

The Effects of Celebrity Endorsement on Brand Reputation and Consumer Behaviour among Malaysian University Students

Nicolette Foo Ni En¹, Yong Xin Yi²
^{1,2}Tunku Abdul Rahman University, Malaysia



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study investigates the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements as a marketing strategy, with particular attention to its impact on brand reputation and consumer behavior among university students. **Method:** Guided by social identity theory, a quantitative survey was administered to 104 university students to examine the extent to which celebrity endorsements influence purchasing decisions. **Results:** The findings reveal that celebrity endorsements significantly affect brand perception and consumer behavior, driven largely by societal pressures and the aspirational appeal of celebrities. While social identity factors heighten susceptibility to celebrity influence, rational considerations such as price, quality, and personal preference continue to play a decisive role in consumer choices. **Novelty:** This study contributes to the existing literature by integrating social identity theory to elucidate the dual forces of social belonging and rational evaluation in shaping consumer responses to celebrity endorsements, offering a more nuanced understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying marketing effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

In the world of people obsessing over celebrities, the right person for the right logo can be the most powerful move for a brand. For luxurious brands with the market coming to a stagnant point in North America, fashion brands have shifted their focus to Southeast Asia with Thailand market expected to grow and contribute to the regional sales up to 4.8 percent in 2024, as a result of tourism from neighbouring countries. Rob Manley the chief marketing officer of Burberry added that the number would be astronomically high and reach a wider audience in comparison to Western Ambassadors particularly during a new TV series or project which amplifies the impact of them being associated with the endorsed brand [1]. The marketing trends varied significantly compared to a decade ago, where the focus was on B2C (Business to Consumers) and in contrast to the present, consumers are more likely to put trust on C2C (Consumers to Consumers) marketing. It was supported by Adjei et. al, that the uncertainty towards a brand can be reduced among the consumers with the help of C2C communication online, even if the individual deems themselves to be knowledgeable regarding the product [2]. However, with the ongoing development of celebrity marketing, it has been scrutinised for the adverse risk and how far-reaching the backlash from the public could be. Public perception for brands could change in a matter of moments once a product has failed, brands acted poorly, or even the figure endorsing the brand has been entangled in a scandal, bundling with severely affected consumer purchasing decisions. Soon after Ye (formerly known as

Kanye) made an antisemitism statement towards Jewish people, the impact was extended beyond him to the brand that produced Yeezy - Adidas. The shares have dropped 5 percent even when the brand has acted immediately by cutting ties with the celebrity, claiming that they put people over profits [3]. This controversy clearly portrayed that brands' own good behaviour does not guarantee a safeguard from affiliated celebrities that act irresponsibly, in fact, brands' reputation could plummet if no immediate actions were taken that were deemed appropriate by the public.

The definition of celebrity has been expanded in recent years, especially with the emergence of online platforms that produced a mass volume of content creators and influencers. Celebrity endorsement is no longer reserved exclusively for traditionally known celebrities anymore, for which it has reached its mature stage, if not peak, for brands that spent multi-million dollar to collaborate with widely discussed trending celebrities and have an even higher return of investment. This phenomenon occurs beyond the business world as well. In the 2024 U.S. election, celebrities with different political views have brought impact to different parties. Notably, ever since Taylore Swift encouraged her fans to vote, the registered new voters have been doubled throughout the week on top of the \$200,000 funds that Swifties (Taylor Swift's fandom) has raised in support of Kamala Harris campaign. Spillane [4] suggested that the act of celebrities incorporating messages into their public appearance could effectively destigmatize political participation and normalize engaging in political process and integrate it into young adulthood.

In Malaysian context, this phenomenon is prevalent though less internationally recognized in comparison to the celebrities in Western markets. Nevertheless the endorsements are aligned with global trends and exerts strong impact on brand reputation and consumer behaviour. Notably, the former world No. 1 badminton player Datuk Lee Chong Wei has endorsed for Kaspersky Lab, Samsung, Faber Castell, Maxis and 100Plus, bridging the gap between brands closer to local Malaysians through his familiar and widely idolised figure and presence. After the hijab entrepreneur and endorser of Swarovski - Noor Neelofa Mohd Noor was found guilty of breaching covid-19 standard operating procedures, she was called out by X (former Twitter) user and urged the brand to drop her as an endorser [5]. This shows that consumers' perception towards a brand image can be significantly influenced by the endorser's actions and behaviour. In other words, the scandal that the endorser was involved in could be reflected onto the brand's image as well, which in turn negatively affects the brand's reputation.

Shifting the focus onto micro-celebrity, Jenn Chia, or more commonly known as So, I'm Jenn has recently endorsed for La Roche-Posay with a video posted on Instagram and it was supported by her fans commenting that she makes them want to get the product immediately and that the video was very convincing, there was one comment specifically said that "Everytime u post about la roche posay i will end up buying it. What is this sorcery" [6]. It is evident that celebrities do play a significant role with their promotional events and how it shapes consumers' perception of brands and their

purchase intention. The influence may stem from their creative way of storytelling, as usually seen with Jenn Chia, the aspirational appeal of Datuk Lee Chong Wei, resulting from his remarkable badminton achievements, or even for their personal charisma.

Similarly, university students are also under the influence of celebrity endorsement, particularly when most of this demographic are active users of social media where many of the promotional materials are largely featured on. Wen (2017) argued that the reason celebrities impact teenagers more than never is because teenagers rely on external agents, such as social media platforms in the process of forming their social identity. Even though the interactions on social media would probably be nonreciprocal such as liking and commenting on the posts, teenagers feel more intimate with the celebrities and hence it fosters the identification process in relation to SIT. Undoubtedly, once students develop the sense of identification with a celebrity, the effect can be long-lasting as it is formed during the crucial stage of the personal and social development process. Therefore, the impact of celebrity endorsement on brand reputation and consumer behaviour must be studied among the university students to gain better insights on their brand perceptions and purchase intentions. In short, this research offers perspective through the framework of Social Identity Theory that supports the notion that celebrity endorsements wield extensive influence to brand reputation and consumer behaviour, either intentional or unintentional. This could exert advantages to brands in making diligent choices when selecting an endorser for long term growth and achievements as it provides insights for areas that have not been comprehensively studied.

Literature review

Carlson et. al found that consumers are likely to be appealed by celebrity endorsers whom they identified, even when the perceived fitness is relatively low [7]. However, more often than not, certain industries would still be requiring some degree of product-endorser or brand-endorser fitness, especially luxurious products. Relying on product-endorser or brand-endorser strategy alone substantially increases the seclusion of the brand from consumers who do not identify with the endorser, not to mention that it puts the brand to a vulnerable position to possible downfall if the endorser faces any scandals.

Nevertheless, Jun et. Al proved otherwise. They have suggested that when a brand has low brand association prior to consumers' knowledge, the 3E (enabling, enriching, and enticing) effect by other entities is rather stronger to be associated with the brand . That is, when consumers are not familiar with a brand, leveraging the associations of a celebrity endorser and transferring the corresponding associations to the brand would be easier. Although consumers would perceive an endorser's benefits as a brand's benefits, it is more difficult to change the existing key association on existing brands that already have a rich network of brand associations in the memory of consumers.

Noviani et. Al suggested that although the brand is endorsed by celebrity, the consumers are well aware of the actual quality of products, where the endorsement could only serve as a reference point [8]. However, the researchers emphasized that quality of

products refers to the compatibility of the product with consumer's needs. It means that despite a strong endorsement by a public figure for the brand, consumers are rather rational in making purchasing decisions, and that the quality of the target product would still be the final deciding factor during the purchase.

Theoretical framework

Social Identity Theory (SIT) was adopted as a tool to justify the canonical problem of the relationship between an individual to a group and defines how social context influences interactions with in-group and out-group members [9].

Social identity, as refers to the identification of an individual as a member of a specific group, which develops a sense of belongingness and willingly associate with characteristics of which are related to the group. It also applies to broader groups or organisations where the individual has become a member of said group or organisation, whether being involved voluntarily or involuntarily. Humans categorize each other into groups to make the world simplify the world, and in the process of this they also categorize themselves into different groups as well [10]. It is true even if the grouping was done only cognitively, when the individual categorises themselves as a member of a group without any external acknowledgements. These identities are able to perform as an enhancement to self-concept, thus the members tend to form a strong and stable bond, possibly resulting in a negative bias towards any perceived threats from out-groups. This is because the negative out-group interactions would be seen as competing for resources, which may cause identity crises for the in-group members.

Hogg et. al suggested that social identity was originally distinguished from self-identity, and the complexity of self-identity depends on the number of social identity and the rate of social identity overlapping on top of each other [11]. If one possesses multiple, distinct social identities that do not intersect or are related to each other, it means that the individual is having complex social identity; vice versa, if one's social identities have commonalities or overlap with each other, the individual has a relatively simpler social identity. Through categorization and identification of self-concept, the individual then experiences the transformation of self-perception to conform with implicit in-group practice. On a broader level, the attributes that distinguish one group from another will then cause an impact on perspective, attitudes, and behaviour from external parties.

SIT outlines the interactions of in-groups and out-groups, mediated by social identities, and people intend to engage with higher social identities to enhance their own by leveraging different strategies. The state of boundaries between each group determines the mobility of each individual. If the boundaries are permeable and unstable, individuals tend to improve their identities by moving to groups with higher status [12]. Conversely, to better shield potential harm and threats, group members would vouch for other group members to ensure overall group status. That is, in turn, promoting depersonalization that the group members shifting their own belief to match with perspective that the group already held. This phenomenon, called group polarization, explains the strong urge to favour other group members to the extent that individual boundaries have been blurred, fostering a higher group cohesiveness and stability [9].

In application of effects of celebrity endorsement, SIT offers a unique perspective to explain how endorsement events or celebrity behaviour influence brand reputation and consumer behaviour through the interactions and consumer's reactions. Therefore, the research question of this study would be as follows:

RQ 1: What are the effects of celebrity endorsement on brand reputation?

RQ 2: What are the effects of celebrity endorsement on consumer behaviour?

RESEARCH METHOD

Sampling procedures

104 sets of data have been obtained from undergraduates from different faculties in UTAR. The participants were encouraged to share with their peers to increase the sample pool, the implementation of snowball sampling could aid researchers to reach out to the target population according to the proximity to participants, in this case, the research would be based in Sungai Long, Kajang. The employment of snowball sampling employment not only effectively help researchers to reach to the population that are relatively harder to reach, but also minimize the necessity to have site coordinators, which in turn reduces the potential of deviation from original study protocol [13]. This is due to a widely recognized potential bias - the relationship of researchers and participants, therefore snowball sampling could broaden the sample pool that is unknown from the researchers' direct network. The final sample was inclusive of 35.6% of students aged 18 to 21 and 64.4% of students are between the ages of 22 to 25, thereby having a diverse yet relevant research population as the mentioned age groups are the primary demographic affected by celebrity endorsements.

Study design and measures

The data was collected in the form of cross-sectional survey basis, which is, taking a potentially relevant population at a single point in time, with no longitudinal follow up [14]. This way, multiple correlation between impacts of celebrity endorsement on brand reputation and consumer behaviour can be studied altogether. The questions set in the survey are close-ended questions, therefore participant's enthusiasm can be increased with the easy-to-answer questions. It is also less demanding for people who are inarticulate and struggle to express their ideas clearly, thereby increasing the willingness of participation. This survey is primarily distributed online to enhance accessibility and promote a higher participation rate, with prior requirements of age groups mentioned. To ensure measurability of the variables of this research, Likert Scale has been adopted with the scale of 1 to 5, to facilitate a structural numerical evaluation. This method was first discovered by Rensis Likert to measure each individual's opinion or attitude for any item to the extent of agree and disagree. The variables are operationalized by utilising Likert Scale, as it offers a window for researchers to obtain unobservable constructs. The consistent structure of Likert Scale could also reduce burden on participants in choosing their subjective truth as it decreases the need for attention to a certain level, as human's attention span has been widely studied to be existent in a certain period of time. Therefore, celebrity endorsement, brand reputation, and consumer behaviour were

studied using 5-point Likert Scale, stated as 1= Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree for participants to indicate their level of agreement to each statement stated.

Ethical consideration

Participants were informed for the purpose of research and objectives in a declaration beforehand, hence they are all well acknowledged of the purpose of participation. All identities of respondents will be kept anonymous and strictly confidential, without disclosing to third parties according to standard privacy guidelines.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The data collected was then analysed with the application of descriptive analysis techniques. This process often involves data that is collected, cleaned, and summarized before structuring them into charts, tables, and graphs. This approach can effectively simplify the data by turning numerical values into a clear and concise picture, hence assisting businesses to make informed decisions [15]. The nature of this data analysis makes it lie closer to real-life sceneries and is able to provide insights to identify areas of improvement in decision making process as it reflects the objective truth of each respondents' self-report for each statement from the survey. There are several steps to be included to implement descriptive analysis - data collection and preparation, data exploration and visualization, data analysis itself and finally interpretation and reporting. Each step concludes the historical data and gains valuable insights in previous or ongoing trends by understanding the reason behind consumer behaviour that might not be obvious by looking at the raw data [16]. In this research, the raw data on participants' level of agreement to each statement are systematically linked to relevant variables.

From the survey, over 63% of respondents are aware of usage of celebrity endorsement by brands, and 60% of them admitted that their impression on a brand enhances if their admired celebrity is endorsing the brand, which correlates to SIT where people view their in-group members more positively compared to out-group members, with celebrity being the key figure of the group. Other than that, with 70% of respondents implied that the alignment of values between brand and celebrity is essential, this highlights the importance of strong brand-endorser fit to avoid conflict in key brand characteristics, including brand's value, image, marketing objective and target demographic. There are also 56% of respondents believe that celebrity endorsement marketing is an important contributing factor to long term success for a brand, whereas 50% of them believe that with the employment of celebrity endorsement, the products of the brand are more likely to be of quality.

To answer if celebrities influence consumer behaviour, 57% of respondents think that celebrity endorsement is able to leave an impact on their purchasing behaviour in the long term as some meaning has been transferred from celebrities to the product,

forming a fixed impression in consumers. For the most part, consumers approve the celebrity cognitively if they are met with certain conditions to be an 'expert' in the endorsed products as their credibility and trustworthiness has risen. It demonstrates a sense of authenticity which could maintain if not gain consumer trust by having a figure who shares a similar impression as them, that the brand does not intend to disguise as something else.

Discussion

Social Identity Theory framework was applied to this research to find out the linkage of celebrity endorsement with brand reputation and consumer behaviour. While previous studies, such as Carlson et. al provided empirical investigation into the identification of the theory in response of consumer to celebrity endorsement, this study offers one of the first perspectives on focusing on the demographic of UTAR students [17]. Thus, it allows an insight of a more nuanced understanding of consumer behaviour and brand reputation with the impact of ongoing topic - celebrity endorsement. Overall, over 60% of consumers tend to be swayed by products that are endorsed by their favourite celebrity figure, while 56% of them hold the opinion that the chances of brands to be successful for a longer term would be much higher when celebrities were involved in marketing strategies. It corresponds to the concept of SIT. With celebrity endorsements serving as a gateway towards higher social status, consumers are more likely to associate with the seemingly elevated social group instead. On top of that, celebrity's identities are intertwined with the brand's image, therefore extending the brand loyalty to celebrity fanbase, making branding seem effortless and impactful. It is also worth noting that the impact of celebrity endorsement extends beyond brand image but also consumer behaviour as they might feel assimilation pressure, when they strive to associate with elite groups. Therefore, consumers are often pressured to demonstrate some form of support, whether through purchasing products, engaging with brand content online, or even by participating in conversations with members of social circles as a way to reinforce their loyalty.

One of the most successful endorsements in marketing history is the collaboration between Nike and Michael Jordan, the combination so iconic that it is almost inseparable as a brand. As many as 33 editions have been launched from the shoeline - Air Jordan alone since their collaboration, making it the second-best seller sneakers in the USA until this date. Drawing data from the studies, 63% of respondents admitted that celebrities are capable of influencing them to try on new products and their fashion choices. The aspiration and identification of consumers toward a celebrity increases their willingness to attach to a brand and try new products. A notable case would be Jisoo's endorsement for Dior that linked to a significant 86.8% increase in revenue within a year, with operating profit rising from 104.7 billion won to 211.5 billion won. The fanbase of Jisoo who identify as a member of the in-group tend to conform with the practice of other members in supporting the endorser's products. Coinciding with research data, 46% of respondents indicated willingness to change their purchase intention when their favourite celebrity figure is endorsing a different product. Wang et. al suggested that

consumer trust and attitude are under the influence of consumer perception, and in turn, giving impact on their purchase intention [18]. That is to say, celebrity endorsements have a remarkable influence on the level of trust consumers place in a brand which in turn directly determines the probability of their purchase intentions.

When compared to other promotional activities, 48% of respondents found celebrity endorsement to be more effective. It is aligned similarly with Knoll & Matthes which pointed out that celebrity endorsement is more effective compared to other promotional activities, emphasizing on the importance of image and value matching between celebrity and brand [19]. They have also highlighted that unfamiliar products are able to reflect celebrity's images more strongly to consumers as they are still yet to possess a rich network of associations in relation to the product than the familiar products. Brand should also consider cultural nuances in employing the correct celebrity for different demographics in order to tailor endorsement to different preferences to achieve better results. Consequently, it is wise to employ celebrity endorsement before the image of a brand becomes commonly recognised among consumers, whereas the well-established brands should select celebrities whose image can convey a message efficiently for the brand. With consumers trusting brands to offer higher quality products when endorsed by a celebrity, it proves that the image of the endorser, particularly the credibility, has remarkable influence on how the consumers perceive the brand itself.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : This study establishes that celebrity endorsements significantly influence brand perception and consumer purchasing behavior, with social identity theory providing a robust framework to explain consumers' identification with celebrity figures. Endorsement effectiveness is notably enhanced when there is strong celebrity-brand congruence, reinforcing consumer trust and purchase intention. **Implication :** These findings suggest that marketers should strategically select celebrity endorsers whose public image aligns with the brand's values to foster long-term brand equity and avoid reputational risks. Furthermore, consistency and authenticity in celebrity partnerships are crucial to maintaining positive consumer associations, especially among younger demographics such as Generation Z and Millennials. **Limitation :** However, the study is limited by its focus on individual-level identification and a specific sample of university students, which may not capture broader group-level dynamics or other influencing factors like celebrity attractiveness and expertise. **Future Research :** Future studies should explore the group-level effects of celebrity endorsements, incorporate qualitative methodologies to gain deeper insights, and examine the rising impact of micro-influencers and ordinary content creators within the social identity framework to assess their comparative effectiveness against traditional celebrity endorsers.

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*** Nicolette Foo Ni En (Corresponding Author)**

Tunku Abdul Rahman University, Malaysia

Email: nicolettefoo,nf@gmail.com

Yong Xin Yi

Tunku Abdul Rahman University, Malaysia

Email: yongxy@utar.edu.my
