. I consider Montrex to be "me" (it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others).
7. The moisturizer (shampoo) would suit me well.	7. Montrex suits me well.

Note. Self–Brand Connection Scale items are anchored by *Not at all* (0) to *Extremely well* (100), except for item 6, which is anchored by *Not me* (0) to *Me* (100).

[a]Modified version of Escalas (2004) to suit the hypothetical nature of the fictitious products used in this study.

TABLE 2
Parasocial Relationship Scale Items

1. When *CELEBRITY* shows me how she feels about something, it helps me make up my own mind about the issue.
2. I feel sorry for *CELEBRITY* when she makes a mistake.
3. *CELEBRITY* makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.
4. I see *CELEBRITY* as a natural, down-to-earth person.
5. I look forward to watching or hearing about *CELEBRITY*.
6. If *CELEBRITY* appeared on a (different) television program, I would watch that program.
7. I sometimes make remarks to *CELEBRITY* during a show, movie, or interview.
8. If there were a story about *CELEBRITY* in a newspaper, magazine, or online, I would read it.
9. I would like to meet *CELEBRITY* in person.
10. I think *CELEBRITY* is like an old friend.
11. I find *CELEBRITY* to be attractive.
12. I follow what *CELEBRITY* is saying and doing
13. When I'm watching *CELEBRITY* in the media, I feel as if I am part of her group.

Note. Anchored by *Strongly disagree* (0) to *Strongly agree* (100). The name of the celebrity used as the endorser replaces *CELEBRITY* in each study.

female U.S. resident respondents from an online panel responded to a randomized invitation to participate and completed the study, ultimately yielding a usable sample of 190 participants after the removal of approximately the top and bottom 5% of participants ($N = 19$) based on the time taken to complete the study (completion time range: 11 minutes to nearly 1 hours; mean: 41 minutes; top 5%: over 102 minutes; bottom 5%: under 16 minutes). Up to three e-mail notifications over a one-week period were used to secure cooperation, and the chance to win one of two drawings for a $100 prize served as an incentive. The attrition rate for this study, that is, the percent of people who began the study but failed to complete it, was 33% and the average age of respondents was 36.

Hypotheses Tests. The model used in the analyses to predict self–brand connections was a between-subjects generalized linear model (GLM) using continuous variables for SBC, NTB, and parasocial relationship. The scales used in the study proved to be reliable: the Leary et al. (2013) Need to Belong Scale ($\alpha = .84$), the Escalas (2004) Self–Brand Connection Scale ($\alpha = .96$), and the modified Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) Parasocial Relationship Scale ($\alpha = .88$). We find a significant positive effect of NTB on SBC, in support of hypothesis 1 ($\beta = .30$, $F(1, 188) = 6.35$, $p = .01$). To test hypothesis 2, we find a significant positive effect of NTB on our parasocial relationship variable ($\beta = .17$, $F(1, 188) = 5.57$, $p < .05$). In addition, parasocial relationship has a significant, positive effect on SBC ($\beta = 1.0$, $F(1, 288) = 104.66$, $p < .001$). Next, when both parasocial relationship and NTB are
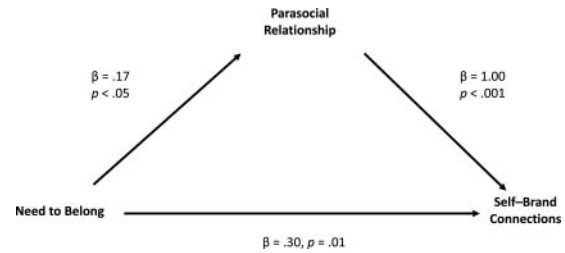

FIG. 1. Study 1a: Parasocial relationships mediate the effect of celebrity endorsements on self–brand connections for high need to belong consumers. Full model: need to belong: $\beta = .14$, n.s.; parasocial: $\beta = .98$, $p < .001$.

included in the model of SBC, NTB becomes insignificant ($\beta = .14$, $F(1, 187) = 1.91$, $p = .17$), while parasocial relationship remains significant ($\beta = .98$, $F(1, 187) = 97.46$, $p < .001$). A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval (CI) for the indirect effect based on 5,000 bootstrapped samples using Hayes's mediation model #4 (Hayes 2013) resulted in a 95% CI entirely above zero (0.018 to 0.304). Thus, the indirect effect was statistically significant, supporting our mediation hypothesis. Figure 1 illustrates these results.

Study 1B Participants and Results

Participants. The experiment was administered via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). A total of 163 U.S. resident MTurk workers from the online panel completed the survey in response to our invitation (HIT) to participate; however, five participants failed an attention-check item and were removed from the data set, leaving 158 completed questionnaires. (The attention-check item added to Study 1B, in the context of MTurk, told participants to retype the name of their celebrity into a text box that asked for a brief description of shopping habits as a foil). The data ultimately yielded a usable sample of 141 participants after the removal of approximately the top and bottom 5% of participants ($N = 17$) based on the time taken to complete the study (completion time range: seven minutes to 80 minutes; mean: 20.2 minutes; top 5%: over 102 minutes; bottom 5%: under eight minutes; average age 35; 48% female). Participants were paid $2.00 in Amazon credits for their time. The attrition rate for this study was 19%.

Hypotheses tests. The scales used in the study again proved to be reliable: Need to Belong Scale ($\alpha = .91$), Self–Brand Connection Scale ($\alpha = .95$), and the modified Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) Parasocial Relationship Scale ($\alpha = .87$). Using the same statistical model as Study 1A, we find a significant positive effect of NTB on SBC, in support of hypothesis 1 ($\beta = .39$, $F(1, 140) = 15.36$, $p < .001$). We also find a significant positive effect of NTB on our parasocial relationship variable ($\beta = .22$, $F(1, 140) = 10.04$, $p < .01$). In addition, parasocial relationship has a significant, positive effect on SBC ($\beta = .96$, $F(1, 140) = 113.44$, $p < .001$). Finally, when both parasocial relationship and NTB are included in the model of SBC, NTB becomes less significant
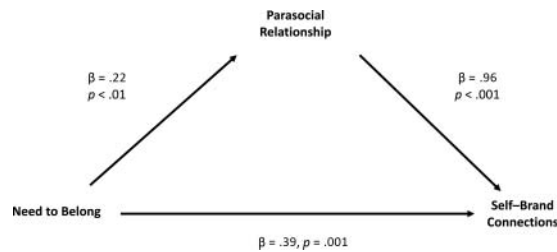
FIG. 2. Study 1b: Parasocial relationships mediate the effect of celebrity endorsements on self–brand connections for high need to belong consumers. Full model: need to belong: $\beta = .19$, $p < .05$; parasocial: $\beta = .90$, $p < .001$.

($\beta = .19$, $F (1, 139) = 5.60$, $p < .05$), while parasocial relationship remains significant ($\beta = .90$, $F (1, 139) = 96.90$, $p < .001$). A bias-corrected bootstrap CI for the indirect effect based on 5,000 bootstrapped samples using Hayes's (2013) mediation model #4 resulted in a 95% CI entirely above zero (0.074 to 0.342). Thus, the indirect effect was statistically significant, supporting hypothesis 2. Figure 2 illustrates these results.

Discussion of Results from Studies 1A and 1B

These two studies demonstrate that consumers with a high NTB form stronger connections to a celebrity-endorsed brand than consumers who score lower on the NTB scale (hypothesis 1), and this effect is mediated by the formation of a parasocial relationship with the celebrity endorser (hypothesis 2). High-NTB consumers develop a false sense of intimacy with the celebrities they are fans of, perhaps in an attempt to meet their affiliation needs. This in turn increases the power of the celebrity endorsement.

THE ROLE OF SOURCE CONGRUENCE

As discussed, our conceptual model is based on McCracken's (1989) proposition that consumers engage in consumption behavior in part to construct their self-concepts and to create their personal identities. Consumers value brand symbolism because these symbols can help them create their personal identities and/or present themselves to others. We have shown in Studies 1A and 1B that consumers with high NTB form stronger connections to a brand endorsed by a celebrity than those consumers lower in NTB. However, we have not directly examined how the match between the brand's symbolic meaning and the celebrity's meaning might affect the degree of connection to the brand.

Work by Kirmani and Shiv (1998) on source congruency effects provides a framework for examining this issue. They argue that, under conditions of high brand-relevant elaboration, a match between the celebrity's image and the brand's image creates a strong argument in favor of the brand, enhancing brand attitudes. Alternatively, a mismatch is a weak argument, and, consistent with traditional dual process models, this

leads to lower brand attitudes under high brand-relevant elaboration. Under conditions of low elaboration, Kirmani and Shiv (1998) argue that traditional peripheral cues, such as celebrity liking or trustworthiness, will dominate. (See Rice, Kelting, and Lutz 2012 for additional work on the effects of source congruity on celebrity endorsements).

In our framework, we believe that high-NTB consumers, due to their high need for social connection and imagined relationship with the celebrity, will be more prone to low-elaboration, heuristic-based processing in response to an ad featuring a liked celebrity. Thus, high-NTB consumers may be more inclined to overlook the degree of match or mismatch between the celebrity's image and the brand's image, basing their self–brand connections on their affective, relationship-based response to the celebrity. Hence, their SBC will be relatively high in both the match and mismatch conditions, consistent with the results of Studies 1A and 1B.

Conversely, we assert that low-NTB consumers will be more likely to engage in high elaboration in response to the stimulus advertisement, because they are less likely to form parasocial relationships with celebrities, and thus they base their evaluation of the brand on more careful consideration of the ad information. As Kirmani and Shiv (1998) explain, this makes the degree to which there is a match between the celebrity's image and the brand's image an important component of the strength of the ad's message, with a match leading to more positive brand attitudes. Furthermore, in the context of SBC, a symbolic match makes it easier for the celebrity's symbolism to reinforce and enhance the brand's symbolic meaning. The result is a strong, consistent brand image that can be appropriated as a signal by consumers engaged in identity construction and communication, leading to higher SBC in the match than the mismatch condition.

Based on these arguments, we expect that the difference between the match and mismatch conditions will be greater for low-NTB than for high-NTB consumers and that the difference between high-NTB and low-NTB consumers will be greater in the mismatch than in the match condition. Thus, we hypothesize:

> **H3**: A match between the celebrity endorser's image and the brand image will have a positive effect on SBC for low-NTB consumers, but less of an effect for high-NTB consumers.

STUDY 2

In this third study, we replicate the findings from Studies 1A and 1B, where NTB was shown to increase the influence of a celebrity endorsement on SBC (hypothesis 1), mediated by the formation of parasocial relationships (hypothesis 2), and extend those findings to a third product category, a sports watch. We also explore the notion of source congruence (hypothesis 3) by manipulating the extent to which the

celebrity's image matches the product category being adver-tised (here, a fictitious Montrex athletic watch brand).

Studies 1A and 1B suffer from a limitation due to the exper-imental methodology. Recall that, in these studies, participants entered their five favorite celebrities, the second of which was subsequently used as the celebrity endorser for the new prod-uct launch. This technique is helpful for customizing the stim-ulus in a way that makes sense for each participant; however, it suffers from the alternative explanation that the participants may already have formed a parasocial relationship with the celebrity endorser prior to the study. Thus, it is impossible to determine the causal relationship between NTB and parasocial relationship. In Study 2, we remedy this weakness by selecting two celebrities a priori (one male and one female to corre-spond to the gender of the participant). Another limitation of Studies 1A and 1B is that instead of presenting an actual celeb-rity advertisement, participants were asked to imagine that their second favorite celebrity was going to endorse the new moisturizer or shampoo product. Therefore, in Study 2 we administer an actual print ad with a celebrity endorser, albeit for a fictional brand, rather than asking participants to imagine the endorsement.

Method

Participants. The experiment was administered via a web-based facility affiliated with a major research university. A total of 327 U.S. resident respondents from an online panel responded to a randomized invitation to participate and passed our attention filters, ultimately yielding a usable sample of 295 participants after the removal of approximately the top and bottom 5% of participants ($N = 32$) based on the time taken to complete the study (completion time range: four minutes to 52 minutes; mean: 14 minutes; top 5%: over 27 minutes; bot-tom 5%: under 7 minutes; average age 51; 53% female). Up to three e-mail notifications over a one-week period were used to secure cooperation, and the chance to win one of three draw-ings for a $100 prize served as an incentive. The attrition rate for this study was 9.5%, with 2% of the participants who dropped out of the study coming from the athletic, individual difference scales (IDS) at the beginning condition, 2% from the athletic, IDS at the end condition, 3% from the nonathletic, IDS at the beginning condition, and 2.5% nonathletic, IDS at the end condition.

Procedure. Participants were asked to complete a battery of individual difference scales, including the Need to Belong Scale (counterbalanced: half saw the individual difference scales first, half at the end). (Other scales, which turned out to be unimportant for this research, included materialism, global self-esteem, cognitive flexibility, and attachment style). Next, participants were asked to read a biography of either actor Will Smith (male participants) or actress Angelina Jolie (female participants) that emphasized either their dramatic abilities (low source congruence) or their athletic abilities

(high source congruence condition for the stimulus sports watch; see the online appendix). We believe the choice of these actors to be a conservative test of our hypotheses in that while they both may appear in the tabloid press, each is pri-marily famous for their acting rather than for being a reality or social media star. After reading the short bio, participants were shown an ad for the fictitious watch brand, Montrex, using a sports watch as the stimulus and listing sports-watch-related features (see the online appendix). Participants then rated the degree to which they had self–brand connections with the Montrex athletic watch, followed by the extent to which they had formed a parasocial relationship with the actor, manipulation checks, and demographic variables.

Independent and dependent variables. Participants were randomly assigned to source congruence conditions. As in Studies 1A and 1B, we used the Leary et al. (2013) 10-item Need to Belong Scale ($\alpha = .89$), the Escalas (2004) 7-item Self–Brand Connection Scale ($\alpha = .96$), and the modified Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) Parasocial Relationship Scale ($\alpha = .92$),

Covariates and manipulation checks. Order was included as a covariate, because half the participants filled out the indi-vidual difference scales at the beginning of the study, while half did so at the end. To test our manipulation of source congru-ence, we asked about the match between the actor and the sports watch with two items ("To what extent does the image of Will Smith/Angelina Jolie match the image of this product?" and "This product and Will Smith/Angelina Jolie fit together . . ." anchored by *Not at all/Extremely well*, 0 to 100; $\alpha = .97$).

Results

The model used to analyze SBC was a between-subjects GLM, with scale order as a covariate and two factors, source congruence (manipulated: match/control) and NTB (measured, continuous, mean centered), plus their interaction.

Manipulation checks and covariates. The source congru-ence manipulation check was significant (high congruence = 45.66, low congruence = 34.52; $F (1, 289) = 4.57, p < .05$). The scale order covariate was significant in all models with SBC as the dependent variable. Participants who com-pleted the NTB scale at the beginning of the study had sig-nificantly lower SBC compared to participants who completed the NTB scale at the end of the study. This may be due to survey fatigue: People who had completed all the items prior to seeing the advertisement for the Montrex watch may have felt less inclined to incorporate the watch into their sense of self. However, we did not assess mood in the study, so this explanation is speculative. Order did not interact with any of the other variables in any of the models, so it was left as a covariate in all analyses and will not be discussed further.

Hypotheses Tests. We find a significant positive effect of NTB on SBC, in support of hypothesis 1 ($\beta = .03, F (1,$
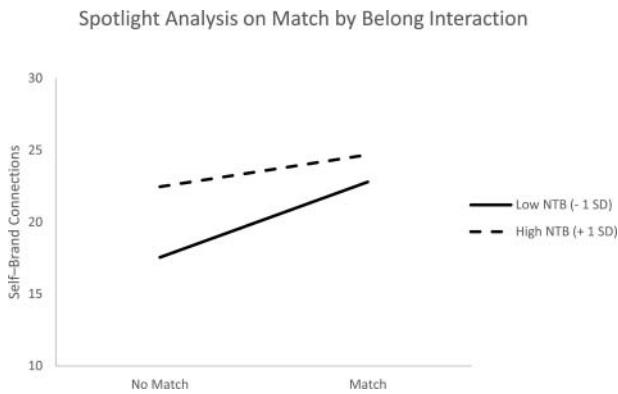
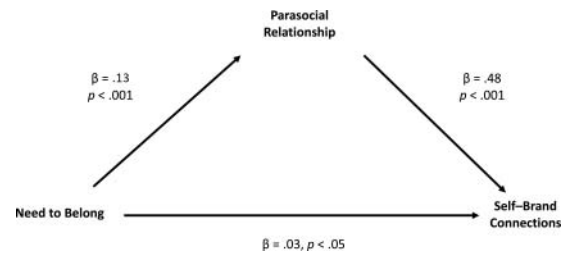FIG. 3. Study 2: Interaction between celebrity congruency (match versus not) and need to belong (NBT).

FIG. 4. Study 2: Parasocial relationships mediate the effect of celebrity endorsements on self–brand connections for HIGH need to belong consumers. Full model: need to belong: $\beta = -.03$, n.s.; parasocial: $\beta = .46$, $p < .001$.

290) $= 4.96$, $p < .05$). In this same model, we also find a significant main effect of the match/mismatch manipulation on SBC (mismatch $= 20.16$, match $= 23.68$; $F (1, 290) = 4.78$, $p < .05$). In addition, there is a marginally significant interaction between NTB and the match/mismatch manipulation ($F (1, 290) = 2.91$, $p < .10$). Spotlight analyses at plus and minus one standard deviation reveal that the effect of match on SBC is significant for those who are lower in NTB but not significant for those who are higher in NTB (who are more uniformly high in response to the celebrity endorsement). Figure 3 illustrates these results, which support hypothesis 3.

To test the mediation hypothesis (hypothesis 2), we find a significant positive effect of NTB on our parasocial relationship variable ($\beta = .13$, $F (1, 290) = 11.48$, $p < .001$), while match and the interaction of match and NTB do not significantly affect parasocial relationship ($Fs \leq 1.30$, $ps > .25$). In addition, parasocial relationship has a significant, positive effect on SBC ($\beta = .48$, $F (1, 291) = 84.11$, $p < .001$). Finally, when parasocial relationship is added to the larger model of SBC, NTB becomes insignificant ($\beta = -.03$, $F (1, 289) < 1.0$, $p > .45$), while parasocial relationship remains significant ($\beta = .46$, $F (1, 289) = 75.69$, $p < .001$). (In the model with parasocial relationship included, match remains significant [$F (1, 289) = 4.02$, $p < .05$] and the interaction of match by NTB becomes insignificant [$F (1, 289) = 1.76$, $p > .18$]). A bias-corrected bootstrap CI for the indirect effect based on 5,000 bootstrapped samples using Hayes's (2013) mediation analysis model #4, including the order covariate, plus match and the interaction of NTB by match as additional variables, resulted in a 95% CI entirely above zero for the indirect effect of NTB on SBC (0.047 to 0.213), which supports our mediation hypothesis. Figure 4 illustrates the mediation results, excluding the match variable for clarity.

Discussion of Results of Study 2

We show again that consumers who have a high NTB form stronger SBC to a celebrity-endorsed brand than consumers

who have lower affiliation needs (hypothesis 1). Once again, this effect is fully mediated by parasocial relationships (hypothesis 2). While it may be ill-advised to compare coefficients across different experiments, it is difficult not to notice that the coefficients related to SBC in Study 2 are smaller than in Studies 1 and 2. Recall that, in those studies, participants entered their favorite celebrities, and each participant's second favorite celebrity was selected as the endorser for the hypothetical moisturizer or shampoo product. In Study 2, participants were shown either Will Smith (male participants) or Angelina Jolie (female participants), thus providing a more conservative test of our conceptual framework.

In this study we also successfully manipulate source congruence by highlighting a celebrity trait, in this case athleticism, to match the image of our fictitious brand as an athletic watch. Celebrity–brand image match has a positive effect on celebrity endorsement (hypothesis 3), and this effect is not mediated by parasocial relationships. In addition, source congruence interacts with NTB, such that a symbolic match between the celebrity and the brand is more important for consumers who have lower affiliation needs, and thus do not form parasocial relationships with the celebrity in the ad, than for those with high affiliation needs. Lower-NTB consumers seem to be more discriminating with regard to the match between the brand and the celebrity compared to the high-NTB consumers. These high-NTB consumers appear to actively seek to form parasocial relationships with celebrities and appropriate the symbolism of such celebrities by forming SBC to the brands they endorse, regardless of the match between the celebrity's symbolic associations and those of the brand the celebrity is promoting. This is consistent with our hypothesis that high-NTB consumers look to celebrity endorsements for brands that can help meet their relationship-based identity goals.

CONCLUSION

We argue that consumers appropriate brand meanings from celebrity endorsement to construct their self-concepts. Our contribution stems from our proposition that high-NTB consumers will be more likely to look to celebrities for meaning, augmenting the effects of celebrity endorsement. Our findings demonstrate that consumers are motivated by their affiliation

needs to utilize brand associations derived from celebrity endorsement in a contingent fashion to create and present their self-identities, as evidenced through the use of self–brand connections as our primary dependent variable. In the case of high-NTB consumers, we believe the celebrity endorsement provides signals about how such endorsed brands can help meet affiliation needs.

Another important contribution of this research is the assertion and demonstration that, for consumers who have higher affiliation needs, the effect of celebrity endorsements works through the formation of a parasocial, or one-sided, relationship with the celebrity. Despite the reality of not truly knowing celebrities, people feel as if they do know them intimately, often forming intense emotional and psychological connections to them. In these cases, media users establish parasocial relationships with distant media figures, which creates a false sense of friendship or intimacy. Thus, in the same way that consumers trust friends' recommendations, they trust the advice of a celebrity with whom they have a parasocial relationship.

Finally, in Study 2, we explore source congruence and find that a symbolic match between the celebrity and the brand is more important for consumers who have lower affiliation needs, and by extension do not form parasocial relationships with the celebrity in the ad, than for those with high affiliation needs. Lower-NTB consumers seem to be more discriminating with regard to the match between the brand and the celebrity, compared to the high-NTB consumers, who appear to actively seek to form parasocial relationships with celebrities and appropriate the symbolism of said celebrities by forming SBC to the brands they endorse, regardless of the symbolic match between celebrity association and brand associations.

Our studies are not without limitations. First, to enhance internal validity, we used fictitious brands in our research. Therefore, the level of SBC to these brands is consistently below the scale midpoint. However, we would not anticipate a different pattern of results were the SBC significantly higher. Second, our studies are largely correlational in nature. For example, in Studies 1 and 2, the parasocial relationship with a favorite celebrity may exist prior to the celebrity endorsement of the fictitious moisturizer. While this is less likely in Study 2, where the celebrities are chosen at random and the same celebrities are seen by all, future research should continue to investigate this process. Third, our hypothesis about the role of celebrity–brand match proposes differential cognitive elaboration between high- and low-NTB consumers, but we provide only indirect evidence for this claim. Future research could examine thought listings and other processing measures to provide direct evidence of differential elaboration levels across NTB in response to celebrity endorsements.

Our research raises some other interesting questions for future research. For example, much of our argument in favor of the development of parasocial relationships with celebrities is based on the modern phenomena of reality television and social media. And yet our celebrity endorsers in Study 2 were of a more traditional acting vein. More research should explore the differences in endorsement effects and parasocial relationships with the three different types of celebrities identified (traditional, reality, and social media–based celebrities), as well as other types of celebrity that may exist. As technology continues to develop new ways of interacting with celebrities in our culture, fertile avenues of celebrity endorsement research emerge as well.

Our research may also shed light on who adopts and why consumers adopt social media to follow celebrities in our modern culture. For example, a Pew Research Center (2016) study reports that 36% of Twitter users are under age 29. While one might argue that young people are early adopters of technology in general, the most followed individuals on Twitter are celebrities, such as Katy Perry, Justin Bieber, and Taylor Swift (TwitterCounter.com 2016). Perhaps young people, whose identities are still under construction and who have strong affiliation needs, may be more likely to look to celebrities for meaning and thus adopt social media as part of that endeavor. Although we did not find a correlation between NTB and age in Studies 1A and 1B, post hoc analyses of Study 2 revealed a significant correlation, where young people reported higher levels of NTB ($r = -.124$, $p < .05$). Again, this is an area ripe for future research. This hypothesis may also explain why my daughter's classmate was willing to dye her hair purple based on the advice of a YouTube celebrity.

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SUPPLEMENTAL DATA

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at www.tandfonline.com/ujoa.

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