

**CELEBRITY GOSSIP CONSUMPTION:  
NOVEL ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES**

**A Dissertation**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Celebrity gossip, defined broadly as speculative media content about celebrities' personal lives, is heavily understudied in the fields of marketing and consumer research. The current dissertation is an attempt to fill this void by examining some novel antecedents and marketing/consumer-relevant consequences of reading/watching celebrity gossip. The first essay looks at the consumption of celebrity gossip as a previously unexplored form of compensatory behavior exhibited subconsciously by individuals particularly in response to social exclusion threats. The second essay investigates how the valence of gossip stories about celebrities can impact the celebrities' persuasiveness as endorsers for vice versus virtue products.

### **ESSAY 1: Celebrity Gossip Consumption as an Affiliation-Based Means of Coping**

Despite the immense popularity of celebrity gossip magazines and websites, little research exists on people's motivations for consuming celebrity gossip as compared to the substantial literature on interpersonal gossip. Building on the compensatory consumer behavior model, my co-authors and I propose an affiliation-based coping explanation for people's consumption of celebrity gossip and test the same using three experimental studies. We demonstrate that celebrity gossip consumption is a means of coping with identity threats, particularly social exclusion threats. Learning about celebrities' personal lives via gossip articles makes them appear more relatable, enhancing readers' feelings of closeness with them. Thus, consuming celebrity gossip vicariously satisfies the desire for affiliation that increases under social exclusion threats. In other words, gossip articles enable one-sided or parasocial

relationships with celebrities and become an effective means of coping with social exclusion threats.

## **ESSAY 2: Impact of Celebrity Gossip on Celebrity Endorsements for Vice vs. Virtue**

### **Products**

Prior research has primarily looked at the negative effects of negative information about celebrities on their effectiveness as brand endorsers. Building on the meaning transfer model and the match-up hypothesis, often used for explaining the persuasiveness of celebrity endorsements, my co-author and I propose that a negative piece of information about a celebrity's personal life (a negative gossip story) can possibly make the celebrity a better endorser for vice (vs. virtue) products by enhancing the perceived fit of the celebrity with the product/brand. We expect this effect to be stronger for female audiences, who have been shown to be more comprehensive information processors (they tend to be more sensitive to all pieces of information available to them while evaluating advertising messages). However, among the male audiences, who have been shown to be selective information processors (they tend to pay attention primarily to the cues made salient in the advertisement itself), the proposed effect is likely to be weaker. We find support for this theorizing across three experimental studies. This research thus adds to the literature on communication source effects by establishing celebrity gossip stories as subtle cues that have the potential to alter audience responses to celebrity endorsements.

# **ESSAY 1: Celebrity Gossip Consumption as an Affiliation-Based Means of Coping**

(co-authored with Tanuka Ghoshal and Raj Raghunathan)

## **Introduction**

It is no secret that celebrity gossip magazines such as *People*, *Us Weekly*, and *OK!* — which divulge intimate, often sensationalized details of celebrities' private lives — are immensely popular. After *ESPN* (the sports magazine), *People* is the most popular magazine in the US, with a reach of 98.51 million (June 2019 statistic; Watson 2020). While substantial research exists on interpersonal gossip (e.g., Feinberg, Willer, and Schultz 2014; Fine and Rosnow 1978; Martinescu, Janssen, and Nijstad 2014; Wert and Salovey 2004), there is surprisingly limited academic investigation into people's psychological motivations for consuming celebrity gossip.

Gossip is evaluative talk about absent third parties, usually with others in one's social group (Arno 1980; Eder and Enke 1991; Foster 2004; Noon and Delbridge 1993). Engaging in gossip helps obtain "privy" value-laden information about persons that may not be directly accessible by engaging in primary exchange with those persons (Foster 2004; Noon and Delbridge 1993). This is particularly true for celebrity gossip since most people cannot engage in one-on-one conversations with celebrities. It may seem that people would not consider celebrities as part of their social group, and thus should not be interested in their lives. However, given the repeated exposure to celebrities on mass and social media, it has been argued that people tend to develop one-sided — "parasocial" — relationships with the celebrities, becoming

as invested in the celebrities' personal lives as they are in their friends' lives (Gamson 1994; Horton and Wohl 1956; Labrecque 2014; Levin and Arluke 1987; McAndrew and Milenkovic 2002). Could celebrity gossip consumption further this process of parasocial bonding and be a source of emotional comfort when one needs it? That is the broad question that we address in this research.

Prior researchers have conceptualized celebrity gossip as media content about the private lives of celebrities (De Backer et al. 2007; McDonnell 2014, 2015). They argue that such content, although speculative and biased, offers new/unknown information about the celebrities' lives (De Backer 2012; De Backer et al. 2007; De Backer and Fisher 2012; McDonnell 2014; Petersen 2011). Combining these perspectives, we define celebrity gossip as speculative media content about relatively unknown aspects of celebrities' personal lives, presented in an evaluative manner.

Adopting the lens of compensatory consumption (Mandel et al. 2017), we propose that celebrity gossip offers a means to cope with certain types of self-threats. Specifically, based on the premise that knowledge of intimate details about celebrities' lives (as revealed in the typical gossip articles) could make people feel closer to these celebrities, we conjecture that celebrity gossip consumption may serve as an affiliation-based means of coping, particularly in response to social exclusion threats.

This research adds to the literature on compensatory consumption by documenting how consuming celebrity gossip can help cope with social exclusion threats. Thus, it also contributes

to the growing stream of research on the virtues of gossip (e.g., Baumeister, Zhang, and Vohs 2004; Feinberg et al. 2012, 2014; Martinescu et al. 2014). Additionally, it advances the prior work on parasocial relationships; specifically, it is the first to show that people seek emotional comfort even from parasocial relationships.

The rest of the essay is structured as follows. In the next section, we develop our hypotheses, and then, in the subsequent section, we present evidence from empirical tests designed to test these hypotheses. We conclude with a discussion of our theoretical and substantive implications.

## **Conceptual Development**

Self-threat is an aversive psychological situation arising from a discrepancy between one's current state and desired state in domains considered important to self-identity, like intelligence or belonging (Han, Duhachek, and Rucker 2015; Higgins 1987; Kim and Rucker 2012). In response to self-threats, people often engage in compensatory consumption behavior (for a review, please see Mandel et al. 2017).

Imagine a student is overlooked by the organizer of a sorority party. In response to this threat to her social identity, she may seek the company of her best friend. This would be an example of "direct" resolution/compensation. Alternatively, she could buy her school's wrist band (e.g., Mead et al. 2011) or an anthropomorphized product (Chen, Wan, and Levy 2017), in an attempt to bolster her sense of belonging. These would be examples of "symbolic" self-

completion/compensation (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982). She may also cope with the self-threat by distracting herself, say, by listening to loud music (Batra and Ghoshal 2017), which would be categorized as escapism, or by affirming herself in a different identity domain, such as intelligence (Steele 1988), which would constitute “fluid” compensation (for more on these coping strategies, please see Mandel et al. 2017).

Unsurprisingly, a common way in which people cope with social exclusion is by “directly” seeking affiliation, particularly with close others (Bernstein et al. 2010; Lakin, Chartrand, and Arkin 2008; Maner et al. 2007; Park and Maner 2009). To the extent that celebrities are perceived as “friends” (Giles 2002; Horton and Wohl 1956; Peng et al. 2015), it is conceivable that people may seek affiliation with celebrities too when faced with a social exclusion threat. We claim that learning details of celebrities’ personal lives by consuming gossip articles is not only a “symbolic” means to satisfy this affiliation desire but is also a subconscious reinforcement for the parasocial bond that people have with them. Scholars have argued that knowing intimate details about celebrities’ lives makes them appear more “ordinary” (McDonnell 2014), thus fostering a sense of attachment with them (McAndrew and Milenkovic 2002; Thomson 2006). However, this affiliation-based coping mechanism may not work as strongly as a “fluid” compensation strategy (Mandel et al. 2017) for threats to the identity domains that are not related to affiliation, such as intelligence and personal control.

Formally, we hypothesize:

**H1:** There is an increased proclivity for celebrity gossip following social exclusion threats but less so following affiliation-unrelated threats.

**H2:** The increased proclivity for celebrity gossip in response to social exclusion is mediated by a desire to affiliate with close others.

**H3:** Consuming celebrity gossip increases feelings of closeness with celebrities by making them appear more relatable.

Our overarching conceptual framework is presented in figure 1. We test our theorizing in three experimental studies using gossip articles about Hollywood and Bollywood celebrities, among students as well as a general adult population. In study 1, we test H1 and show that social exclusion (vs. affiliation-unrelated self-threats and a baseline condition) increases the consumption of celebrity gossip (vs. non-gossip) media articles. In study 2, we directly examine the underlying process and find that a desire to affiliate with close others mediates the impact of social exclusion on the consumption of celebrity gossip articles (thus confirming H2). We further elaborate on the process of affiliation coping in study 3 by showing that gossip articles make celebrities appear more relatable and thus increase readers' feelings of closeness with them (thereby confirming H3).

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Insert figure 1 about here

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### **Study 1: Moderation by Threat Type**

Study 1 tests H1 by investigating the impact of three types of self-threats, one affiliation-related (social exclusion) and two affiliation-unrelated (intelligence, personal control) on

participants' proclivity for celebrity gossip (vs. non-gossip) media articles. As per H1, we expect that the proportion of participants choosing a celebrity gossip article to read will be more post the affiliation-related social exclusion threat than post the two affiliation-unrelated threats.

### *Method*

Study 1 followed a single-factor (four levels) between-subjects design. We manipulated threat type (intelligence, personal control, social exclusion, plus a baseline condition) and observed its effect on the participants' article choice from a selection of two gossip titles ("Brad Pitt spoiling kids as the custody battle with Angie heats up," "Jennifer Aniston hasn't given up on love after Justin Theroux split"), and two non-gossip titles ("Bohemian Rhapsody is now the highest grossing musical biopic," "New streaming platform by AT&T to compete with Netflix and Hulu"). These titles were selected based on a pretest of ten titles (taken from recent headlines) – done on sixty-three US-based MTurk workers (44.44% female, Mage = 34.98), who were not allowed to participate in the main study.

*Pretest details.* The pretest participants were asked to evaluate 10 article titles – all taken from recent entertainment-related news headlines – six celebrity gossip titles and four non-gossip titles, presented in a counter-balanced order. After reading each title, the participants were asked to evaluate it both from the perspective of "people in general" (to counter any potential impression management/social desirability concerns related to celebrity gossip articles) as well as from their own perspective. They indicated the extent (from 1 = "Not at all" to 7 = "Very much") to which the title would make them/people in general "want to read the full article," and

how “interesting” and “entertaining” the article with such a title would be. Next, the gossipiness of each title was measured by asking the participants to indicate (from 1 = “Not at all” to 7 = “Very much”) how “gossipy” they expect the article to be (direct measure), how likely they were to see such an article title in a magazine like People or Us Weekly, and how likely they were to see it in a magazine like TIME or Newsweek (indirect measures).

*Pretest results.* We did not consider the data of four pretest participants for analysis as they failed multiple attention checks (more than one, out of a total of three). Based on this pretest, we selected the aforementioned four article titles for the main study, two celebrity gossip (CG) and two non-gossip (NG), which were similar along all other dimensions: “Brad Pitt spoiling kids as the custody battle with Angie heats up” (CG1), “Jennifer Aniston hasn’t given up on love after Justin Theroux split” (CG2), “Bohemian Rhapsody is now the highest-grossing musical biopic” (NG1), and “New streaming platform by AT&T to compete with Netflix and Hulu” (NG2).

A repeated-measures ANOVA confirmed that the titles CG1 ( $M = 5.88$ ) and CG2 ( $M = 6.02$ ) were perceived as significantly more gossipy (Wilks’ Lambda = 0.38,  $F(3, 56) = 30.19$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) than the titles NG1 ( $M = 3.20$ ) and NG2 ( $M = 2.76$ ). Similarly, CG1 ( $M = 5.85$ ) and CG2 ( $M = 5.85$ ) were significantly more likely to be seen in a magazine like People or Us Weekly (Wilks’ Lambda = 0.58,  $F(3, 56) = 13.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) than NG1 ( $M = 4.85$ ) and NG2 ( $M = 3.92$ ). Also, as expected, CG1 ( $M = 2.88$ ) and CG2 ( $M = 2.73$ ), were significantly less likely (Wilks’ Lambda = 0.49,  $F(3, 56) = 19.22$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) to be seen in a magazine like TIME or Newsweek than NG1 ( $M = 4.49$ ) and NG2 ( $M = 5.19$ ).

Importantly, the four titles didn't differ on aspects such as the extent to which the title makes people want to read the full article (Wilks' Lambda = 0.96,  $F(3, 56) = 0.81$ ,  $p = 0.492$ ), how interesting the article is expected to be (Wilks' Lambda = 0.91,  $F(3, 56) = 1.83$ ,  $p = 0.152$ ), and how entertaining it is expected to be (Wilks' Lambda = 0.96,  $F(3, 56) = 0.8$ ,  $p = 0.498$ ).

*Main study details.* Three-hundred-eleven US-based MTurk workers (47.9% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 38.82$ ) completed study 1 for monetary compensation. They first responded to a "personality assessment," wherein we measured their self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965) along with some generic trait measures. We then manipulated self-threat using an experience recall task (Han et al. 2015); the participants wrote about a time when they felt unintelligent (intelligence threat), not in control (personal control threat), or excluded/left out (social exclusion threat). In the baseline condition, the participants wrote about their activities since waking up that day.

Following some filler questions, the participants responded to self-threat manipulation checks (Han et al. 2015) and mood measures (Batra and Ghoshal 2017), before proceeding to an ostensibly unrelated study on reading preferences. In this "unrelated study," the participants were asked to select an article for reading from the four titles shown, read their chosen article, and answer some questions about it. Article choice (gossip vs. non-gossip) served as our primary dependent measure. The questions following the article included manipulation checks assessing the chosen article's gossipiness, and potential covariates (interest in digital entertainment/rock music/biopics and liking for the celebrities featured in the stimuli articles).

## Results

*Self-threat manipulation checks.* The manipulations were successful in inducing the corresponding self-threat. Specifically, participants in the social exclusion, intelligence, and personal control threat conditions reported feeling more excluded ( $M_{\text{exclusion-threat}} = 3.36$ ,  $M_{\text{baseline}} = 2.81$ ;  $F(1, 155) = 3.41$ ,  $p = 0.067$ ), more unintelligent ( $M_{\text{intelligence-threat}} = 2.74$ ,  $M_{\text{baseline}} = 1.86$ ;  $F(1, 155) = 15.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and greater lack of control ( $M_{\text{control-threat}} = 3.41$ ,  $M_{\text{baseline}} = 2.88$ ;  $F(1, 153) = 7.25$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ) respectively.

*Gossipiness manipulation checks.* One-sample t-tests on the direct measure of gossipiness revealed that the participants who read a gossip article rated it higher than the scale mid-point of 4 ( $M = 5.54$ ;  $t(77) = 8.76$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and the participants who read a non-gossip article rated it lower than the scale mid-point of 4 ( $M = 1.79$ ;  $t(232) = -29.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

We also ran similar one-sample t-tests on the indirect measures of gossipiness comparing the participant ratings (condition-wise) with the scale mid-point of four. For likelihood to appear in People/Us Weekly, the ratings were significantly higher than the scale midpoint for those who chose to read a gossip article ( $M = 5.79$ ;  $t(77) = 10.68$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). However, these ratings were not significantly different from the scale midpoint for those who chose to read a non-gossip article ( $M = 3.84$ ;  $t(232) = -1.23$ ,  $p = 0.219$ ). This could be because our non-gossip articles were also related to the entertainment industry and were thus also somewhat likely to appear in People/Us Weekly.

For the second indirect gossipiness measure (likelihood to appear in TIME/Newsweek), as expected, the ratings for the gossip article were significantly lower than the scale midpoint ( $M = 2.94$ ;  $t(77) = -5.06$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), while for the non-gossip article, the ratings were significantly higher than the scale midpoint ( $M = 5.33$ ;  $t(232) = 14.26$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

*Article choice.* The proportion of participants choosing a gossip article differed significantly by threat condition ( $M_{\text{exclusion-threat}} = 38.5\%$ ,  $M_{\text{intelligence-threat}} = 23.1\%$ ;  $M_{\text{control-threat}} = 26.3\%$ ,  $M_{\text{baseline}} = 12.7\%$ ; Wald  $\chi^2(3, N = 311) = 14.149$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ; please see figure 2). Since the proportion in the two affiliation-unrelated threats were not significantly different from each other (Wald  $\chi^2(1, N = 154) = 0.217$ ,  $p = 0.641$ ), we combined the two conditions for further analyses. Pairwise comparisons with the baseline condition revealed that the effect of the affiliation-related exclusion threat on choice of gossip article was very strong (Wald  $\chi^2(1, N = 157) = 13.763$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) while that of the affiliation-unrelated threats was relatively weaker (Wald  $\chi^2(1, N = 233) = 4.61$ ,  $p = 0.032$ ). Another pairwise comparison confirmed that the effect was stronger for the affiliation-related exclusion threat than for the affiliation-unrelated ones ( $M_{\text{affiliation-related-threat}} = 38.5\%$ ,  $M_{\text{affiliation-unrelated-threats}} = 24.7\%$ ; Wald  $\chi^2(1, N = 232) = 4.749$ ,  $p = 0.029$ ). These results continued to hold even after adding the measures of self-esteem, interest in digital entertainment/biopics/rock music, liking for the target celebrities, mood, and gender as covariates in the model.

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Insert figure 2 about here

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## *Discussion*

Study 1 results show that the proclivity for celebrity gossip increases following self-threats and confirm H1 by showing that this compensatory effect is more pronounced for a social exclusion threat than for affiliation-unrelated threats (intelligence, personal control threats). Study 1 findings thus suggest that celebrity gossip consumption is possibly an affiliation-based means of coping. In study 2, we seek to replicate the main results of study 1 in a different cultural context while examining the underlying process.

### **Study 2: Process Evidence**

Study 2 uses only a social exclusion threat to test H1 again, in a different cultural context (India), and also tests H2 by assessing whether a desire to affiliate with close others mediates the impact of social exclusion on the proclivity for celebrity gossip. We additionally investigate escapism (Heatherton and Baumeister 1991; Mandel and Smeesters 2008) as an alternate process explanation.

## *Method*

Two-hundred-twenty-eight Indian adults (32.5% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 31.54$ ), recruited via MTurk and a panel maintained by the behavioral lab of an Asian B-school, participated in this study. We used the same procedure as study 1, with a few important modifications. First, India-specific content and Bollywood celebrities were used for stimuli articles (two gossip and two

non-gossip entertainment articles), based on a pretest on 40 MTurk workers (details to follow). The covariates measured were customized to the articles in the choice-set (e.g., liking for the specific celebrities). Second, we used only the social exclusion threat (vs. baseline condition) in a single-factor design. The conditions were manipulated using the same experience recall task employed in study 1. Third, we included measures for our primary mediator – desire to affiliate with close others (“Right now how much would you like to...” “Hang out with friends?,” “Make plans with a friend or a significant other?,” “Send a text message to a close other?,” “Spend time with a close friend?,” and “Talk on the phone with a friend?;” 1 = “Not at all,” 7 = “Very much;” Park and Maner 2009), and for the alternate mediator – escapism (“I don't want to think about my present situation too much,” “I feel like turning to work or some other activity to take my mind off things,” and “I feel like taking my mind off my present situation;” 1 = “Strongly disagree,” 7 = “Strongly agree;” adapted from Duhachek and Oakley 2007).

*Pretest details.* To select stimuli article titles for study 2, a pretest was done on forty India-based MTurk workers (62.5% female,  $M_{age} = 36.58$ ), who were not allowed to participate in the main study. In the pretest, these participants were asked to evaluate ten article titles taken from recent headlines in Indian media – five celebrity gossip titles and five non-gossip ones. The questions following each title were similar to the ones used in the study 1 pretest.

*Pretest results.* As in study 1, we selected four titles for the main study, two celebrity gossip (CG) and two non-gossip (NG), that were similar along all other aspects: “Ranveer Singh and Deepika Padukone to marry in Switzerland?” (CG1), “After break-up with Alia, ‘gentleman’ Sidharth dating Jacqueline?” (CG2), “Andhra Pradesh: Man dies while watching Avengers

Infinity War” (NG1), and “Digital medium in Indian entertainment: Revolution or Fad?” (NG2). A repeated-measures ANOVA confirmed that the titles CG1 ( $M = 5.6$ ) and CG2 ( $M = 5.72$ ) were perceived as significantly more gossipy (Wilks’ Lambda = 0.78,  $F(3, 37) = 3.52$ ,  $p = 0.024$ ) than the titles NG1 ( $M = 5.15$ ) and NG2 ( $M = 4.92$ ). Also, as desired, the four titles did not vary on other aspects, such as the extent to which the title made the participants want to read the full article (Wilks’ Lambda = 0.87,  $F(3, 37) = 1.84$ ,  $p = 0.157$ ) and how interesting the participants perceived it to be (Wilks’ Lambda = 0.9,  $F(3, 37) = 1.39$ ,  $p = 0.26$ ).

## *Results*

Twenty participants failed more than two attention-checks (out of four), leaving two-hundred-eight usable responses (all the results are robust to the inclusion of data from these participants).

*Self-threat manipulation check.* The participants in the social exclusion threat condition reported feeling more excluded ( $\alpha = 0.76$ ) than the participants in the baseline condition ( $M_{\text{exclusion-threat}} = 4.21$ ,  $M_{\text{baseline}} = 2.82$ ;  $F(1, 206) = 49.63$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

*Gossipiness manipulation check.* We ran one-sample t-tests on the gossipiness ratings comparing them (condition-wise) with the scale mid-point of four. For those who read a gossip article, these ratings were significantly higher than the scale mid-point ( $M = 5.53$ ;  $t(65) = 7.68$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). And for those who read a non-gossip article, these ratings were significantly lower than the scale mid-point ( $M = 3.1$ ;  $t(141) = -5.22$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

*Article choice.* In support of H1, we found that the proportion of participants choosing a gossip article to read was significantly higher in the social exclusion condition than in the baseline condition ( $M_{\text{exclusion-threat}} = 40.8\%$ ,  $M_{\text{baseline}} = 22.9\%$ ; Wald  $\chi^2(1, N = 208) = 7.71$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ; please see figure 3). These results (and all subsequent ones) continue to hold even after adding measures for self-esteem, mood, gender, liking for target celebrities, interest in Bollywood, etc. as covariates.

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Insert figure 3 about here

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Even on the full sample of two-hundred-twenty-eight participants (adding back the twenty participants initially excluded for failing multiple attention checks), similar results were obtained. Replicating the results reported above, it was found that the proportion of participants choosing a celebrity gossip article was significantly higher in the social exclusion threat condition than in the baseline condition ( $M_{\text{exclusion-threat}} = 39.8\%$ ,  $M_{\text{baseline}} = 24.3\%$ ; Wald  $\chi^2(1, N = 228) = 6.27$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ). In a logistic regression run on article choice (gossip article choice coded as 1, choice of a non-gossip article coded as 0) and adding as covariates the measures for self-esteem ( $p = 0.501$ ), mood ( $p = 0.74$ ), gender ( $p = 0.993$ ), liking for Ranveer Singh ( $p = 0.035$ ), liking for other celebrities mentioned in the gossip articles (all  $p > 0.34$ ), interest in Bollywood ( $p = 0.092$ ), and interest in superhero movies ( $p = 0.419$ ), we found that the effect of the manipulated social exclusion threat was significant and positive ( $B = 0.81$ ,  $SE = 0.33$ ; Wald

$\chi^2 = 6.15, p = 0.013$ ). The covariates were not significant, except for liking for one of the target celebrities (Ranveer Singh).

*Desire to affiliate with close others.* An ANOVA revealed that the participants in the social exclusion condition reported a significantly higher desire to affiliate with close others ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ) than those in the baseline condition ( $M_{\text{exclusion-threat}} = 5.18, M_{\text{baseline}} = 4.68; F(1, 206) = 6.33, p = 0.013$ ). There was a marginally significant partial mediation through DACO for the effect of social exclusion on gossip article choice (coefficient = 0.088, SE = 0.078, 90% CI = 0.003 to 0.268; PROCESS Model 4; Hayes 2013), thus supporting H2.

An ANOVA on the desire to affiliate with close others on the full sample too revealed that the participants in the social exclusion condition felt significantly greater affiliation desire than those in the baseline condition ( $M_{\text{exclusion-threat}} = 5.2, M_{\text{baseline}} = 4.76; F(1, 226) = 5.15, p = 0.024$ ). We ran an ANCOVA – adding as covariates the measures of self-esteem ( $p = 0.133$ ) and mood ( $p = 0.915$ ) – and found a similar effect of the social exclusion threat ( $M_{\text{exclusion-threat}} = 5.2, M_{\text{baseline}} = 4.77; F(1, 226) = 4.47, p = 0.036$ ). Analysis done using PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes 2013) on the full sample revealed a marginally significant partial mediation through DACO for the effect of social exclusion on gossip article choice (coefficient = 0.079, SE = 0.068, 90% CI = 0.006 to 0.242). This result persisted (coefficient = 0.08, SE = 0.063, 90% CI = 0.009 to 0.224) even after adding as covariates the measures for self-esteem, mood, gender, liking for target celebrities, interest in Bollywood, and interest in superhero movies in the mediation analyses.

*Escapism.* A separate ANOVA revealed that the participants in the social exclusion condition exhibited marginally higher escapism tendencies ( $\alpha = 0.76$ ) than those in the baseline condition ( $M_{\text{exclusion-threat}} = 4.78$ ,  $M_{\text{baseline}} = 4.42$ ;  $F(1, 206) = 3.05$ ,  $p = 0.082$ ). However, the mediation analysis via escapism was non-significant (coefficient = 0.046, SE = 0.055, 90% CI = -0.006 to 0.194), thus ruling it out as an alternate process explanation.

Another ANOVA on the full sample revealed that the participants in the social exclusion threat condition did not differ on the exhibited escapism tendencies from those in the baseline condition ( $F(1, 226) = 1.7$ ,  $p = 0.193$ ). An ANCOVA on escapism, with the measures for self-esteem ( $p < 0.001$ ) and mood ( $p = 0.015$ ) as covariates, also revealed a non-significant effect of social exclusion ( $F(1, 226) = 0.36$ ,  $p = 0.549$ ). Finally, the mediation analysis with escapism was non-significant – both with the covariates (coefficient = 0.008, SE = 0.047, 90% CI = -0.037 to 0.123) and without them (coefficient = 0.04, SE = 0.047, 90% CI = -0.004 to 0.162) – thus further confirming that escapism doesn't account for our observed effects of social exclusion on proclivity for celebrity gossip.

## *Discussion*

Study 2 shows that the increased preference for celebrity gossip following social exclusion is partly mediated by a desire for social affiliation, supporting H2. This provides additional support for our main thesis: celebrity gossip offers an avenue for affiliation-based coping. It is particularly interesting that, following an experience of social exclusion, people seek emotional comfort in parasocial relationships with celebrities – just as they do in regular

interpersonal relationships. In study 3, we investigate whether consuming celebrity gossip (post experiencing social exclusion) actually enhances feelings of interpersonal closeness with the target celebrities.

### **Study 3: Testing Underlying Rationale**

Study 3 tests the underlying rationale for our affiliation coping explanation by examining whether consuming celebrity gossip (following social exclusion) actually makes people feel closer to the target celebrity (subject of the gossip), and if so, whether this is driven by increased relatability perceptions of the celebrity (test of H2). We thus investigate how celebrity gossip vicariously fulfills the desire for social affiliation activated post a social exclusion threat.

#### *Method*

Two-hundred-thirteen undergraduate students from an American university (47.4% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.9$ ) participated in Study 3 for course credit. Social exclusion was primed, for all participants, using an experience recall task as in previous studies. In a single-factor design, the article type was manipulated by assigning participants randomly to read a celebrity gossip article (“Ariana Grande still healing from Pete Davidson split and Mac Miller’s Death”) or a non-gossip one (“Disney in talks with AT&T for buying out its stake in Hulu;” full text of the articles is included in the appendix).

After reading the assigned article and answering some filler questions, participants responded to two measures of closeness with Ariana Grande. As a direct measure (Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992), they were presented with seven sets of circle-pairs, differentially spaced apart, from 1 (no-overlap) to 7 (complete-overlap). They were asked to imagine that one circle represented them, and the other represented Ariana, and indicate how close they feel to her by selecting the appropriate circle-pair. Closeness was also captured indirectly via perceived similarity (“Celebrities such as Ariana Grande are similar to regular people”; 1 = “Strongly disagree,” 7 = “Strongly agree”).

Participants then responded to single-item measures of relatability and authenticity of the celebrity, and empathy felt for her (“I can relate to Ariana,” “I find Ariana to be authentic,” “I empathize with Ariana;” 1 = “Strongly disagree,” 7 = “Strongly agree”). We included these additional measures because knowing details of a celebrity’s personal life through media gossip could also impact perceived authenticity and empathy. While these may be important — authenticity is particularly relevant for human branding (Fournier and Eckhardt 2019) — these are less relevant (in comparison to relatability) for our affiliation-based coping explanation of people’s affinity for celebrity gossip.

Finally, the participants answered our manipulation check questions for article gossipiness, before proceeding to the “unrelated” part of the study on personality assessment, wherein we measured self-esteem and need to belong (Leary et al. 2013; Loveland, Smeesters, and Mandel 2010) among some other generic trait measures.

## Results

*Manipulation and confound checks.* The gossip article was considered more gossipy ( $M_{\text{gossip}} = 4.66$ ,  $M_{\text{non-gossip}} = 3.44$ ;  $F(1, 211) = 27.69$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), more likely to be seen in People/Us Weekly ( $M_{\text{gossip}} = 4.95$ ,  $M_{\text{non-gossip}} = 3.82$ ;  $F(1, 211) = 21.89$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), but less likely to be seen in TIME/Newsweek ( $M_{\text{gossip}} = 3.19$ ,  $M_{\text{non-gossip}} = 4.42$ ;  $F(1, 211) = 23.76$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) than the non-gossip one. Importantly, the two articles were not different on aspects like interesting ( $p = 0.23$ ) and entertaining ( $p = 0.15$ ).

*Closeness with target celebrity.* An ANOVA on the direct measure of closeness (circle-distance) revealed that the participants who read the celebrity gossip article felt closer to Ariana Grande than those who read the non-gossip article ( $M_{\text{gossip}} = 2.45$ ,  $M_{\text{non-gossip}} = 2.07$ ;  $F(1, 211) = 4.06$ ,  $p = 0.045$ ; refer to figure 4a). An ANCOVA on this direct measure of interpersonal closeness with Ariana Grande, with self-esteem ( $p = 0.074$ ), need to belong ( $p = 0.924$ ), liking for Ariana Grande ( $p = 0.002$ ), interest in digital entertainment ( $p = 0.335$ ), mood ( $p = 0.247$ ), and gender ( $p = 0.041$ ) as covariates, also found a similar effect of article type ( $M_{\text{gossip}} = 2.46$ ,  $M_{\text{non-gossip}} = 2.05$ ;  $F(1, 205) = 4.97$ ,  $p = 0.027$ ).

Another ANOVA on the indirect closeness measure (perceived similarity) revealed that the participants who read the gossip article about Ariana Grande perceived her to be more similar to them than the participants who read the non-gossip one ( $M_{\text{gossip}} = 5.08$ ,  $M_{\text{non-gossip}} = 4.12$ ;  $F(1, 211) = 14.47$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; refer to figure 4b). And an ANCOVA on this indirect closeness measure, with measures for self-esteem ( $p = 0.154$ ), need to belong ( $p = 0.032$ ), liking for Ariana

Grande ( $p < 0.001$ ), interest in digital entertainment ( $p < 0.001$ ), mood ( $p = 0.607$ ), and gender ( $p = 0.946$ ) as covariates, also revealed a similar pattern ( $M_{\text{gossip}} = 5.13$ ,  $M_{\text{non-gossip}} = 4.08$ ;  $F(1, 205) = 20.19$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

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Insert figure 4 about here

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*Mediation via perceived relatability.* Two ANOVAs revealed that the participants who read the celebrity gossip article found Ariana to be more relatable ( $M_{\text{gossip}} = 3.75$ ,  $M_{\text{non-gossip}} = 3.11$ ;  $F(1, 211) = 7.04$ ,  $p = 0.009$ ) and more authentic ( $M_{\text{gossip}} = 4.5$ ,  $M_{\text{non-gossip}} = 3.65$ ;  $F(1, 211) = 14.15$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Another ANOVA revealed that those who read the gossip article also felt more empathy for her ( $M_{\text{gossip}} = 4.97$ ,  $M_{\text{non-gossip}} = 3.99$ ;  $F(1, 211) = 16.96$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Similarly, an ANCOVA on perceived relatability of Ariana Grande, with self-esteem ( $p = 0.038$ ), need to belong ( $p = 0.961$ ), liking for Ariana Grande ( $p < 0.001$ ), interest in digital entertainment ( $p = 0.018$ ), mood ( $p = 0.428$ ), and gender ( $p = 0.972$ ) as covariates, revealed that the participants who read the gossip article found her to be more relatable than those who read the non-gossip one ( $M_{\text{gossip}} = 3.74$ ,  $M_{\text{non-gossip}} = 3.12$ ;  $F(1, 205) = 8.73$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ). Another ANCOVA on her perceived authenticity, with self-esteem ( $p = 0.551$ ), need to belong ( $p = 0.267$ ), liking for Ariana Grande ( $p < 0.001$ ), interest in digital entertainment ( $p = 0.557$ ), mood ( $p = 0.644$ ), and gender ( $p = 0.154$ ) as covariates, also found a similar effect of article type ( $M_{\text{gossip}} = 4.48$ ,  $M_{\text{non-gossip}} = 3.67$ ;  $F(1, 205) = 17.82$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The third ANCOVA on the empathy measure, with self-esteem ( $p = 0.805$ ), need to belong ( $p = 0.634$ ), liking for Ariana

Grande ( $p < 0.001$ ), interest in digital entertainment ( $p = 0.021$ ), mood ( $p = 0.977$ ), and gender ( $p = 0.35$ ) as covariates, revealed that those who read the gossip article also felt more empathy for her than those who read the non-gossip one ( $M_{\text{gossip}} = 4.97$ ,  $M_{\text{non-gossip}} = 3.99$ ;  $F(1, 205) = 22.7$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Mediation analyses (PROCESS Model 4; Hayes, 2013) confirmed H3 by finding a significant indirect effect of article type on the direct measure of closeness with Ariana Grande via her perceived relatability (coefficient = 0.243, SE = 0.095, 95% CI = 0.075 to 0.448), but not via perceived authenticity (coefficient = -0.058, SE = 0.059, 95% CI = -0.196 to 0.041) or via empathy (coefficient = 0.034, SE = 0.062, 95% CI = -0.082 to 0.173). Another analysis, again done using PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes, 2013), revealed a significant indirect effect of article type on the indirect measure of closeness with Ariana Grande (how similar the participants considered her to them) – both the perceptions of her relatability (coefficient = 0.145, SE = 0.079, 95% CI = 0.029 to 0.362) and her authenticity (coefficient = 0.183, SE = 0.107, 95% CI = 0.012 to 0.437) were significant as parallel mediators, but empathy felt towards her was not (coefficient = 0.157, SE = 0.121, 95% CI = -0.04 to 0.452).

After including the various covariates in the mediation model as well (PROCESS Model 4; Hayes, 2013), we found a significant indirect effect of article type on the direct measure of closeness with Ariana Grande via her perceived relatability (coefficient = 0.234, SE = 0.082, 95% CI = 0.087 to 0.416) but not via her perceived authenticity (coefficient = -0.063, SE = 0.06, 95% CI = -0.204 to 0.04) or via the empathy felt towards her (coefficient = 0.026, SE = 0.064, 95% CI = -0.088 to 0.172). A similar mediation analysis with the same covariates on the indirect

closeness measure revealed that both perceived relatability of Ariana Grande (coefficient = 0.16, SE = 0.076, 95% CI = 0.046 to 0.356) and her perceived authenticity (coefficient = 0.17, SE = 0.093, 95% CI = 0.014 to 0.377) were significant as parallel mediators, but empathy felt was not (coefficient = 0.1, SE = 0.106, 95% CI = -0.086 to 0.336).

### *Discussion*

Study 3 provides insights into why celebrity gossip consumption is higher following social exclusion threats, and how this consumption vicariously satisfies the desire for social affiliation. Importantly, they give further credence to the idea that people engage in one-sided parasocial relationships with celebrities (Giles 2002; Horton and Wohl 1956), which is facilitated via celebrity gossip articles.

### **General Discussion**

The primary purpose of our research was to test whether celebrity gossip consumption can serve as a means to cope with social exclusion self-threats. We find that it can — by vicariously satisfying the desire for social affiliation activated by the threat. We thus assert that celebrity gossip consumption is an affiliation-based means of coping and that's why the coping value of celebrity gossip consumption is lower for affiliation-unrelated threats (intelligence threat, personal control threat), as we find in Study 1.

Study 3 findings that gossip articles enhance celebrities' relatability and readers' feelings of closeness with them, together with study 2 results — that the affinity for celebrity gossip post an exclusion threat is driven by a desire for affiliation with close others — imply that celebrities can substitute for “close others.” This is interesting because it suggests that even one-sided relationships with celebrities may be a sufficiently potent source of emotional support. Thus, besides being among the first ones to examine celebrity gossip from a consumption perspective, we extend the prior work on parasocial relationships (e.g., Giles, 2002) in an important way. We also contribute to the literature on compensatory consumption (Mandel et al. 2017) by demonstrating celebrity gossip consumption as a previously-unexplored form of compensatory behavior.

We were able to rule out several alternative explanations for our effects. In all the studies, we ensured that the non-gossip articles were entertainment-related so that a desire for entertainment/pleasure does not explain our effects. We explicitly rule out escapism as an alternate process in study 2. Another possible reason why people may seek celebrity gossip post-self-threat is “downward comparisons:” reading about the “failings” of the rich and famous could make people feel better about themselves. To test for this possibility, we included both positive-toned and negative-toned (gossip and non-gossip) articles in study 2. An ancillary study 2 analysis, wherein we tested whether social exclusion leads to an increased preference specifically for negative (or positive) content, yielded non-significant results (Wald  $\chi^2(1, N = 208) = 0.24, p = 0.625$ ). Thus, at least in our context, neither downward nor upward comparisons explain the heightened preference for celebrity gossip post an exclusion threat. Finally, by measuring and controlling for mood, self-esteem, and other relevant covariates (e.g., liking for target celebrities,

general interest in Bollywood/Hollywood/digital entertainment industry) in our studies, we take care of a few other confounding factors.

### *Managerial Implications*

Our research highlights an important motivation underlying celebrity gossip consumption: the desire for social affiliation. This insight has implications not only for magazines/websites publishing such content but also for brands advertising in these vehicles. Specifically, to the extent that celebrity gossip provides an avenue for coping, media outlets that peddle such content could prove particularly effective for advertising other coping means, such as retail therapy and comfort foods (e.g., ice cream, chocolate, potato chips).

### *Future Research*

As previously mentioned, there is scanty academic research on celebrity gossip. Important questions remain uninvestigated, including the long-term emotional repercussions of celebrity gossip consumption. While we focused on consumption, it would be interesting to understand what makes individuals share celebrity gossip with others; could it be a means of self-signaling? It would also be interesting to theoretically compare celebrity and interpersonal gossip, including their driving factors and consequences.

## **ESSAY 2: Impact of Celebrity Gossip Valence on Celebrity Endorsements for Vice versus Virtue Products**

(co-authored with Tanuka Ghoshal)

### **Introduction and Conceptual Development**

Celebrity endorsement is a “form of advertising in which a famous or well-known person uses her or his social status to promote a good, service, or idea” (Winterich, Gangwar, and Grewal 2018, p. 71). It is one of the most popular strategies of advertising (Halonen-Knight and Hurmerinta 2010). Like all strategies, even celebrity endorsements are not entirely risk-free. Celebrity endorsers often get themselves in trouble (in their personal or professional life) which negatively impacts the brands that they endorse (e.g., Amos, Holmes, and Strutton 2008; Knittel and Stango 2014; Till and Shimp 1998). These negative effects of negative celebrity information have been shown on consumers’ attitudes and purchase intention for the endorsed brands (Amos et al. 2008; Carrillat, d’Astous, and Christianis 2014; Till and Shimp 1998; Um and Kim 2016; Zhou and Whitla 2013), brand personality (Campbell and Warren 2012), and stock market returns (Bartz, Molchanov, and Stork 2013; Hock and Raithel 2020; Knittel and Stango 2014; Louie, Kulik, and Jacobson 2001).

Usually, following some negative publicity about a celebrity, the brands that have him/her as an endorser tend to terminate their contracts with him/her (Bartz et al. 2013; Hock and Raithel 2020; Um and Kim 2016). In the current research, we explore what are the kinds of brands/products for which such contract termination is not the right move. Specifically, for

negative information about a celebrity's personal life (i.e., a negative gossip story), we explore whether such information can make the celebrity a better endorser for the brands whose product offering is a vice (vs. a virtue). By vice products, we mean those products (usually foods) that give immediate pleasure but are detrimental in the long run, while by virtue products, we refer to those product offerings which appear not that alluring in the present but have positive long-term consequences (van Doorn and Verhoef 2011; Masters and Mishra 2019; Wertebroch 1998). A decadent (calorie-rich) chocolate cake is an example of a vice product while a nutritious apple is an example of a virtue product.

Since vice products are generally associated with sin (Fitzsimons, Nunes, and Williams 2007; Mishra and Mishra 2011; Verma, Guha, and Biswas 2016), we think that it is quite conceivable that a story of a celebrity engaging in sinful behavior (conveyed in a negative gossip story) could make the celebrity a better fit for endorsing a vice product. We build this prediction conceptually on the basis of the meaning transfer model (McCracken 1986, 1989; Miller and Allen 2012) and the match-up hypothesis (Kamins and Gupta 1994; Lynch and Schuler 1994) from the celebrity endorsement literature. Both these frameworks explain how a celebrity's overall image in the society can affect the types of products/brands that they can persuasively endorse. More specifically, we conjecture that negative gossip stories (of celebrities committing a "sinful" act) create a specific image of the celebrity which makes them a better "match" or "fit" for endorsing a "sinful" vice product rather than a virtue one. This perception of "fit" between a celebrity and the brand/product should then lead to enhanced attitudes toward the brand advertisement featuring the celebrity as endorser.

It is important to note that the gossip stories about celebrities operate independently from the brand endorsements in which the celebrities are featured. In other words, people read celebrity gossip in a different space and watch the celebrity endorsements in another distinct space. So it is unlikely that everyone will be able to draw the “meaning” about the celebrity from the gossip context and then use it to evaluate an advertisement featuring the celebrity in another context. Based on prior research on information processing styles of males and females (Chang 2007; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991; Putrevu 2001), we hypothesize that females should be more likely than males to draw this connection (between celebrity gossip and celebrity endorsement) and base their evaluations of the brand endorsement on the same.

Females have been shown to be “comprehensive information processors,” that is, they pay attention to all cues available to them for processing and evaluating an advertising message while males have been shown to be “selective information processors,” who focus their attention only to the cues made salient in the advertisement (Darley and Smith 1995; Kempf, Laczniak, and Smith 2006; Meyers-Levy and Loken 2015; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1991). Since celebrity gossip stories are never made salient in an ad itself, males should be less likely than females to take those gossip stories into consideration while evaluating an ostensibly unrelated advertisement featuring the celebrity as the endorser. We test our predictions (summarized in the conceptual model; see figure 5) across three experimental studies.

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Insert figure 5 about here

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## Study 1

In study 1, our objective is to test the initial part of our conceptual framework – whether valence of gossip story, product type (vice vs. virtue), and participant gender interact in the hypothesized way to affect the perceived fit of the celebrity with the product/brand. We thus employ a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subjects design, with gossip valence (positive vs. negative) and product type (vice vs. virtue) as the manipulated factors, and gender (male vs. female) as the measured factor.

### *Method*

One-hundred-twenty-six graduate students from an Asian B-school participated in this study for a drawing for cash prizes. The participants were first asked to read a positive gossip story or a negative gossip story about a fictitious Indian actor, Rohit Srinivasan: “Rohit Srinivasan proposes marriage to long-time girlfriend Mona Shekhawat” (positive gossip) or “Rohit Srinivasan cheats on long-time girlfriend with his new co-star Gloria” (negative gossip; refer to the appendix for the full text of the stories). They were led to believe that Rohit Srinivasan is an actual celebrity whose identity has been masked for the purposes of the study. They also read two other filler articles to reduce demand effects. After each article, they answered a few questions including our confound check, “How interesting did you find this article?” (1 = “Not at all interesting,” 7 = “Extremely interesting”). They also answered our

manipulation check, “How positive or negative was the overall tone of the article?” (1 = “Extremely negative,” 7 = “Extremely positive”).

After a short filler task (to ensure ecological validity), the participants were taken to the second part of our study, “evaluation of endorsement deals.” In this part, they read a short article about Rohit Srinivasan signing a new endorsement deal for a condom brand (vice product), “Tollywood star Rohit Srinivasan to appear in a condom advertisement,” or for a cookware brand (virtue product), “Tollywood star Rohit Srinivasan to promote a new cookware brand” (refer to the appendix for the full text). Two other endorsement deal articles were also presented (to reduce demand effects). After reading about the endorsement deal, the participants responded to our main dependent measure for perceived fit of Rohit Srinivasan with the condom/cookware brand (“I think that Rohit Srinivasan & this new brand of condom/cookware are:” 1 = “A bad fit,” 7 = “A good fit”; refer to the appendix for the full scale). Finally, at the end of the study, we captured the participants’ gender among other demographic questions.

## *Results*

*Manipulation and confound checks.* As expected, the tone of the positive gossip story was perceived by participants to be significantly more positive than that of the negative gossip story ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 5.18$ ,  $M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 2.80$ ;  $F(1, 124) = 158.74$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Importantly, the two stories did not vary in terms of how interesting they were perceived ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 2.74$ ,  $M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 2.67$ ;  $F(1, 124) = 0.078$ ,  $p = 0.781$ ).

*Perceived celebrity-brand fit.* In line with our predictions, there was a 3-way interaction between gossip valence, product type, and participant gender on the perceived fit of Rohit Srinivasan with the new condom/cookware brand ( $F(1, 118) = 4.45, p = 0.037$ ; see figure 6). Follow-up contrasts confirmed that the impact of gossip valence was marginally significant and negative on the perceived fit of Rohit Srinivasan with the condom brand (vice product) for the female participants ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 4.19, M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 5.83; F(1, 9) = 3.55, p = 0.092$ ) but was not significant for the male participants ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 5.13, M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 4.94; F(1, 51) = 0.20, p = 0.655$ ). Another set of contrasts revealed that the impact of gossip valence was significant and positive on the perceived fit of Rohit Srinivasan with the cookware brand (virtue product) for both the female participants ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 5.17, M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 2.60; F(1, 9) = 16.12, p = 0.003$ ) as well as the male participants ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 4.38, M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 3.06; F(1, 49) = 8.59, p = 0.005$ ).

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Insert figure 6 about here

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### *Discussion*

The results of study 1 provide preliminary support for the initial part of our proposed conceptual model (figure 5). However, the study does have a few important limitations. First, it doesn't use actual advertisements as stimuli (it only uses endorsement deal announcements) and thus we still don't know whether these results would extend to consumer attitudes towards actual

ads. We address this limitation in studies 2A and 2B by using actual advertisements and measuring the final dependent variable as well (attitude toward the advertisement).

The second limitation is that the product categories used also vary on other dimensions (e.g., relevance) apart from vice versus virtue. We address this limitation in the subsequent studies by keeping the same product category for both vice and virtue offerings (only the brand positioning is changed to vice vs. virtue using the ad tagline). The third and final limitation of study 1 is that its sample size was too small for detecting a 3-way interaction (and skewed towards males). Of course, we correct for this too in the next study. However, we believe that finding our predicted effects in this study, despite this sample size issue, is a testament to the strength of our effect.

## **Study 2A**

In study 2A, our objective is to test our conceptual framework in its entirety – whether valence of gossip story, product type (vice vs. virtue), and participant gender interact in the hypothesized way to affect the consumer attitudes toward the advertisement via the perceived fit of the celebrity with the product/brand. We again employ a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subjects design, with gossip valence (positive vs. negative) and product-type/ad-positioning (vice vs. virtue) as the manipulated factors, and gender (male vs. female) as the measured factor. As mentioned before, we use the same product category (chocolate) for both the stimuli advertisements; we just position it as a vice or a virtue in the ad.

## *Method*

One-hundred-seventy-eight graduate students from an Asian B-school participated in this study for partial course credit or for a drawing for cash prizes. Like study 1, the participants were asked to read a positive gossip story or a negative gossip story about a fictitious Bollywood actress, Natasha Handa: “Natasha Handa celebrates her birthday with kids at an orphanage” (positive gossip) or “Natasha Handa’s extravagant birthday celebrations in Brazil” (negative gossip; full text of the stories can be found in the appendix). Like study 1, the participants were told that Natasha Handa is an actual person whose identity has been masked for the purposes of the study. The manipulation check (article tone) and confound check (how interesting was the article) were the same as used in study 1.

Following a filler task (to ensure ecological validity), the participants proceeded to an ostensibly unrelated ad evaluation study. In this study, they were randomly shown either the vice version or a virtue version of an advertisement for a fictitious chocolate brand, Broc Chocolate. The tagline for the vice advertisement was “A naughty indulgence... smooth, rich, and sinfully decadent” while the tagline for the virtue version was “A virtuous treat... made with ethically sourced organic ingredients” (refer to the appendix for the actual advertisement images used as stimuli).

After showing the advertisement, we first measured our main dependent variable, attitude toward the ad: “Please tell us your overall attitude towards this ad along the following dimensions:” (1 = “Dislike,” 7 = “Like”; refer to the appendix for the full scale). We then

measured our mediator, perceived celebrity-brand Fit (“As an endorser for Broc Chocolate, I think Natasha Handa is:”; 1 = “Inappropriate,” 7 = “Appropriate”; full scale is included in the appendix). Finally, before the demographic questions (including gender), as our manipulation check for vice versus virtue positioning, we asked the participants to share their agreement on three statements about the advertisement (e.g., “This ad has a righteous message”; 1 = “Completely disagree,” 7 = “Completely agree”; refer to the appendix for the other items).

## *Results*

*Manipulation and confound checks.* As expected, the tone of the positive gossip story was perceived by participants to be significantly more positive than that of the negative gossip story ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 5.99$ ,  $M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 2.71$ ;  $F(1, 176) = 424.00$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Importantly, the two stories did not vary in terms of how interesting they were perceived ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 3.76$ ,  $M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 3.90$ ;  $F(1, 176) = 0.387$ ,  $p = 0.535$ ).

Even our vice vs. virtue positioning manipulation worked as intended. A one-way ANOVA on virtuous message index ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ) with ad positioning as the factor revealed that the vice chocolate ad was seen as less virtuous than the virtue version ( $M_{\text{vice-ad}} = 2.56$ ,  $M_{\text{virtue-ad}} = 3.97$ ;  $F(1, 176) = 50.78$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

*Perceived celebrity-brand fit.* In line with our predictions, there was a 3-way interaction between gossip valence, ad positioning, and participant gender on the perceived fit of Natasha Handa with Broc chocolate ( $F(1, 170) = 4.75$ ,  $p = 0.031$ ; see figure 7a). Follow-up contrasts

confirmed that the impact of gossip valence was significant and negative on the perceived fit of Natasha Handa with Broc chocolate (vice version) for the female participants ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 3.38$ ,  $M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 5.02$ ;  $F(1, 42) = 25.23$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) but was not significant for the male participants ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 4.36$ ,  $M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 4.35$ ;  $F(1, 45) = 0.001$ ,  $p = 0.982$ ). Another set of contrasts revealed that the impact of gossip valence was non-significant on the perceived fit of Natasha Handa with Broc chocolate (virtue version) for both the female participants ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 4.36$ ,  $M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 4.35$ ;  $F(1, 43) = 0.001$ ,  $p = 0.973$ ) as well as for the male participants ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 3.88$ ,  $M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 4.10$ ;  $F(1, 40) = 0.27$ ,  $p = 0.606$ ).

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Insert figure 7 about here

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*Attitude toward the ad.* In line with our expectations, there was a marginally significant 3-way interaction between gossip valence, ad positioning, and participant gender on the perceived fit of Natasha Handa with Broc chocolate ( $F(1, 170) = 2.89$ ,  $p = 0.091$ ; see figure 7b). Follow-up contrasts revealed that the impact of gossip valence was negative, though non-significant, on the attitude towards the vice ad for the female participants ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 3.81$ ,  $M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 4.33$ ;  $F(1, 42) = 2.16$ ,  $p = 0.149$ ) but it was not so for the male participants ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 4.62$ ,  $M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 4.27$ ;  $F(1, 45) = 0.92$ ,  $p = 0.343$ ). Another set of contrasts revealed that the impact of gossip valence was non-significant on the attitude towards the virtue ad for both the female participants ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 4.61$ ,  $M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 4.13$ ;  $F(1, 43) = 1.30$ ,  $p = 0.260$ ) as well as the male participants ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 3.88$ ,  $M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 4.10$ ;  $F(1, 40) = 0.03$ ,  $p = 0.864$ ).

*Moderated moderated mediation analysis.* Using PROCESS macro (model 11), we carried out a moderated moderated mediation analysis on attitude towards the ad with gossip valence as the independent variable, ad positioning as the first-stage moderator, participant gender as the second-stage moderator, and perceived celebrity-brand fit as the mediator. The results of this analysis were significant and in support of our theorizing (index of moderated moderated mediation = 0.857, SE = 0.408, 95% CI = 0.083 to 1.674). The conditional moderated mediation was significant for females (index = 0.755, SE = 0.290, 95% CI = 0.229 to 1.356) but not for males (95% CI = -0.678 to 0.466). Among females, the indirect effect via perceived celebrity-brand fit was significant only for the vice ad (coefficient = -0.748, SE = 0.177, 95% CI = -1.116 to -0.416) but not for the virtue ad (95% CI = -0.422 to 0.441).

### *Discussion*

The results of study 2A provide further support for our conceptual model (figure 5). Specifically, the study shows that, particularly for females, a negative gossip story (vs. a positive one) about a celebrity enhances her persuasiveness as an endorser for a vice product (vs. a virtue one). This effect doesn't hold for males, which is in line with prior research showing that they are selective information processors who don't assimilate all cues available to them while evaluating an advertising message (Meyers-Levy and Loken 2015). However, it is also conceivable that the effect did not work for male participants because the celebrity (subject of the gossip stories and endorser in the chocolate ad) was a female — male participants probably could not relate to her. It is also possible that the product category chosen (chocolate) was not

that relevant/appealing for the males. We address these concerns in a conceptual replication of this study only on male participants (study 2B) to see if our hypothesized gossip valence  $\times$  product type interaction effects start working for males too. If not, it would mean that our theorizing based on gender differences in information processing is indeed correct.

## **Study 2B**

In study 2B, our objective is to re-examine our conceptual framework only for male participants addressing the possible concerns mentioned above for study 2B (specific to males). The study was identical to study 2B except for change in the gender of the celebrity (we used a male celebrity this time) and a new product category (condom).

### *Method*

Eighty-nine male graduate students from an Asian B-school participated in this study for partial course credit. Like study 2B, the participants were asked to read a positive gossip story or a negative gossip story about a fictitious Bollywood actor, Ritwik Verma: “Ritwik Verma finally ready to settle down?” (positive gossip) or “Another new girl in Ritwik Verma's life?” (negative gossip; full text of the stories can be found in the appendix). Like the previous studies, the participants were led to believe that Ritwik Verma is an actual celebrity whose identity has been masked for the purposes of the study. Everything else in the procedure too was identical to study 2A, except for the following.

In the “unrelated” advertisement evaluation study, the participants were randomly shown either the vice version or a virtue version of an advertisement for a fictitious condom brand, Contempo Condoms. The tagline for the vice advertisement was “I believe in pleasure... Be wild, be safe!” while the tagline for the virtue version was “I advocate safe sex... Be responsible!” (refer to the appendix for the actual advertisement images used as stimuli).

## *Results*

*Manipulation and confound checks.* As expected, the tone of the positive gossip story was perceived by participants to be significantly more positive than that of the negative gossip story ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 5.09$ ,  $M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 2.70$ ;  $F(1, 87) = 99.79$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Importantly, the two stories did not vary in terms of how interesting they were perceived ( $M_{\text{positive-gossip}} = 3.23$ ,  $M_{\text{negative-gossip}} = 3.07$ ;  $F(1, 87) = 0.237$ ,  $p = 0.628$ ).

Even our vice vs. virtue positioning manipulation worked as intended. A one-way ANOVA on the virtuous message manipulation check (with ad positioning as the factor) revealed that the vice condom ad was seen as less virtuous than the virtue one ( $M_{\text{vice-ad}} = 4.27$ ,  $M_{\text{virtue-ad}} = 5.27$ ;  $F(1, 87) = 8.35$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ).

*Perceived celebrity-brand fit.* In line with our theorizing for male audiences, the 2-way interaction of gossip valence and ad positioning on the perceived fit of Ritwik Verma with Contempo Condoms was not significant ( $F(1, 85) = 0.009$ ,  $p = 0.925$ ; see figure 8a).

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Insert figure 8 about here

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*Attitude toward the ad.* Even on the attitude towards the ad, the 2-way interaction of gossip valence and ad positioning was not significant ( $F(1, 85) = 0.105, p = 0.746$ ; see figure 8b).

### *Discussion*

The null results in study 2B (done only on male participants, using a male celebrity and a product category targeted specifically at males) rule out the possibility that we did not find effects among males in study 2A just because the gender of the celebrity endorser was different (and thus not relatable) or because the product category advertised (chocolate) was not appealing/relevant for them. If correcting for the alternate explanations for the null results among males in study 2A does not change the results, we can consider this as further evidence for our conceptualization based on gender differences in information processing styles.

### **General Discussion**

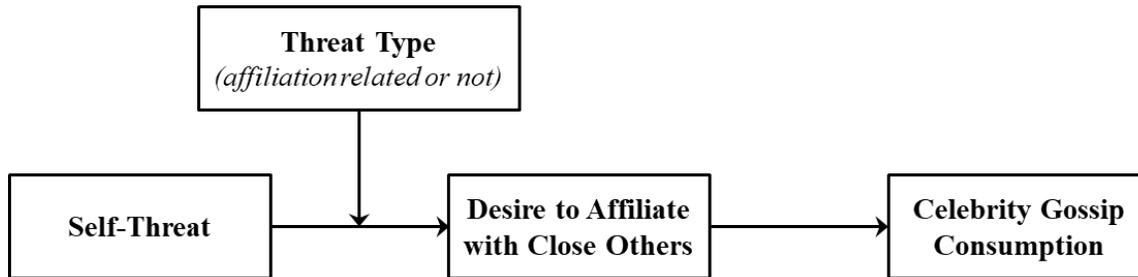
Taken together, the three studies provide convergent evidence in support of our conceptual model (figure 5). More specifically, these studies establish that celebrity gossip stories are subtle cues which can impact audience evaluations of the brand endorsements done by

these celebrities. We call these gossip stories as subtle cues because it affects the ad evaluations only for comprehensive information processors (females) but not for selective information processors (males).

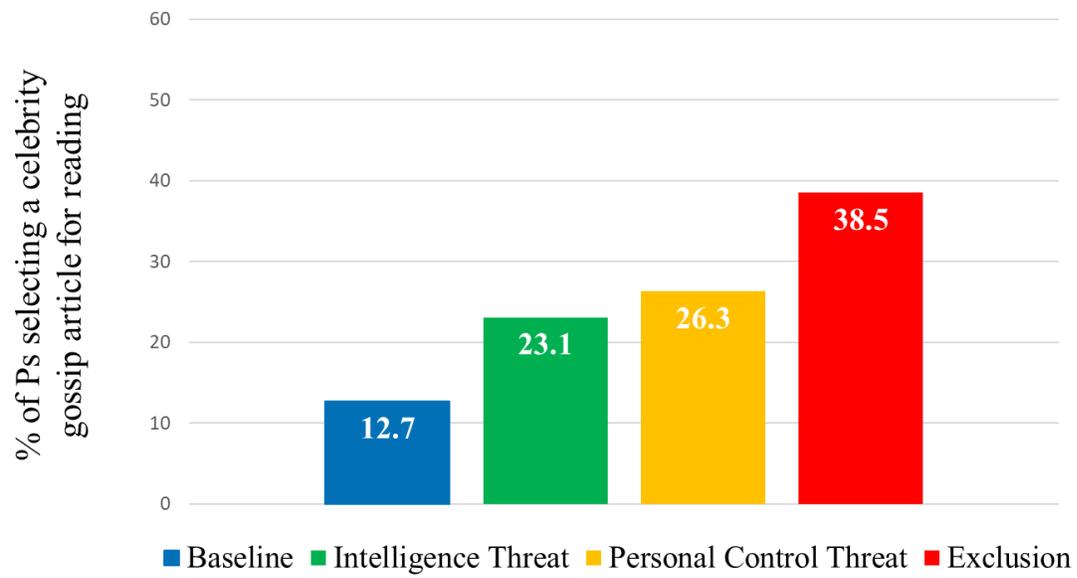
These findings are particularly noteworthy because gossip stories generally tend to be speculative (unconfirmed). Therefore, we believe that finding an impact of such non-credible stories on consumer evaluations of celebrity endorsements is particularly interesting. Most brand managers would tend to disregard the impact of celebrity gossip on brand endorsements featuring the celebrities. If our findings (based on controlled experiments) are true in the real world too, then probably marketing managers should start capitalizing on the gossip stories to position their brand offering in ad advertisement featuring the concerned celebrity. To be more specific, for a product targeted at females, it would make sense to advertise it as a vice (rather than as a virtue) if it features a celebrity endorser about whom a negative gossip story is being circulated in the media.

## FIGURES

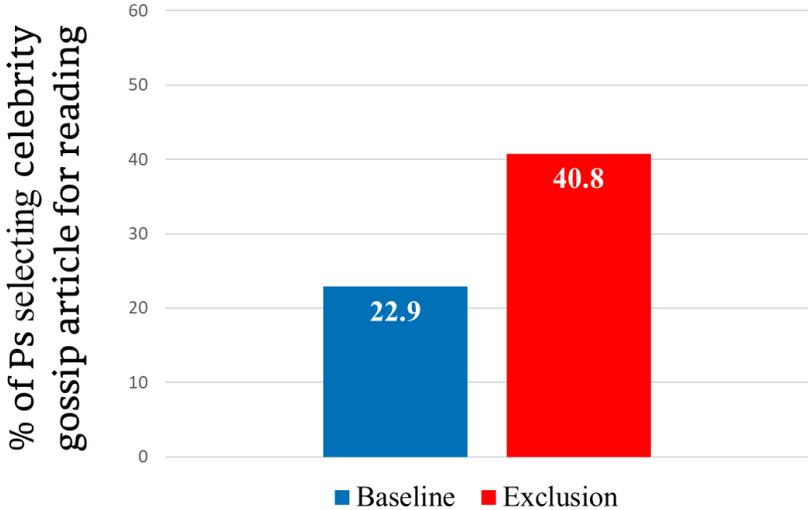
**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework (Essay 1)**



**Figure 2: Study 1 Results (Essay 1)**

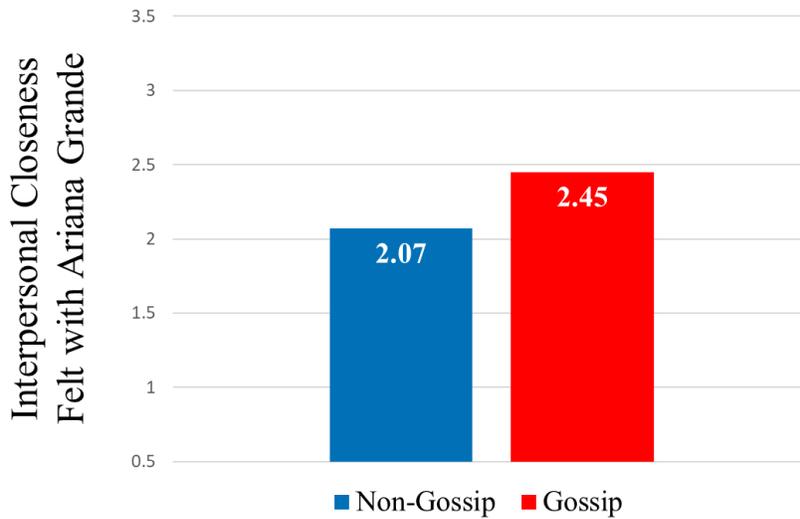


**Figure 3: Study 2 Results (Essay 1)**

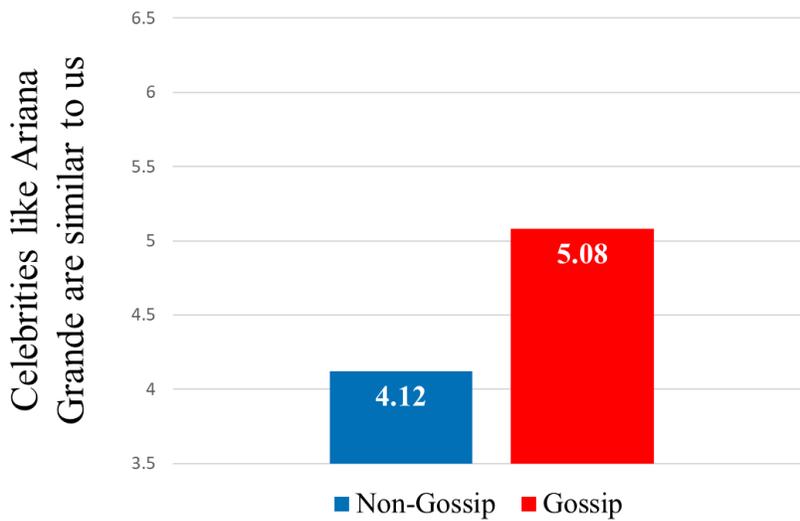


**Figure 4: Study 3 Results (Essay 1)**

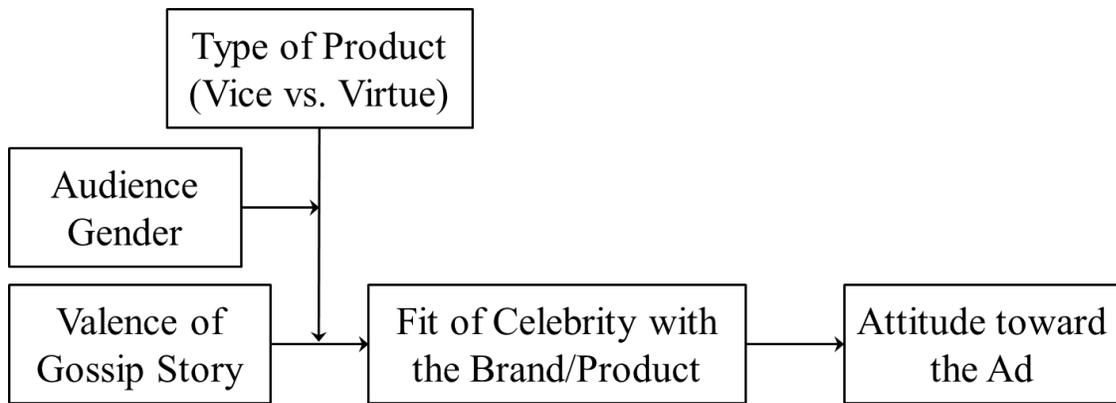
(a) Means across conditions of the direct closeness measure (overlapping circles)



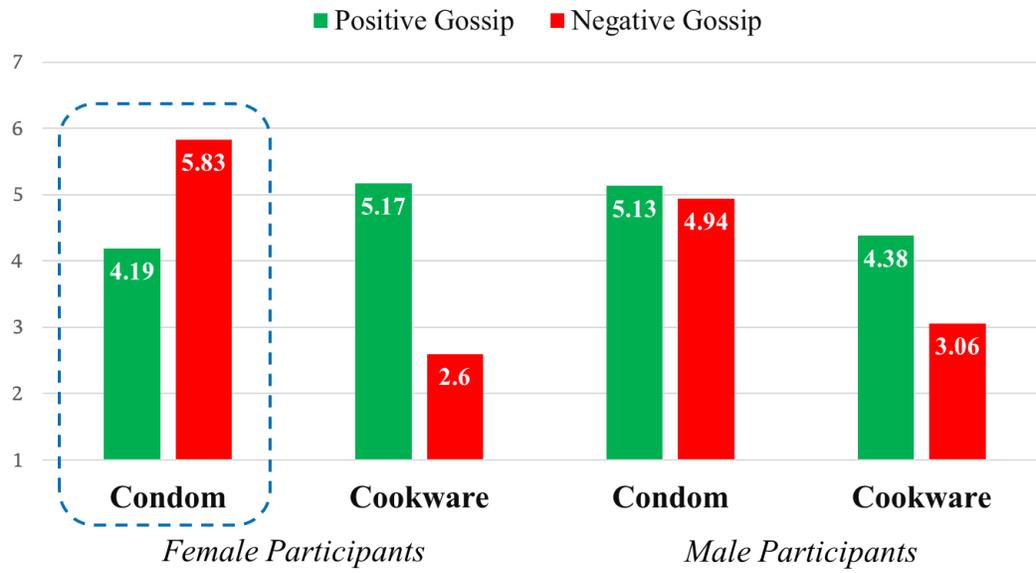
(b) Means across conditions of the indirect closeness measure (perceived similarity)



**Figure 5: Conceptual Framework (Essay 2)**

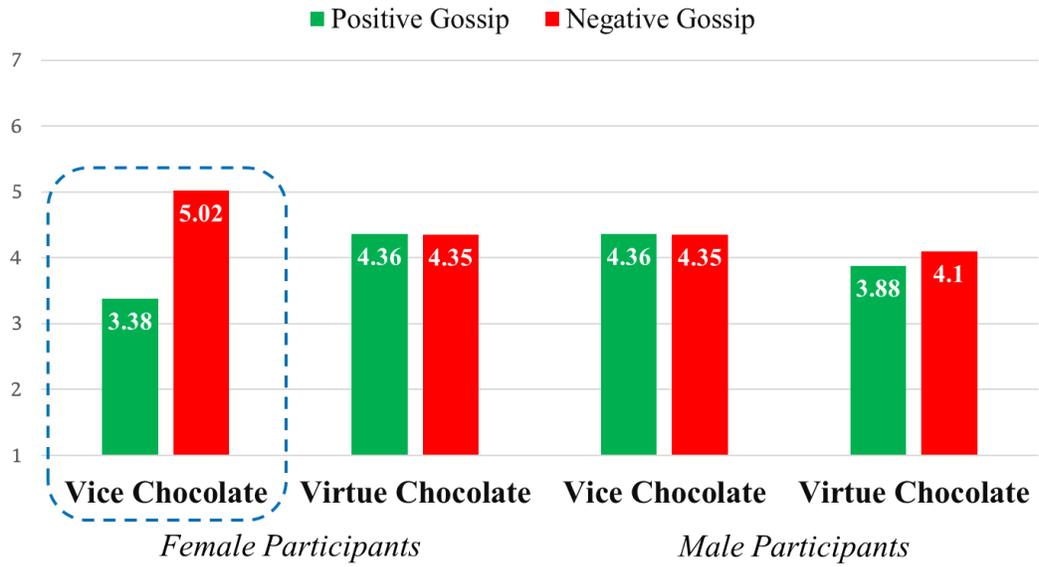


**Figure 6: Study 1 Results – Perceived Celebrity-Brand Fit (Essay 2)**

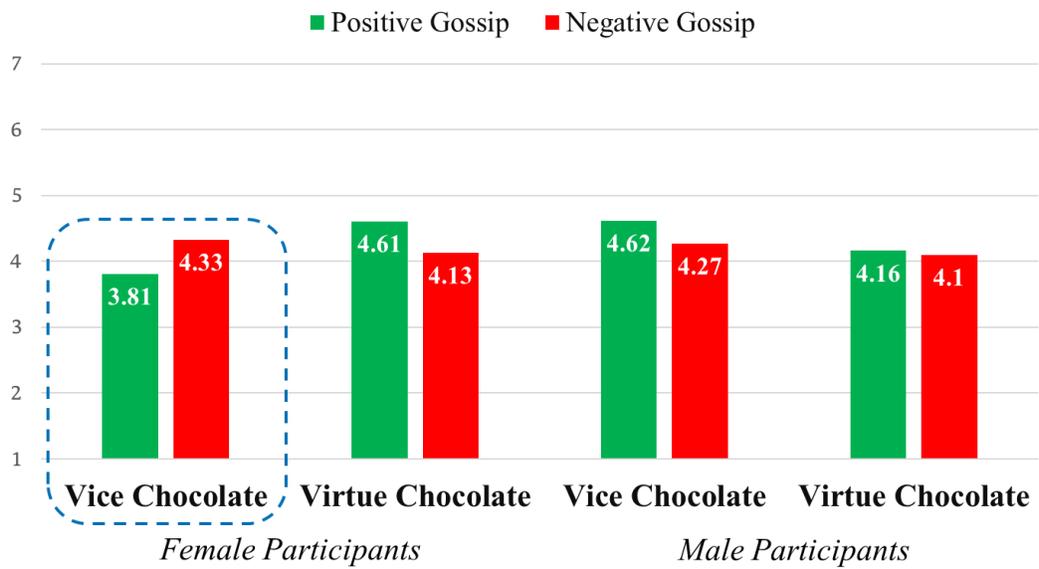


**Figure 7: Study 2A Results (Essay 2)**

(a) Means across conditions for perceived celebrity-brand fit

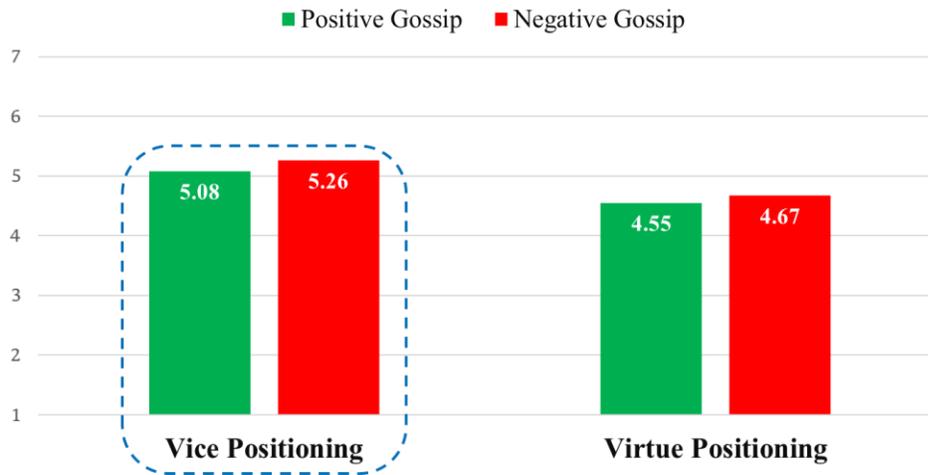


(b) Means across conditions for attitude toward the ad

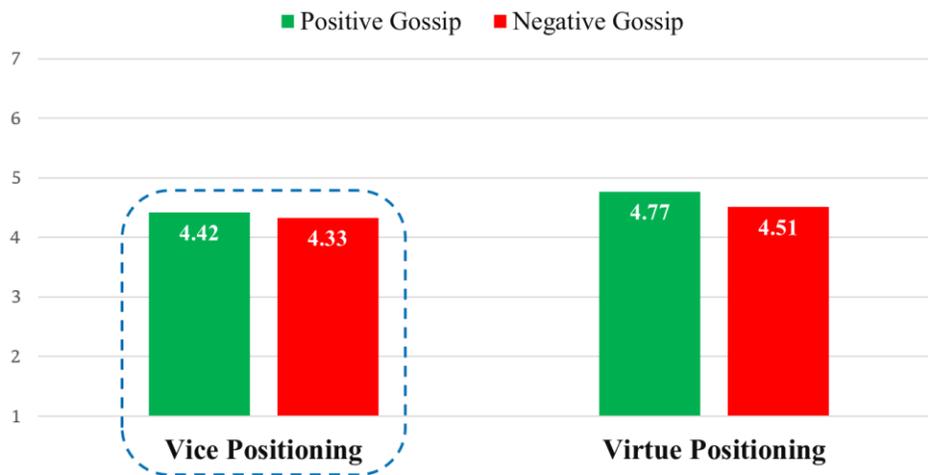


**Figure 8: Study 2B Results – Male participants only (Essay 2)**

(a) Means across conditions for perceived celebrity-brand fit



(b) Means across conditions for attitude toward the ad



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## APPENDIX – ESSAY 1

### Study 1 Self-Threat Manipulations (Han et al. 2015)

- *Intelligence threat.* “Please take a moment to recall a particular incident from your life in which you felt unintelligent. By that, we mean a situation in which you felt dumb or questioned your intelligence in some way. Please provide a detailed description of this situation in which you felt unintelligent – what happened exactly, how you felt, etc.”
- *Personal control threat.* “Please take a moment to recall a particular incident from your life in which you felt not in control. By that, we mean a situation in which you were not in direct control of the outcome; it could be something that happened to you and was NOT because of something that you did. Please provide a detailed description of this situation in which you felt not in control – what happened exactly, how you felt, etc.”
- *Social exclusion threat.* “Please take a moment to recall a particular incident from your life in which you felt socially excluded. By that, we mean a situation in which you were left out of a group, or you came to realize your poor standing within a group. Please provide a detailed description of this situation in which you felt socially excluded – what happened exactly, how you felt, etc.”
- *Baseline condition.* “Please take a moment to recall all your experiences since waking up today morning. Please provide a detailed description of the situations – what all happened, how you felt, etc.”

**Study 1 Self-Threat Manipulation Checks** (adapted from Han et al., 2015)

- *Intelligence threat* ( $\alpha = 0.92$ )

- “To what extent do you feel that you are an incompetent person?”
- “To what extent do you feel that you are an unintelligent person?”
- “To what extent do you feel that you are an incapable person?”

(1 = “Not at all,” 7 = “Very much”)

- *Personal control threat* ( $\alpha = 0.88$ )

- “To what extent do you feel that the events in your life are mainly determined by your own actions?” (R)
- “To what extent do you feel that you are not in control of most things that occur in your life?”
- “To what extent do you feel that it is in your own hands whether or not you are able to get what you want?” (R)
- “To what extent do you feel that what happens to you in the future mostly depends on you yourself?” (R)
- “To what extent do you feel that what happens in your life is often beyond your control?”

(1 = “Not at all,” 7 = “Very much”)

- *Social exclusion threat* ( $\alpha = 0.75$ )

- “To what extent do you feel that there are many people who care about you?” (R)
- “To what extent do you feel very alone right now?”

(1 = “Not at all,” 7 = “Very much”)

### **Study 1 Article Choice Dependent Measure**

“Following are a few article titles which you are likely to see in magazines or newspapers. Please select which article you feel like reading right now:”

- “Brad Pitt spoiling kids as the custody battle with Angie heats up” (CG1)
- “Jennifer Aniston hasn’t given up on love after Justin Theroux split” (CG2)
- “Bohemian Rhapsody is now the highest-grossing musical biopic” (NG1)
- “New streaming platform by AT&T to compete with Netflix and Hulu” (NG2)

**Study 2 Self-Threat Manipulation and Manipulation Checks:** same as study 1

### **Study 2 Article Choice Dependent Measure**

“Following are a few article titles which you are likely to see in magazines or newspapers. Please select which article you feel like reading right now:”

- “Ranveer Singh and Deepika Padukone to marry in Switzerland?” (CG1)
- “After break-up with Alia, ‘gentleman’ Sidharth dating Jacqueline?” (CG2)
- “Andhra Pradesh: Man dies while watching Avengers Infinity War” (NG1)
- “Digital medium in Indian entertainment: Revolution or Fad?” (NG2)

### **Study 2 Main Mediator – Desire to Affiliate with Close Others** (Park and Maner 2009)

“Right now how much would you like to...”      (*1 = “Not at all,” 7 = “Very much”*)

- “Hang out with friends?”
- “Make plans with a friend or a significant other?”
- “Send a text message to a close other?”
- “Spend time with a close friend?”
- “Talk on the phone with a friend?”

### **Study 2 Alternate Mediator – Escapism** (adapted from Duhachek & Oakley, 2007)

- “I don’t want to think about my present situation too much.”
- “I feel like turning to work or some other activity to take my mind off things.”
- “I feel like taking my mind off my present situation.”

(*1 = “Strongly disagree,” 7 = “Strongly agree”*)

### Study 3 Stimuli Articles

*(Celebrity Gossip Article)*

#### **Ariana Grande still healing from Pete Davidson split and Mac Miller's Death**

It seems that youth sensation Ariana Grande is “still healing” after her split from Pete Davidson and the death of her ex-boyfriend Mac Miller. A source close to her exclusively shared with us how the 25-year-old singer feels about her tumultuous past and revealed that she is still “deep as f\*\*k in her feelings.”

The source, on condition of anonymity, told us, “Ariana cries a lot as she can't really fathom all that has happened over the past few years.” For those uninitiated, the *7 Rings* singer was in therapy for a long time, battling anxiety issues post the terrorist bombing at her May 2017 concert in England, which killed 22 people, including several children.

Last year in October, the Grammy nominee broke up with fiancé Pete Davidson after a four-month engagement. The split from the *Saturday Night Live* star came a month after her ex, rapper Mac Miller, died at the young age of 26 from a drug overdose.

According to the source, “A couple of months ago she even told her team she is not in an okay enough place to tour or to work at all. Thankfully, with the help of her friends and due to her love for music, she recovered and turned everything around.” She recently released her fifth studio album *Thank U, Next* which has been well-received by the critics and audience alike.

The source ended by saying, “Though she is still healing, she feels a lot lighter now. She says she is grateful for her life, for the people in it, for the ups and challenges, for the laughter and the pain, for her music and for the lifelong friendships she has made through making it.”

*(Non-Gossip Article)*

### **Disney in talks with AT&T for buying out its stake in Hulu**

Disney is in talks with AT&T to acquire the 10% stake that the telecom giant owns in the streaming-media company through its WarnerMedia subsidiary.

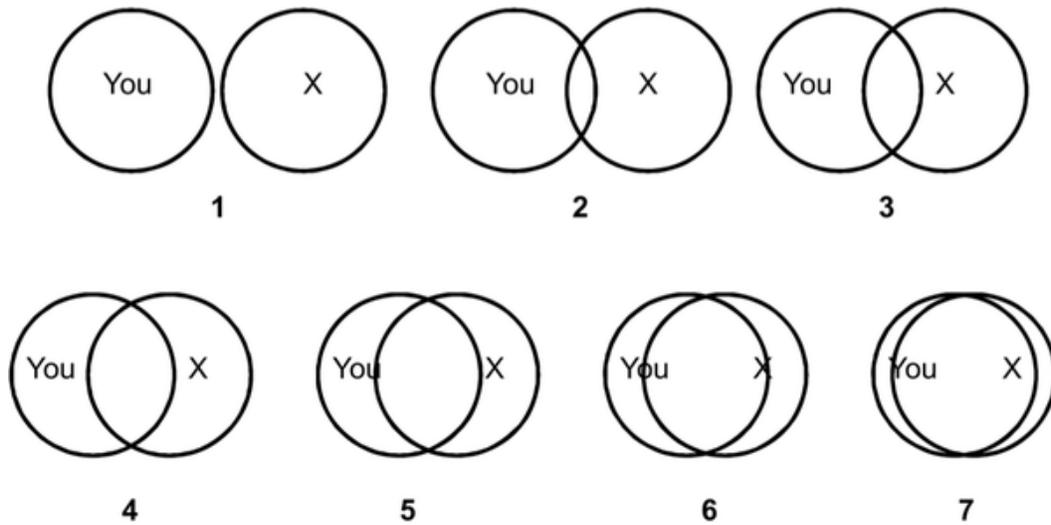
Hulu was formed in 2007 by a group of media giants to compete in the emerging market for streaming video. While Hulu has struggled to compete against Netflix, its recent shift to original programming helped it bring in 8 million new subscribers last year to reach a total of more than 25 million subscribers.

Disney currently holds a 30% stake in Hulu and, through its planned purchase of 20th Century Fox, may soon control Fox's 30% stake in the company too. Comcast's NBC Universal subsidiary also owns a 30% stake, with AT&T owning the final 10%. It has been reported that Comcast has no interest in parting with its stake in Hulu.

AT&T's WarnerMedia is planning to launch a standalone service to stream video programs in its catalog. The CEO of AT&T had said at an industry conference last November that he would be willing to sell off assets such as its Hulu stake to help pay down debt from the AT&T-Time Warner merger. Hulu was valued at \$9.3 billion last summer, pricing a 10% stake at around \$930 million.

If the talks lead to a sale of AT&T's stake in Hulu, it could leave Disney with a 70% stake in Hulu at a time when media giants are preparing services to compete against Netflix. Last month, after Netflix increased the prices of some of its streaming plans, Hulu responded by cutting its basic subscription rate to \$5.99 a month from \$7.99 a month.

**Study 3 Direct Measure of Closeness Felt with Ariana Grande – Inclusion of Other in Self scale (Aron et al. 1992)**



“Imagine that X is Ariana Grande. Please indicate below the degree of closeness you presently feel with her on a scale of 1 to 7 (in reference to the above image of overlapping circles).”

## APPENDIX – ESSAY 2

### Study 1 Stimuli Articles

*(Positive Gossip)*

#### **Rohit Srinivasan proposes marriage to long-time girlfriend Mona Shekhawat**

After a two-year long relationship, Tollywood heartthrob Rohit Srinivasan recently proposed marriage to his girlfriend Mona Shekhawat. Though a date has not been fixed yet, sources close to the couple tell us that they are likely to tie the knot by the end of this year.

Interestingly, Rohit revealed to a leading daily how he proposed to his lady love and it is no less than a dream proposal. He said, “We were in Singapore for a show and the sky was lit with fireworks. I was carrying the ring with me and something told me that this is the right time. So while she was capturing the fireworks on video, I took the opportunity and gave her the ring.” While Mona was in a state of surprise, her first reaction was “what are you telling me?” She later said, “Okay” to which Rohit replied, “I will take that as a yes!”

Thanks to Rohit’s good looks, he is extremely popular with his female co-stars and there have been other rumored link-ups. But Mona trashed all the rumors and confirmed the news about their marriage being planned. She said, “Rohit is ready to start a family with me, and that's what makes me most happy. But we have not finalized a wedding date yet.”

*(Negative Gossip)*

### **Rohit Srinivasan cheats on long-time girlfriend with his new co-star Gloria**

What looked like a till-death-do-us-part relationship between Tollywood heartthrob Rohit Srinivasan and actress Mona Shekhawat has come to an end. Reason: The other woman. Apparently, Rohit has grown close to Gloria, new actress who is co-starring with him in an upcoming film.

What's even more shocking is that Gloria admitted to the fling to none other than Mona when the latter confronted her. Says a source close to the former couple, "Trouble started brewing when Rohit started demanding space in the relationship. He even attended Gloria's birthday party a month ago, alone. While he told Gloria that he had split with Mona, he assured the latter that he was not on talking terms with Gloria. Mona bumped into Gloria at a recent award function and decided to clear the air. To her shock, Gloria admitted to the affair." Following this, Mona ended her two-year relationship with Rohit. He had promised her marriage and she had even gone against her family for him.

While Gloria refused to comment, Rohit said, "Gloria is not involved." To those uninitiated, the good-looking actor is known to be quite a ladies' man. He has acted in many erotic movies and is rumored to have dated several co-stars in the past.

## **Study 1 Endorsement Announcements**

*(Virtue Product)*

### **Tollywood star Rohit Srinivasan to promote a new cookware brand**

Tollywood heartthrob Rohit Srinivasan has signed a new endorsement deal with a major kitchenware company which is launching a new range of cooking utensils and dinner sets. Made from good quality aluminum, this range of cookware is stated to last long and convenient for regular use. Coated with ceramic, their trendy design adds greatly to the visual appeal of the products.

Owing to his tremendous popularity, Rohit seems to be a good choice to promote this cookware range among the household ladies. The television advertisement featuring Rohit Srinivasan is likely to be released soon.

*(Vice Product)*

### **Tollywood star Rohit Srinivasan to appear in a condom advertisement**

Tollywood heartthrob Rohit Srinivasan has signed a new endorsement deal with a major pharmaceutical company which is launching its own brand of condoms. The range of condoms is stated to include eleven variants viz. ultra-thin, dotted and all night; different flavors such as chocolate, banana, strawberry, coffee and bubblegum; and also scented condoms in fragrances like rose, jasmine and musk.

Owing to his tremendous popularity with boys and girls alike, Rohit seems to be a good choice to promote safe sex using condoms among the youngsters. The condom advertisement featuring Rohit Srinivasan is likely to be released soon.

**Study 1 Dependent Measure: Perceived Celebrity-Brand Fit ( $\alpha = 0.96$ )**

“I think that Rohit Srinivasan & this new brand of condom/cookware are:”

- (1) “Not compatible” ... “Compatible” (7)
- (1) “A bad fit” ... “A good fit” (7)
- (1) “A bad match” ... “A good match” (7)

## Study 2A Stimuli Articles

*(Positive Gossip)*

### **Natasha Handa celebrates her birthday with kids at an orphanage**

Bollywood actress Natasha Handa recently celebrated her 27th birthday at an orphanage in Mumbai. Despite being into showbiz for many years, her idea of partying is quite different from that of other tinsel-town celebrities. While most celebrities throw lavish parties, Natasha chose to spread happiness among less privileged children at a city orphanage.

The beautiful actress, who is an inspiration to many young girls thanks to her oozing confidence to carry anything in style, took to Instagram to share some pictures from her unconventional birthday celebrations. She was accompanied by her close friend and stylist Ritu Kulkarni, who made her look as radiant as the smiles on those innocent kids' faces. Also joining her for the special occasion was her “good friend” actor Ritwik Verma who was seen dancing and singing with the orphanage kids.

In a video posted by the actress, she was seen cutting her birthday cake along with a 6-year-old boy who happened to share his birthday with the pretty lady. All the kids looked very happy and seemed to be having a great time with these Bollywood celebrities.

In reel life as well, the actress has to her credit several thought-provoking and responsible movies and is involved with many social activities in her personal life. This goes on to show that she is not just a great actress but also a genuinely good human being.

*(Negative Gossip)*

### **Natasha Handa's extravagant birthday celebrations in Brazil**

Bollywood actress Natasha Handa recently flew to Brazil to celebrate her 27th birthday at the beach of Lopez Mendes. Lopes Mendes is two miles of unspoiled, deserted, powder-white sand that leads to some of the world's clearest, most crystalline waters.

The beautiful actress, who is an inspiration to many young girls thanks to her oozing confidence to carry anything in style, took to Instagram to post some of her latest pictures from the beach. She was accompanied by her close friend and stylist Ritu Kulkarni, who probably was responsible for her sizzling hot looks we witnessed in her Instagram photos. Also joining her for the special occasion was her "good friend" actor Ritwik Verma who was seen getting pretty intimate with her in the pics posted online.

Natasha also shared a video of the birthday celebrations in which she was seen popping open several bottles of very expensive champagne and spraying large quantities of the expensive drink all over herself and her friends. Obviously drunk, the gang seemed to enjoy the champagne shower to the fullest, with no concern about the wastage and the mess they were creating at the beautiful beach.

Though the actress keeps herself involved in various social activities here in India, and also has to her credit several thought-provoking and responsible movies, but these photos and videos she posted from her extravagant birthday party at the beach in Brazil tell a different story!

## Study 2A Stimuli Ads

*(Virtue positioning)*



A virtuous treat... Made with ethically sourced organic ingredients. My most favorite chocolate!

*Natasha Handa*

*(Vice positioning)*



A naughty indulgence... Smooth, rich and sinfully decadent. My most favorite chocolate!

*Natasha Handa*

**Study 2A Dependent Measure: Attitude toward the Ad ( $\alpha = 0.91$ )**

“Please tell us your overall attitude towards this ad along the following dimensions:”

- (1) “Dislike” ... “Like” (7)
- (1) “Unfavorable” ... “Favorable” (7)
- (1) “Negative” ... “Positive” (7)

**Study 2A Mediator: Perceived Celebrity-Brand Fit ( $\alpha = 0.81$ )**

“As an endorser for Broc Chocolate, I think Natasha Handa is:”

- (1) “Inappropriate” ... “Appropriate” (7)
- (1) “Ineffective” ... “Effective” (7)

**Study 2A Manipulation Check: Virtuous Message Index ( $\alpha = 0.87$ )**

- “This ad has a righteous message.”
- “This ad has a virtuous message.”
- “This ad has a vicious message.” (R)

*(1 = “Completely disagree,” 7 = “Completely agree”)*

## Study 2B Stimuli Articles

*(Positive Gossip)*

### **Ritwik Verma finally ready to settle down?**

Bollywood heartthrob Ritwik Verma, who has been dating actress Natasha Handa for over a year now, recently proposed marriage to her. This comes as quite a surprise given his image as a womanizer and his track record of casual flings with several co-stars over the past few years.

A source close to Ritwik told us that, although he was previously commitment-phobic, Natasha's love for him has changed him completely - he now is ready to give her a lifelong commitment and can't wait to start a family with the beautiful actress. Though there is no official announcement yet from the couple, their fans have already started expressing their happiness on Twitter and Instagram. This is a rare happening in Bollywood when an on-screen hit pair happens to click in real life as well.

Though the couple have never made their relationship public, their frequent public appearances and foreign trips together have left little room for speculation. The duo appeared together as "good friends" in a Koffee with Karan episode last year, and their fabulous chemistry made it very apparent that they are much more than friends.

While we respect the actors' right to remain discreet about their personal life, we are eagerly waiting for an official announcement. We are really excited to see Bollywood's chocolate boy Ritwik tie the knot with his lady love Natasha and settle down for good.

*(Negative Gossip)*

### **Another new girl in Ritwik Verma's life?**

It appears that Bollywood heartthrob Ritwik Verma, who was dating actress Natasha Handa for over a year now, has found his new muse in co-star Mona Shekhawat. He seems to have grown very fond of Mona, who is co-starring with him in an upcoming film.

Though Natasha-Ritwik fans would have definitely liked the on-screen hit pair to last in real life as well, but apparently Ritwik can't remain satisfied with just one woman. A source close to Ritwik, on condition of anonymity, told us that Natasha broke-up with Ritwik after she caught him in bed with Mona. This news doesn't come as a surprise given his image as a womanizer. He has acted in many erotic movies and is rumored to have dated several other previous co-stars as well.

When contacted, both Ritwik and Mona refused to comment on the matter. Though they may choose not to make their affair public, but nothing skips the media's eye. Over the last couple of weeks, they both have been frequently spotted together outside the actor's house, usually around nighttime.

In a talk show last week, Natasha had confessed that she has been cheated on in a relationship. Now we know that Ritwik was the boyfriend who she was referring to. We sincerely hope that Ritwik mends his playboy ways and doesn't break Mona's heart like he broke Natasha's.

**Study 2B Stimuli Ads**

*(Virtue positioning)*



*(Vice positioning)*



**Study 2B Dependent Measure: Attitude toward the Ad ( $\alpha = 0.93$ )**

“Please tell us your overall attitude towards this ad along the following dimensions:”

- (1) “Dislike very much” ... “Like very much” (7)
- (1) “Very unfavorable” ... “Very favorable” (7)
- (1) “Very bad” ... “Very good” (7)

**Study 2B Mediator: Perceived Celebrity-Brand Fit ( $\alpha = 0.82$ )**

“As an endorser for Contempo Condoms, I think Ritwik Verma is:”

- (1) “Inappropriate” ... “Appropriate” (7)
- (1) “Ineffective” ... “Effective” (7)