

Consumers' Reactions to a Celebrity Endorser Scandal

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ABSTRACT

This research examined the impact of a widely publicized celebrity scandal on consumers' attitudes toward the involved celebrities and the products they endorsed. Special attention is placed on the interplay between consumers' perceptions of the celebrities' responsibilities for the events that occurred, their affective reactions to both the events and the celebrities, and their consequent reactions to the products that the celebrities endorsed. The use of a real celebrity scandal permitted the effects of several variables to be identified that are normally not taken into account, including individuals' *a priori* liking for the celebrities, perceptions of the scandal's impact on both the involved celebrities and the society, individuals' own involvement in scandal-related activities. These and other effects were evaluated using structural equation modeling. Two parallel analyses, one for each celebrity, fit the model well and provided insight into the processes that potentially mediate the effects of a celebrity scandal on product evaluations. © 2012 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

The use of celebrities as brand endorsers is a common advertising strategy throughout the world. Celebrities can increase attention to an advertisement (Atkin & Block, 1983). Furthermore, they are attributed desirable personal qualities that influence their credibility. For instance, celebrities are believed to be trustworthy, believable, persuasive, and likeable (Freiden, 1984). Although the use of a celebrity endorser has numerous benefits, however, it could be a liability if the celebrity becomes involved in a widely publicized scandal or is otherwise discredited. Negative publicity about celebrities can have an adverse effect on the products they endorse, and the magnitude of this effect increases with the strength of the celebrities' association with the product (Till & Shimp, 1998). The effect can nevertheless depend on whether the endorsers are perceived to be responsible for the situation in which they are involved (Louie & Obermiller, 2002).

Most of the research on negative endorser publicity is experimental, however (Edwards & La Ferle, 2009; Louie & Obermiller, 2002; Till & Shimp, 1998). Although laboratory experiments permit the effects of specific variables to be isolated under controlled conditions, they may not capture the thoughts and beliefs that underlie consumers' responses to an actual incident and may decrease the likelihood of identifying the effects of variables that are not anticipated. Moreover, whether *changes* in attitudes toward the celebrity produce corresponding changes in attitudes toward the endorsed brands cannot be directly addressed

in laboratory research. No prior study has investigated consumer's reactions to a real celebrity scandal thus far.

The present research examined the impact of a widely publicized celebrity scandal on consumers' attitudes toward the involved celebrities and the products they endorsed. A model is proposed that considers the interplay of consumers' perceptions of celebrities' responsibility for the events that occurred, their affective reactions to the celebrities, and their consequent evaluations of the products that the celebrities had endorsed. The special nature of the scandal also permitted the examination of the impact of consumers' interest in the incident on their attitude toward both the celebrities and the brands they endorsed. A multiple-factor model of the effects of negative endorser publicity on product attitudes and purchase intentions was tested.

This paper first gives an account of the events that surrounded the scandal and its effects. Then the theoretical and empirical issues concerning the effects of the scandal on attitudes toward the celebrities and the products they endorsed are discussed. Finally, a model that provides tentative answers to these questions is evaluated.

THE SCANDAL

The scandal under investigation involved several celebrities from the Hong Kong entertainment

industry. A large number of sexually explicit photos involving one male celebrity, Edison Chen, and several female celebrities were circulated on the Internet in late January 2008. Although the concerned celebrities initially denied the authenticity of the photos, one of the female celebrities, Gillian Chung, ultimately acknowledged their validity at a press conference and apologized for the disturbances they caused. A few days later, Edison confessed that he had taken the photos and that they had been stolen from his computer when he had taken it in for repair. He also apologized for the negative impact that the incident had had on the female celebrities who were involved and on the society as a whole. The incident was widely publicized, with some magazines even publishing special issues containing the photos. At least 400 such photos were apparently circulated through different channels (e-mails, SMS, Web sites, and print media).

The Hong Kong government ultimately stopped the dissemination of the photos, declaring that the sharing of obscene photos with strangers was a criminal offense and arresting a few uploaders and a computer technician who might have stolen the photos. The general public criticized the government for such a move, however, as the photos became a major source of entertainment. Several informal surveys showed that around 60% of Hong Kong residents had seen at least some of the photos. This incident aroused public interest not only in Hong Kong, but also in China and some other Asian countries in which the celebrities involved were well known. In China, the photos were copied on CDs and sold in larger cities.

These celebrities were very popular artists in Hong Kong and they endorsed several top brands not only in Hong Kong but also in China and Southeast Asia. Edison Chen was the endorser for Levi's, Pepsi, and Samsung digital cameras. Gillian Chung was a member of a female artist team called Twins who also endorsed a number of products including Mentholatum lip balm, Adidas sportswear, Hong Kong Disneyland, and Epson printers. (The other involved female artists were less active in the entertainment industry and were not used as brand endorsers.)

Despite the popularity of the photos, the celebrities were heavily criticized by the public. Fearing that the negative image of the celebrities would be transferred to their brand, firms that had hired the celebrities as brand endorser quickly removed the relevant ads and terminated ongoing promotion campaigns. The firms' concerns were apparently justified. An online discussion group, for example, urged the public to boycott the products the celebrities had endorsed. Nevertheless, while criticizing the celebrities for taking the photos, the general public continued to download and share the photos with one another. Thus, unlike other celebrity scandals, the consumers were themselves highly involved in the incident rather than evaluating from the perspective of a disinterested observer. An important question, therefore, is whether the public's interest in the incident affected their perception of the blamewor-

thiness of the celebrities and their consequent reactions to the products the celebrities had endorsed.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

People generally weigh negative information more heavily than positive information when forming an overall evaluation of a target (Klein, 1996; Mizerski, 1982; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Consequently, negative publicity can have a devastating effect. In fact, the Merriam formula for measuring media impact weighs negative news four times more than positive news (Kroloff, 1988). This may be partly because negative news is more attention getting (Fiske, 1980). Negative news about a brand usually has implications for product quality. However, when negative publicity pertains to the celebrity endorser of a brand, its impact on brand evaluations is largely determined by perceptions of the endorser's blameworthiness (Louie, Kulik, & Jacobson, 2001; Louie & Obermiller, 2002). In many cases, however, attributions of blame are equivocal. In the situation of concern in this article, for example, the obscene photos taken by the celebrities were intended for personal use but were stolen and released to the public illegally by a third party. Consequently, it was debatable whether the celebrities themselves should be held responsible for the incident.

A number of factors could potentially determine the attribution of blame to the celebrities and its consequent effect on reactions to the products the celebrities endorsed. First, individuals' perceptions of the consequences of the incident for both the society in general and the celebrities themselves would influence their beliefs that the celebrities were responsible for the incident. Moreover, individuals' *a priori* attitudes toward sex and pornography, their own involvement in the consequences of the incident (i.e. the frequency with which they personally viewed the obscene photos) would exert an influence as well. Finally, attributions of responsibility to the celebrities would affect attitudes toward them and evaluations of the products they had endorsed.

Attributions of Blame

Celebrity scandals usually involve the personal life of the celebrities who are revealed to have performed role-inappropriate or socially undesirable behavior (e.g. the consumption of illegal drugs, violence, improper love relationships, etc.). People's beliefs that a particular behavior is inappropriate obviously depend in part on their more general attitude toward the type of behavior in question and its consequences. In the present context, taking obscene photos might be considered acceptable by individuals with a liberal attitude toward sex and pornography. However, their beliefs that the celebrities are to blame and their reactions to the celebrities' behavior could also depend on their

perception of the consequences of this behavior independently of other considerations.

According to just world theory (e.g. Lerner, 1970; Lerner & Miller, 1978; Lerner & Simmons, 1966), for example, people desire to maintain a belief that the world is just and, therefore, that people not only get what they deserve but deserve what they get. Walster (1966), for example, found that people evaluated the victim of an automobile accident more unfavorably if the individual was seriously injured than if he was not. (For a review of evidence that the severity of a behavior's consequences affects attributions of blame to the actor, see Robbenolt, 2000.) In the present context, therefore, it seems reasonable to suppose that individuals' attributions of blame to the celebrities would increase with perceptions that the image and career of the celebrities were ruined as a result of the scandal.

Other factors can also come into play. Brewer (1977) suggests that the frequent occurrence of mild accidents decrease beliefs that they are associated with specific individuals. Severe accidents, on the other hand, are rare and consequently are attributed to idiosyncratic characteristics of the individuals involved in them. These attributions might be made regardless of whether the individuals themselves are victims. In the present context, the obscene photos were circulated widely and were easily accessible to children. Thus, the scandal was likely to be perceived to have negative consequences for the society at large. These perceptions, as well as perceptions of the consequences of the scandal for the celebrities themselves, could influence beliefs that the celebrities were responsible for the incident.

H1: Individuals' attributions of responsibility to the celebrities will be correlated positively with their perception of the negative consequences of the incident for both (a) the society in general and (b) the celebrities themselves.

Individuals are also likely to perceive that the celebrity scandal had a negative impact on the companies whose products have been endorsed. Nonetheless, the assignment of responsibility to the celebrities may not be affected by the perception of negative consequences for the companies. Although individuals are likely to be concerned about the negative impact of the scandal on the society as a whole, they may not sympathize with the companies and assign more responsibility to the celebrities. According to the just world hypothesis, individuals may believe that the companies themselves should be responsible for the negative impact on their companies as they made the decision to hire these celebrities. Nevertheless, if an individual has a strong positive attitude toward the affected company, he/she is likely to sympathize with the company and blame the celebrities instead. Because the present study examined the scandal's effect on a composite of brands endorsed by each celebrity at the time the scandal occurred, individual's prior disposition toward a partic-

ular brand on the assignment of responsibility to the celebrity was not considered in the current model. But this possibility should be considered in future studies.

Attitude toward Sex and Personal Involvement

It seems reasonable to suppose that individuals are less inclined to blame the celebrities for the incident if they have generally liberal attitudes toward sex and pornography and do not consider the celebrities' behavior to be particularly objectionable. However, other considerations arise. An important feature of the current scandal is that many individuals were not passive observers of the incident but actively contributed to its consequences by viewing the photos and communicating about them to others. The negative impact of the scandal on the celebrities and the society would obviously have been reduced if individuals had refrained from engaging in this activity. A question arises as to whether the celebrities were attributed less responsibility for the incident by individuals who personally viewed the photos that were being disseminated and thus indirectly perpetuated the problem that the scandal created.

According to cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), individuals who feel uncomfortable about the consequences of their behavior often attempt to deny their own responsibility for it by shifting the blame to other parties. In the present situation, for example, they might increase their belief that if the celebrities had not taken the photos in the first place, or if Edison had not left the computer to the technician for repair, the scandal would not have occurred. Defensive attribution conceptualizations (Burger, 1981; Shaver, 1970) also suggest that individuals are inclined to attribute less responsibility to the perpetrator of a misfortune, and more responsibility to the victim, if they are personally involved in the incident than if they are not. Cialdini, Kenrick, and Hoerig (1976) showed that victim derogation depends on whether individuals believed that they were the cause of others' suffering.

In principle, involvement would be better reflected by direct evidence that individuals shared the photos with other people rather than simply viewing the photos themselves. However, this possibility could not be examined in the current study because the number of respondents who admitted to have disseminated photos to others was very small.¹ Consequently, the frequency of viewing the obscene photos was used as an indication of personal involvement.

The above considerations can be summarized in the following hypothesis:

¹ Only 20 of 141 respondents included in the present study reported to have shared the obscene photos with others. Preliminary analysis suggests that the act of sharing photos with others and the number of people whom one has shared photos with do not affect the assignment of responsibility to the celebrities.

H2: Individuals' attributions of responsibility to the celebrities for the scandal will be correlated negatively with (a) their general attitude toward sex and pornography and (b) their personal involvement in the incident (i.e. the extent of viewing the obscene photos).

Attitudes toward the Celebrities

Attributions of blame to the celebrities are likely to influence affective reactions to them (for more general evidence of this influence, see Weiner, 1980, 1986; see also Caprara, Pastorelli, & Weiner, 1997; Rudolph, Rosesch, Greitemeyer, & Weiner, 2004). When people perceive that someone is responsible for his or her predicament, they may feel angry or disappointed and these reactions may be reflected in their attitudes and behavior. In contrast, an innocent victim might elicit sympathy and be more likely to elicit positive attitudes and behavior.

In the situations of concern in this article, both positive and negative reactions to the celebrities were expected to be evident. Perceptions that the celebrities were responsible for the scandal were expected to elicit disappointment. At the same time, the celebrities were unlikely to be the only ones who were blamed for this incident; other parties (e.g. the person who stole the photos or the one who uploaded them to the internet) were likely to be held responsible as well. Thus, the celebrities were victims of others' behaviors as well as their own. The fact that the media widely publicized how the celebrities had suffered from the incident may also have engendered sympathy for the celebrities. These positive and negative reactions to the celebrities were expected to combine to influence individuals' attitudes toward them.

H3: Individuals' attributions of blame will have a positive or negative impact on attitudes toward the celebrities through their mediating impact on the affective reactions (e.g. sympathy or disappointment) that they experience in response to the celebrities' predicament.

Hypotheses 1 and 3 in combination suggest that people's beliefs in the consequences of the incident for society and the celebrities themselves can influence their attitude toward the celebrities through the mediating effects of these beliefs on attributions of blame. However, their beliefs could also have *direct* effects on attitudes toward the celebrities that are independent of these attributions. Individuals may generally dislike persons whose behavior has negative consequences for the society at large. More interesting in the present context is the possibility that people's attitude toward the celebrities is mediated by their perceptions of the consequences of the incident for the celebrities *themselves*. Sports celebrities and entertainers can serve as role models for people, particularly the young adults (Bush,

Martin, & Bush, 2004; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Individuals identify themselves with these celebrities and develop favorable attitudes toward them. When individuals perceive that the image of the celebrities is tarnished, they may no longer identify with them and their favorable attitude toward the celebrities will diminish. This effect may be independent of their belief that the celebrities were responsible for the incident.

H4: Individuals' attitudes toward the celebrities will be negatively correlated with their perception of the negative impact of the incident on the celebrities, and this will be true independently of the effects of the consequences on attributions of responsibility.

Product Evaluations and Purchase Intentions

The use of celebrities in an advertisement is generally believed to increase attitudes toward the brand being promoted (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995). For one thing, affective reactions to the celebrities could transfer to the brand through either classical conditioning (Till & Busler, 2000; Till, Stanley, & Priluck, 2008) or, alternatively, individuals' tendency to misattribute their affective reactions to the celebrity to their feelings about the product with which the celebrity endorses (Schwarz & Clore, 1983; 1996). Furthermore, characteristics of the celebrities such as trustworthiness and expertise can have a direct impact on intentions to purchase the products they endorse (Ohanian, 1991; Pornpitakpan, 2003).

Although the positive effects of celebrity endorsements are well documented, however, the negative impact of endorsers has rarely been examined. Till and Shimp (1998) found that negative information about a celebrity can hurt the image of the endorsed brand. However, behavior that has an adverse effect on a celebrity himself/herself can sometimes increase purchase intentions (Money, Shimp, & Sakano, 2006). These inconsistent findings highlight the desirability of confirming that decreases in attitudes toward celebrities produce corresponding decreases in attitudes toward the brands they endorse and intentions to purchase them.

The potential negative impact of a celebrity scandal on the endorsed brand may be moderated by the individual's prior brand attitude and brand familiarity. In particular, a strong positive brand attitude may offset the negative impact of the scandal. The current study did not take into consideration this possibility. However, to minimize idiosyncratic effects of prior brand attitudes and brand familiarity, and thus to increase confidence that changes in brand attitudes and purchase intentions were driven by changes in attitudes toward the celebrity, at least three brands were examined jointly for each celebrity endorser.

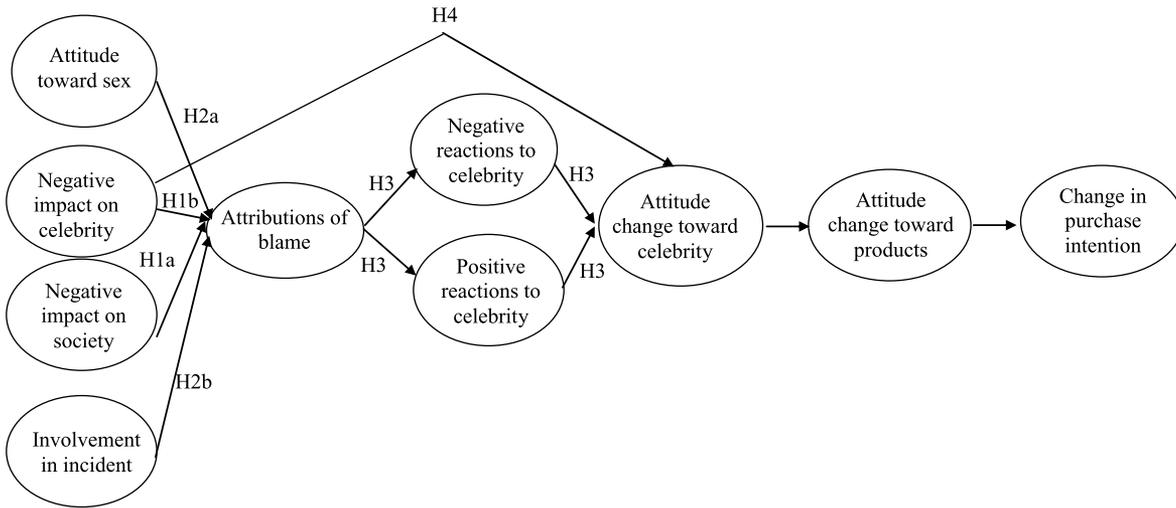


Figure 1. A conceptual model of the impact of negative publicity of celebrity endorser on endorsed products.

Prescandal Attitudes

The effect of the scandal on consumers' product evaluations and purchase intentions is likely to depend not only on their reactions to the celebrities' involvement in the scandal but also on their liking for the celebrities before the scandal occurred. Individuals often identify with attractive celebrities (Bandura, 1986; Friedman & Friedman, 1979), develop a sense of intimacy with them, and derive satisfaction from conforming to the celebrities' behavior (Basil, 1996). To this extent, consumers may resist changing their attitude when the celebrities become victims of negative publicity, either through selective processing of the information or other means (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Moreover, individuals with strong *a priori* liking for the scandal-afflicted celebrities might blame them less for the incident (Avison, 1980) and might be more inclined to sympathize with their plight (Karasawa, 2003). Consumers' initial liking for the celebrities could also have a direct impact on postscandal attitudes toward the endorsed products and purchase intentions. Consumers might like the endorsed brand more if the company keeps using the celebrity endorser they like even after a scandal breaks out. To this extent, they might be inclined to purchase the affected brand as a means of expressing their gratitude toward the company.

Unfortunately, the effects of consumers' initial liking for the celebrities on reactions to a scandal are generally difficult to assess. Experiments that use fictitious celebrities cannot capture the effects of this variable as no prior liking is present. On the other hand, actual celebrity scandals cannot be predicted. Consequently, individuals' prescandal attitudes can only be inferred from their retrospective reports, which are likely to be reconstructions that are affected by the scandal that occurred subsequently. For this reason, these reports were not formally included in the models being tested. However, they were considered in supplementary analyses to be reported presently.

Summary

The implications of the preceding discussion were captured by the theoretical path model shown in Figure 1, which indicates the paths implied by Hypotheses 1–4. More general effects of initial liking for the celebrities on other model parameters are shown as well. (These latter effects were not taken into account in the test of the model, however, for reasons noted earlier.) The validity of the model and its implications for the hypotheses proposed were evaluated in the study to follow.

METHOD

A survey of university students who were very familiar with the incident was conducted two months after the scandal broke out. The data collected were used to test the proposed conceptual framework. Despite being a convenience sample, university students were considered to be appropriate for this study as young people were particularly involved in the incident. According to a survey conducted in mid-February by the New Youth Forum of Hong Kong (2008), 57.5% of all the respondents reported having seen the photos and this figure rose to 70% for the younger population. All of the students surveyed were aware of the incident (thanks to the extensive mass media coverage), although not all of them had chosen to see the photos. Another reason for choosing university students was that they were frequent users of the types of the products endorsed by the celebrities involved in the incident (e.g. printers, sportswear, drinks, and jeans).

A total of 147 students completed the survey. Six students were excluded from the analysis due to missing data on one or more of the variables examined, leaving a sample of 53 males and 88 females for use in testing the proposed model. The students received course credit for completing the survey. They were told that the survey's purpose was to understand their feelings and opinions

regarding the widely publicized photo incident of Edison Chan and the female celebrities. Students were told not to write their name on the questionnaire to ensure anonymity. The items composing the survey, which are conveyed in the Appendix, pertained to

1. *A priori* attitudes toward sex and pornography;
2. Participants' own involvement in the situation, as indicated by the frequency of their exposure to the photos being disseminated;
3. The perceived negative impact of the incident on the celebrities;
4. The perceived negative impact of the incident on the society;
5. Positive reactions to the celebrities after the incident (feeling of sympathy);
6. Negative reactions to the celebrities after the incident (feelings of disappointment and despise);
7. Initial liking for the celebrities;
8. Attributions of blame to the celebrities for the incident ;
9. Change in attitudes toward the celebrities after learning about the incident;
10. Change in attitudes toward the endorsed products (three products for Edison and four products for Gillian);
11. Change in intentions to purchase the endorsed products (three products for Edison and four products for Gillian).

The conceptual model will be tested twice, one for Edison and one for Gillian. The other female celebrities involved in the incident were not active in the entertainment industry when the scandal broke out and they were not endorsing any products in Hong Kong at that time. Consequently, they were not considered.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the model components. Several results will be discussed. First, respondents reported having a rather conservative attitude toward pornography (4.26 along a scale from 1 to 7, with higher numbers indicating greater conservatism). As expected, females reported a more conservative attitude than male respondents did (4.45 vs. 3.40, respectively, $p < 0.001$), and indicated having viewed the photos less frequently (1.41 vs. 2.01, respectively, $p < 0.01$).

Respondents generally believed that the photo incident had a negative impact on both the celebrities themselves ($M = 5.70$) and the society in general ($M = 5.36$). Furthermore, they perceived the impact on the two celebrities to be virtually identical ($M = 5.70$ in each case). They believed that Edison should be blamed significantly more than Gilligan for the incident ($M = 4.68$ vs. 3.99, respectively, $p < 0.001$) and consequently

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Constructs.

| | Mean | SD |
|---|--------|------|
| Attitude toward sex and pornography | 4.26* | 1.19 |
| Negative impact on Edison | 5.71 | 1.48 |
| Negative impact on Gillian | 5.70 | 1.42 |
| Negative impact on society | 5.36 | 1.20 |
| Interest in the photos | 2.05* | 1.48 |
| Blameworthiness of Edison | 4.68 | 1.65 |
| Blameworthiness of Gillian | 3.99 | 1.58 |
| Sympathy for Edison | 3.42 | 1.84 |
| Sympathy for Gillian | 4.22 | 1.77 |
| Disappointment and despise for celebrities | 4.32 | 1.37 |
| Initial liking for Edison | 3.74 | 1.53 |
| Initial liking for Gillian | 4.00* | 1.54 |
| Attitude change toward Edison | -2.42 | 2.25 |
| Attitude change toward Gillian | -2.73* | 2.25 |
| Attitude change toward products endorsed by Edison | -0.36 | 1.39 |
| Attitude change toward products endorsed by Gillian | -0.58* | 1.42 |
| Change in purchase intention for products endorsed by Edison | -0.64 | 1.68 |
| Change in purchase intention for products endorsed by Gillian | -0.80 | 1.61 |

*The means of these variables are significantly different at $p < 0.05$ across the male and female respondents.

felt less sympathy for him than for Gillian ($M = 3.42$ vs. 4.22, respectively, $p < 0.001$). They reported that their attitudes toward both celebrities became more negative after the incident ($M = -2.42$ vs. -2.73 for Edison vs. Gillian, respectively), but these estimates did not differ from one another.

Finally, note that although the reported change in attitude toward the two celebrities after the scandal was large, the changes in attitude toward the products they endorsed and intentions to purchase them were relatively small ($M = -0.47$ and -0.72 , respectively). Although respondents may differ in their prior brand attitudes and familiarity, the joint consideration of three to four brands for each celebrity serves to offset these idiosyncratic differences. Reported changes in attitudes and purchase likelihood were averaged over the three or four brands endorsed by the celebrity and the reliability of these scales is very high (between 0.92 and 0.97). This suggests that the observed changes in brand attitude and purchase intention are likely derived from attitude change toward the celebrities after the scandal rather than by the idiosyncratic differences in brand attitudes and knowledge.

None of the aforementioned judgments significantly differed between males and females. However, females relative to males reported less initial liking for Gillian and a more negative change in attitude toward both her and the products she endorsed. The results are not surprising. As Bower (2001) has pointed out, women tend to dislike highly attractive female models because they compare themselves with these models and this leads

Table 2. Model Fit Indices.

| | χ^2 | df | χ^2/df | <i>p</i> -value | CFI | GFI | AGFI |
|---------------|----------|----|-------------|-----------------|------|------|------|
| Gillian model | 51.4 | 28 | 1.84 | < 0.01 | 0.93 | 0.91 | 0.83 |
| Edison model | 58.65 | 28 | 2.09 | < 0.01 | 0.94 | 0.91 | 0.83 |

to a negative attitude toward the ad and the brand. No gender differences were found for other variables.

Structural Equation Analyses

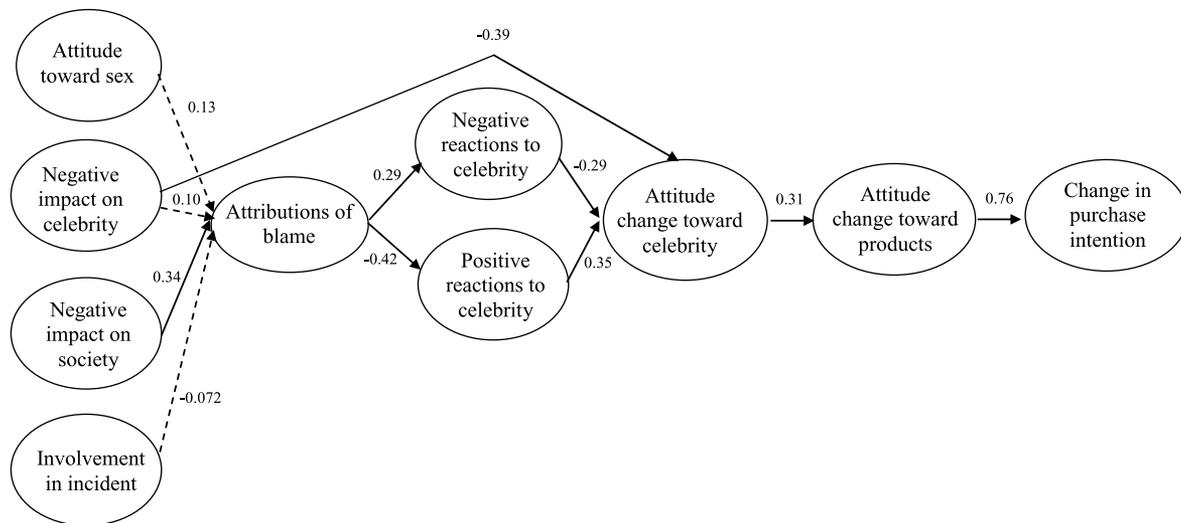
Overall Model Fit. The conceptual model was validated using LISREL 8.8 on the basis of data for Edison and Gillian separately. Table 2 summarizes the indices of fit for the two models. In general, the two sets of data fit the model quite well. Although the χ^2 statistics of both models are significant ($p < 0.05$), this statistic may not be a reliable measure of model fit as it is sensitive to sample size (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). The comparative fit index (CFI) is often used to determine model fit instead. A CFI value over 0.9 is considered as an indication of acceptable fit (Bentler, 1992). Goodness of fit (GFI) and adjusted goodness of fit (AGFI) are alternative indices for model fit. A GFI value greater than 0.9 and an AGFI value exceeding 0.8 are used as the benchmarks (Hayduk, 1987). All the criteria for satisfactory fit are met. Thus, both sets of data were consistent with the conceptual model.

The significant pathways identified in testing the models for Gillian and Edison are shown in Figures 2 and 3, respectively. (Nonsignificant paths predicted by Hypotheses 1–4 are also shown.) With one exception, the pattern of significant relations is identical in each case.

Hypothesis Testing

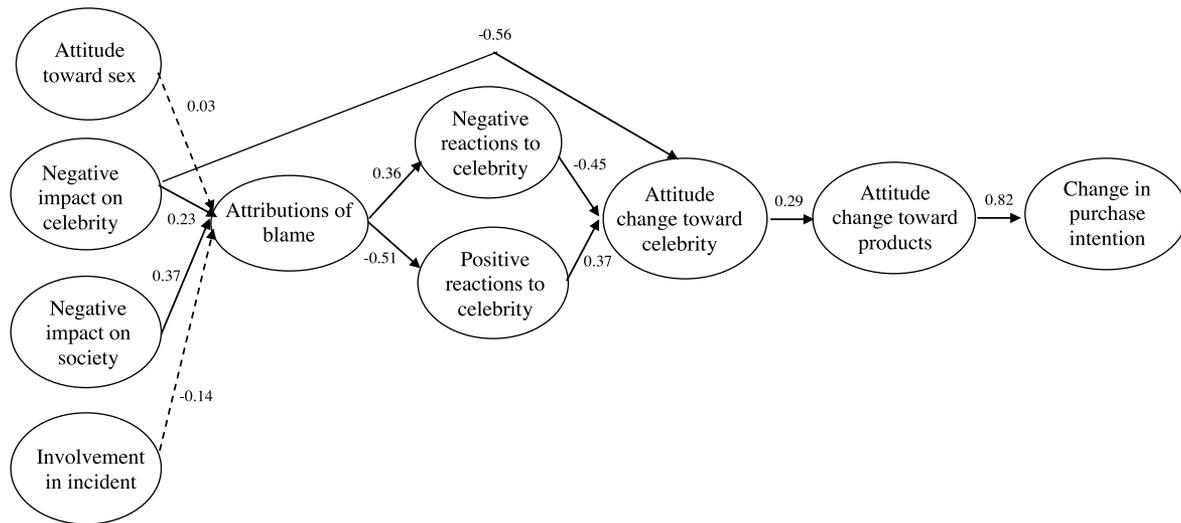
Hypotheses 1 and 2 concerned the factors that are expected to influence attributions of responsibility for the incident. Only Hypothesis 1 received support. That is, perceptions of the negative impact of the scandal on the society had an influence on attributions of responsibility to both Gillian and Edison. However, perceptions of the negative consequences of the scandal for the celebrities themselves only affected attributions of blame to Edison. As noted earlier, participants generally blamed Edison for the scandal to a greater extent than they blamed Gillian. To the extent the impact of perceived consequences on blame attributions results from the motivation to maintain beliefs in a just world, these data suggest that the effects of this motivation were localized in perceptions of only the main perpetrator of the incident.

In contrast to Hypothesis 2a, however, attributions of responsibility were not affected by individuals’ own involvement in the scandal (as reflected in their frequency of viewing the obscene photos). This is somewhat surprising. Individuals who viewed the photos frequently were hypothesized to perceive themselves to be involved in the incident and to rationalize his involvement by attributing blame to the celebrities. This was not the case. However, further analyses provide some preliminary evidence that personal involvement with the incident affects blame attribution in a way consistent with cognitive dissonance theory. A characteristic



---▶ Dotted arrow implies that the path is not significant at $p < 0.05$.

Figure 2. Structural model coefficients for the conceptual model—Gillian



---▶ Dotted arrow implies that the path is not significant at $p < 0.05$.

Figure 3. Structural model coefficients for the conceptual model—Edison

of this scandal is that apart from the celebrities, other parties also contributed to the occurrence of this scandal and thus could potentially be blamed. These parties include the person who stole the photos, the person who first uploaded the photos to the internet, the media that publicized the incident, the people who shared the photos with others, and the people who merely viewed the photos. The average level of perceived blameworthiness of these parties is negatively correlated with the personal involvement in the incident. That is, persons were much less likely to blame all the parties if they were personally involved in the incident than if they were not ($r = -0.33, p < 0.001$). The result seems to imply that those who saw more photos, relative to those who saw fewer, tend to treat the photo incident as an unfortunate event and thus are less critical of every party.

Hypothesis 2b is also not supported. The failure for participants' general attitude toward sex and pornography to influence their tolerance of the scandal and their attributions of blame is noteworthy. Perhaps the widespread media coverage diluted the effect of individual dispositions on evaluations of the blameworthiness of the celebrities. Additional analysis shows that general sex attitude played a role in determining the average level of blameworthiness of all parties ($r = 0.297, p < 0.001$). Individuals with more conservative attitude toward sex and pornography reported a higher level of blameworthiness of all parties involved in the incident.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 were confirmed. That is, changes in attitude toward the celebrities were affected by attributions of responsibility through their mediating impact on both positive reactions to the celebrities (e.g. sympathy) and negative ones (e.g. disappointment), as implied by Hypothesis 3. Further-

more, the negative consequences of the incident for the celebrities decreased participants' attitude toward them independently of their perceptions of the celebrities' responsibility for the scandal, as suggested by Hypothesis 4.

Supplementary Findings

As noted earlier, the inability to obtain data on participants' reactions to the celebrities before the scandal occurred precluded a meaningful evaluation of the effects of their *a priori* attitudes toward the celebrities on their postscandal willingness to purchase the products the celebrities had endorsed and the variables that mediated these effects. That is, participants' retrospective reports of their liking for the celebrities could be influenced by reconstructive memory processes or their attempts to report attitudes that were consistent with their postscandal responses. Nevertheless, the implications of these measures may be worth noting.

Extreme attitudes are usually formed by repeated expressions (Downing, Judd, & Brauer, 1992). An individual who have strong liking for a celebrity may repeatedly share this attitude with other people prior to the scandal and thus enhances the accessibility of this attitude from memory. Extreme attitudes are also less subject to social influence (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955). Consequently, their attitudes may be less swayed by the scandal. To this end, participants who reported either extreme dislike of the celebrities (1 or 2 along a scale from 1 to 7) were compared to those who reported extreme liking for them (6 or 7). Table 3 compares the model variables for Edison and Gillian separately. With only one exception, the results are

Table 3. Comparisons of Model Variables between Respondents with Extreme Prescandal Liking/Dislike for the Celebrities.

| | Edison | | Gillian | |
|---|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| | Extreme liking (18 respondents) | Extreme dislike (39 respondents) | Extreme liking (30 respondents) | Extreme dislike (31 respondents) |
| Perceived blameworthiness of the celebrity | 3.39 | 4.67* | 3.73 | 4.13 |
| Attitude change toward the celebrity | -0.83 | -2.95* | -1.67 | -3.39* |
| Positive reaction to the celebrity | 4.61 | 2.49* | 5.27 | 3.03* |
| Attitude change toward the endorsed products | 0.70 | -0.98* | 0.13 | -1.12* |
| Change in purchase intention toward the endorsed products | 0.56 | -1.79* | -0.24 | -1.99* |

*The means of these variables are significantly different at $p < 0.05$ across the extreme liking and extreme dislike groups. The only exception is the perceived blameworthiness of Gillian—there is no significant difference between the extreme liking and extreme dislike groups.

consistent with expectations. Respondents who expressed extreme liking for a celebrity tended to blame the celebrity less, to change in their attitudes toward the celebrities less, and to sympathize with them more relative to the respondents who expressed extreme dislike did. Moreover, they reported relatively more positive changes in attitude toward the endorse products and in the likelihood of purchasing them.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present study is one of the only investigations of the implications of an actual celebrity scandal on reactions to the celebrities and their consequent evaluations of the products the celebrities endorsed. Although it is obviously somewhat hazardous to infer causality on the basis of correlational data, the fit of the theoretical model provides some confidence in the assumptions on which the model is based. The proposed conceptualization incorporated theory and concepts drawn from attribution theory (Weiner, 1980, 1986) and just world considerations (Lerner, 1970) as well as more general considerations surrounding the influence of attitudes toward the celebrities on reactions to the products they endorsed. Several specific aspects of the findings are worth noting.

Participants' perceptions that the celebrities were to blame for the scandal were determined largely by perceptions of its negative impact on the society as a whole, confirming earlier findings that attributions of responsibility for an event increase with the severity of its consequences (e.g. Lowe & Medway, 1976; Mazzocco, Alicke, & Davis, 2004; McKillip & Posavac, 1975). However, perceptions of the negative impact of the scandal on the celebrities themselves only affected attributions of responsibility to Edison. As noted earlier, participants may have been able to maintain their beliefs in a just world by attributing responsibility to the main perpetrator of the scandal without generalizing this responsibility to other participants.

In contrast to expectations, however, participants' own attitudes and beliefs had no impact on their at-

tributions of responsibility to the celebrities. Specifically, these attributions were uncorrelated with the liberalness of participants' personal attitudes toward sex and pornography (and, therefore, their presumed tolerance of the celebrities' scandal-related behavior). The frequency with which they viewed the photos that were being disseminated likewise had little impact on their reactions to the celebrities. Although the two variables do not determine the perceived blameworthiness of the celebrities, they are related to the average level of blameworthiness of different parties involved in the scandal. In particular, the respondents who were more involved in the scandal assigned a lower level of responsibility to different parties contributing to its occurrence. The result is consistent with the cognitive dissonance theory. Similarly, respondents who reported a more conservative sex attitude assign a higher level of responsibility to all parties involved. In combination, these results suggest that respondents are more likely to be affected by other external factors (e.g. perceived negative impact on the society and on the celebrities) rather than by their own behaviors and disposition when they assign responsibilities to the celebrities. Perhaps the widespread media coverage contributes to this observation.

As already noted, attributions of responsibility to the celebrities was primarily influenced by perceptions of the scandal's negative impact on the society. The magnitude of this impact may often depend on the social or cultural group to which individuals belong. Celebrities who take obscene photos may be considered particularly unacceptable to Chinese consumers (Ding, Wang, & Ma, 2005). As a result, the perceived negative impact on the society and on the celebrities might be greater, and attitude change toward the celebrities might be more negative, than in societies that have more liberal sex-related norms and values. Thus, the effect of culture may be a result of normative values that individuals do not necessarily apply to themselves.

Although there are obvious limitations in measuring *a priori* liking for celebrities after the scandal had occurred, supplementary analyses of the possible effects of this variable (Table 3) are worth noting. Although

likeableness is one of the criteria used in choosing a celebrity endorser, it is given little weight relative to other criteria (Erdogan, Baker, & Tagg, 2001). However, the results of this research suggest that this factor might be more important than is often assumed. That is, although celebrity endorsers may be chosen for other reasons (status, prestige, attractiveness, etc.), the impact of likeableness may determine their persisting effectiveness should negative publicity emerge.

Limitations and Future Research

Although there are merits of using a real scandal to study consumers' reactions, there are obvious problems as well. A major problem pertains to the inability to manipulate or measure variables that were likely to have an impact on the individuals' reactions to the scandal. As noted earlier, individuals' *a priori* liking for the celebrities is likely to have influenced their attributions of responsibility to the celebrities and their sympathy for the celebrities' plight. Although individuals' retrospective estimates of their liking for the celebrities suggest that this is the case (Table 3), the effects could be due in part to differences in reconstructive memory.

The use of a convenience student sample also deserves mention. A student sample can be justified by its match to the target market of the endorsed brands and the higher likelihood that the student respondents had strong prior attitude (like or dislike) toward the affected celebrities. The proposed model may not be applicable to individuals who are less identified with celebrities in general (such as middle-age adults or elderly).

Finally, caution should be taken in generalizing the findings reported to celebrity scandals in general. All scandals have many idiosyncratic features that could qualify some of the conclusions drawn. Nonetheless, the ability to provide an overall conceptualization of the factors that mediate the effects of a celebrity scandal, many implications of which are consistent with laboratory-based theory and research, is encouraging.

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APPENDIX

Measurements of Constructs

Attitude toward Sex and Pornography ($\alpha = 0.88$). Respondents reported their agreement with seven statements along a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). (A similar scale was used to assess peer influences and the feelings that resulted from seeing the pictures, as indicated presently.). The statements were

1. I was resistant toward pornography.
2. I considered watching pornographic videos or visiting pornographic Web sites as unacceptable behaviors.
3. I was conservative about sex.
4. I had very little discussion with friends about sex.
5. I rarely saw pornographic photos or materials.
6. I rarely visited pornographic Web sites.
7. I was not receptive to friends who like pornography.
8. I was not receptive to people taking indecent photos or videos of themselves.

Interest in the Photos. Two questions assessed respondents' interest in the photos. The first question asked how many times respondents had seen the photos along a category scale from "none" to "over 20 times."

The second item asked for the number of photos respondents had seen along a category scale from “none” to “over 200 photos.” Responses to each item were coded from 0 to 6 and averaged to provide a single index of their interest in the photos.

Perceived Negative Impact on the Celebrities. Respondents reported the extent to which they thought the widespread circulation of the indecent photos had a negative impact on (a) Edison Chen (the male celebrity) and (b) the female celebrities (considered as a group). Responses were made along a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

Perceived Negative Impact on the Society. Respondents reported the extent to which they thought the widespread circulation of the indecent photos had a negative impact on (a) the society as a whole and (b) the young generation, along a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). The responses to the two items were averaged to form a single index to reflect the overall perceived negative impact on the society.

Positive Reactions to the Celebrities. Respondents reported the extent they felt sympathetic for Edison and for the female celebrities on separate statements along a scale 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Negative Reactions to the Celebrities. Respondents reported the extent they felt disappointed at and despised the celebrities for the incident on two separate statements along a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Attributions of Blame. Respondents were given a list of individuals and groups and asked to indicate the extent to which each party should be blamed for the scandal along a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). The list included (a) people who shared the photos with others, (b) the computer technician who stole the photos, (c) anyone who saw the photos, (d) the media that publicized the incident, (e) Edison, and (f) the female celebrities. However, for the purpose of this study, only attributions of blame to Edison and the female celebrities are examined in this study.

Initial Liking for the Celebrities. Respondents reported the extent they liked Edison and Gillian on a separate scale from 1 (*did not like him/her at all*) to 7 (*liked him/her very much*).

Attitude Change toward the Celebrities. Respondents reported how their attitudes toward Edison and Gillian changed after the photo incident along two separate scales from -5 (*much more negative*) to 5 (*much more positive*). The mid-point 0 is marked as “no change” to suggest to the respondents that “no change” is also an acceptable option if it reflects their true opinion. The same scale format was adopted for the two measures of attitude change and change in purchase intention toward the endorsed products.

Attitude Change toward the Endorsed Products ($\alpha = 0.97$ and 0.92 for Edison and Gillian, Respectively). Three brands were endorsed by Edison, and they are Levi’s Jeans, Pepsi Cola, and Samsung digital cameras. Four brands were endorsed by Gillian: Mentholatum Lip Balm, Adidas Sportswear, Disneyland, and Epson printers. To serve as a reminder, the endorser of a particular brand was shown in bracket besides the brand that the respondent evaluated. The attitude change scores for the three brands endorsed by Edison, measured along a scale from -5 (*much more negative*) to 5 (*much more positive*), were averaged to form a single index for attitude change toward the products endorsed by Edison. Similarly, the attitude change scores for the four brands endorsed by Gillian were averaged to form a single index.

Change in Purchase Intention of the Endorsed Products ($\alpha = 0.96$ and 0.95 for Edison and Gillian, Respectively). Respondents indicated whether they were more or less likely to purchase each of the seven products along a scale from -5 (*much less likely*) to 5 (*much more likely*). The scores for the three products endorsed by Edison were averaged to provide a single score. Likewise, the scores for the four products endorsed by Gillian were averaged to form a single index.