

Investigating the Impact of Emotional Attachment to Celebrity Endorser on Endorsed Product Purchase Intention Among Celebrity Fans: The Mediating Role of Brand Attractiveness and Quality

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether brand attractiveness or product quality mediate the impact of celebrity attachment on fans' purchase intention. An online survey was conducted involving 248 consumers who identified themselves as members of BTS; a K-Pop popular South Korean singing group; but haven't purchased the investigated brand endorsed by the celebrity. Attachment to celebrity was found not to directly affect intention to purchase advertised product. The impact of celebrity attachment on purchase intention was also fully mediated by brand attractiveness and product quality. Interestingly, brand attractiveness has a stronger impact on purchase intention than product quality does. Marketers should consider the use of popular celebrities with a strong connection with their fans when advertising their brands; as emotional bonding with the celebrity helps brands to be considered as attractive and high quality; which in turn can lead to purchase intention.

Keywords: brand attractiveness, BTS, fans, emotional attachment, perceived brand quality

1. Introduction

Celebrity endorsement is one of the most significant practices in marketing activation strategy (Bennett, Anaza, and Andonova, 2021), as well as one of the most prominent topics in marketing and advertising studies (Halder, Pradhan, and Chaudhuri, 2021). In the last few years, celebrity endorsement has been considered as less effective than it used to be. Using celebrity to endorse a product is expensive and deemed by many as 'not worth the money spent' (Harrington, 2014). Interestingly, although its popularity of the traditional endorsers in advertising has started to be surpassed by social media influencers, big companies are still spending significant amount of money for celebrity endorsement in their ads. For example, one of the most popular music groups in the world, BTS, has been racking up endorsement deals for some major brands, such as FILA sportswear, Louis Vuitton, and McDonalds valued more than USD4million per brand (Miller, 2021). In the first semester of 2021, the number of ads using celebrity has grown by 65% compared to the same period in 2020 (BrandWagon Online, 2021).

Despite the fact that celebrity endorsement is still one of the most investigated areas in advertising research, there is still lack of studies examining the impact of celebrity endorsers

on consumer responses to brands of low involvement product; especially when the investigated consumers are fans of the celebrity. It is still unclear whether consumers are willing to purchase an unfamiliar brand of a low-involvement product just because of their emotional attachment to the celebrity endorsing the brand or because of their other factors related to the brand itself; such as brand attractiveness or perceived brand quality. This study attempts to address that literature gap.

This study attempts to answer these following research questions “*does consumer emotional attachment to a celebrity endorser affect purchase intention of a low-involvement product endorsed by the celebrity?*”. Findings of this study are expected to contribute to the marketing literature as well as marketing practitioners, especially marketers of low-involved products using celebrity in their ads.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Celebrity Endorsement

Celebrity endorsement is defined as an advertising strategy in which an individual who enjoys public recognition uses it on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in a product message or advertisement (McCracken, 1989). Extensive prior studies confirmed that when a brand is appeared in an advertisement with an attractive and likeable celebrity, consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions toward the brand is likely to be more favorable than when it is endorsed by any other types of advertising endorsers (Erdogan, 1999). This is due to the transferability of the personality of the celebrity to the brand (Ambroise, Pantin-Sohier, Valette-Florence, and Albert, 2014; Miller & Allen, 2012). Hence, when the brand is endorsed by celebrity who are perceived as young, cheerful, and interesting, those characters are transferred into the personality of the brand (Forderer & Unkelbach, 2014; Knoll, Matthes, Munch, & Ostermann, 2016).

2.2 Celebrity Attachment

This study defines celebrity emotional attachment is defined as an emotional state occurs when a consumer engages in strong feelings toward a celebrity. Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016) find that emotional attachment with a celebrity can be developed when consumers have consistent access to information posted by celebrities which makes them feel closer to the celebrity as the celebrity is exposed as a real person, instead of solely being exposed to their popularity. Rooted on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), this construct suggests that individuals may develop a deep sense of emotional and affectional bonds with a celebrity they are comfortable with.

Existing literature on consumer attachment on celebrity suggest that stronger attachment leads not only to stronger motivational and positive behavioral implications, but also financial consequences, brand profitability, or consumer lifetime value (Thomson *et al.*, 2005), which translate into purchase intention (Fedorikhin, Park, & Thomson, 2008). In an advertising context, celebrity endorsements are similar to human relationships between consumers and the celebrities (Ilicic, Baxter, and Kulczynski, 2016) and brands they endorse (Huang, Lin, and Phau, 2015; Thomson, MacInnis, and Park, 2005). When a brand is endorsed by a celebrity, or

when the celebrity basically shares any information to their fans through social media, the celebrity plays an active role in developing or sustaining parasocial relationship with their fans, which leading consumers to feel that the reciprocating interaction is happening (Ilicic, Baxter, and Kulczynski, 2016). Meanwhile, consumer attachment to the celebrity confers emotional bonds to the celebrity which is demonstrated in the form of positive responses to the endorsed brands, and finally purchase intention (Fedorikhin, Park, and Thomson, 2008).

H1: Consumer attachment to an endorsing celebrity positively affects the attractiveness of the endorsed brand

H2: Consumer attachment to an endorsing celebrity positively affects the quality of the endorsed product

H3: Consumer attachment to an endorsing celebrity positively affects intention to purchase the endorsed brand

2.3 Brand Attractiveness

Brand attractiveness is conceptualized as positive evaluation of the brand's distinctive and enduring associations (Elbedweihy *et al.*, 2016) in relation to how the brand helps consumers satisfy their self-definitional needs (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Curras-Perez *et al.*, 2009). Brands tend to be attractive for consumers when the brand associations are consistent with how consumers sense of themselves (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Curras-Perez *et al.*, 2009). Prior studies argued that brand attractiveness represents an important element of identification process (So *et al.*, 2017). For example, consumers who have concerns about environmental issues are more likely to perceive brands like Patagonia or The Body Shops as attractive. Hence, consumers who idolize one particular celebrity would consider any brands advertised or endorsed by the celebrity as attractive.

Recent literature suggested that managing brand identity is crucial aspect of branding for celebrity (Centeno & Wang, 2017), as strong brand identity helps consumers develop a stronger relationship with the brand through consumer-brand identification (So *et al.*, 2017). When a celebrity has a strong and solid brand identity, the transfer meaning process from the celebrity to the brands they endorse is more likely to be easier (Roy, 2018). Therefore, when the brand is endorsed by a celebrity perceived as young, friendly, cheerful, and interesting, the image or characteristics are spilled over into the endorsed brand (Zamudio, 2016; Halonen-Knight, E., & Hurmerinta, 2010). Prior studies found that when the connection between consumers and the celebrity is stronger, the chance that the attractiveness of the celebrity is transferred into the endorsed brand (Roy, 2018). Therefore, this study proposed that the stronger the attachment consumers have with the endorsing celebrity, the more likely they consider that the endorsed brand is attractive. Hence, this following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Brand attractiveness positively affects the attractiveness of consumer intention to purchase the endorsed brand

H5: Brand attractiveness mediates the impact of celebrity attachment on purchase intention

2.4 Perceived Quality

This study conceptualizes perceived quality as consumer evaluation about a product's overall excellence or superiority (Guru & Paulssen, 2020). Commonly, consumers use any available product cues to evaluate product quality before consuming the product. The cues consumers use to form their perception are primarily obtained from the product information provided by the marketers, in the form of advertising or product manuals (Gök, Ersoy, & Börühan, 2019) or provided by fellow consumers in the form of product review. Therefore, the way the advertising is designed and presented to consumers is most likely to help them to develop perceptions about the advertised product.

Prior studies suggested that celebrity endorsement can make consumers develop better perceived product quality (Bennett, Anaza, & Andonova, 2021). When the celebrity featured in an advertising is someone dearly loved by the consumers, the personal attachment to the celebrity may help consumers to perceive that the brands endorsed by the celebrity are high in quality (Dwivedi & Johnson, 2013). Based on the explanation above, this study proposed that the stronger the attachment consumers have with the endorsing celebrity, the higher the quality of the advertised product quality that they perceive. Hence, this following hypothesis is postulated:

H6: Perceived quality of the endorsed product positively affects consumer intention to purchase the endorsed product

H7: Perceived quality of the endorsed product mediates the impact of celebrity attachment on purchase intention of the endorsed product

Based on the explanation presented above, this study proposes this following conceptual framework to be tested, as depicted in Figure 1.

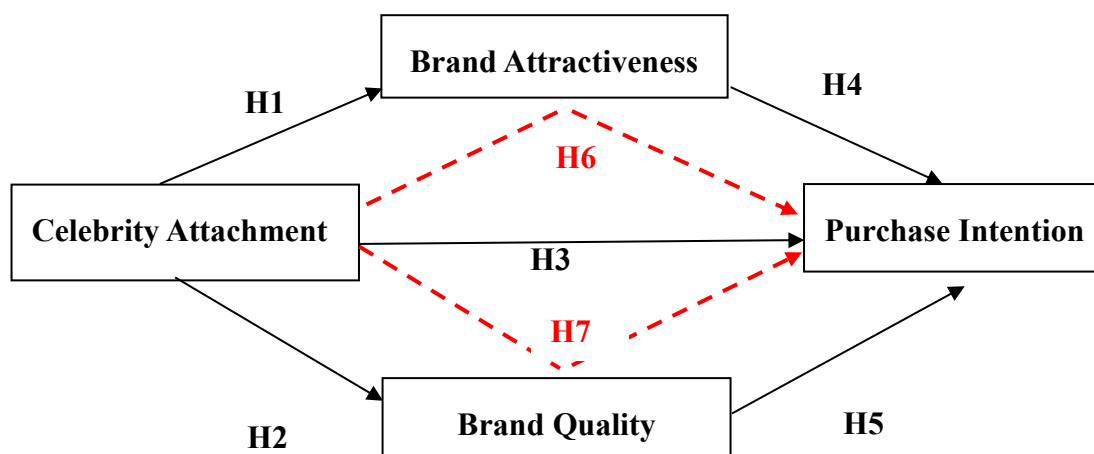


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

3. Research Method

Research Context. Indonesia is the world's fourth most populous nation, with 260 million people, and the largest in Southeast Asia (US Census Bureau, 2019). Indonesia is one of the countries with the largest number of BTS fans in the world (Ng, 2021). Indonesia has been known as one of the leading markets of the Korean entertainment industry (Jibiki & Hosokawa, 2021). Hence, Indonesia is accordingly considered a suitable context for conducting research on fandom behavior towards a Korean pop artist.

Research Design. For this study, all photos posted on the official account of BTS Army were observed; all photos without a clear presence of all the members of BTS were screened out. Ten photos were selected based on those two steps; which were then assessed by two content creators in terms of (1) clarity of the presence of all the members of the artist, and (2) appropriateness of the photo to be used for promoting a product, resulting one final photo. The photo was then redesigned using Photoshop as if the artist endorsing one product. The advertised product investigated in this study was a Korean sportswear brand. A Korean brand was selected to ensure that all participants have similar level of brand familiarity, to avoid a confounding effect. The photo was then inserted in the questionnaire. With the help of a senior Army member, the link to the questionnaire was distributed to the other members of Army BTS Indonesia through emails, online forums, and personal direct message on the Instagram. The participants were requested to have a good look at the photo showing a product advertisement with BTS as the endorser, then they were asked to complete the questionnaire. The participants were asked whether (1) they were familiar with the brand used in the advertising, and (2) they recognized the photo used in the advertising as one of the photos posted in the BTS official Instagram account. If participants confirmed positively to any of these two questions, their responses to the questionnaire were not recorded, and were not used further in the analysis.

Measurement. To measure perceived brand quality, six items were adapted from Vera (2015). The five scale items for measuring brand attractiveness were adapted from So et al., (2017). Celebrity emotional attachment was measured using five items used in Donvito et al., (2020). Lastly, purchase intention was measured using 4-item scales adapted from Bian and Forsythe (2012). Respondents responded to each statement by indicating their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Common method bias was assessed by Hartman's single factor test. The first and largest factor accounted for only 32.75% of the variance indicating that common method bias was not a concern in this study.

Data Collection. Data were collected by means of an online questionnaire. The questionnaire link was distributed to Instagram users who followed the official Instagram account of BTS Army Indonesia. They were approached online and asked to complete the questionnaire and then, for an opportunity to win one of three BTS official merchandises. The participation was totally voluntary and they were given the chance to opt out at any time.

4. Finding and Discussion

A total of 248 respondents participated in the online survey. Among these respondents, 28 were

dropped as they were not met the criteria and 15 were excluded because the responses were incomplete. Finally, there were 205 valid responses were used for further analysis. The respondents were fairly balanced between gender (57.7% male, 42.3% female) and occupation (students 55.1%; non-students 44.9%). The mean age of respondents was about 18 years old ($m=20.19$, $SD=3.2$). Most of them claimed themselves as mild-to-heavy fans of BTS, following the celebrity community (BTS fans club/Army) in more than two online social media forums, and spend more than 3 hours per day on social media updating themselves about BTS (76.7%).

To evaluate the measurement model, four analyses were performed. First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was undertaken to assess the suitability of the proposed model to the data. The overall fit of the model was acceptable, with χ^2 of 1,229 ($df = 413$, $p = 0.00$), χ^2/df ratio of 2.75, and the comparative fit index (CFI) of 0.914 (Hair, *et al.*, 2006). Second, this study needs to test for unidimensionality, CFA was conducted on measurement models for each of the five variables. The CFI indices for all of the five variables are above the 0.9 level indicating evidence of unidimensionality. (Sureshchandar *et al.*, 2002). Third, squared multiple correlations (R^2) for each measurement item, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct were calculated to test the construct reliability (Hair *et al.*, 2006). All score of composite reliability, average variance extracted and Cronbach's alpha (Fornell and Larker, 1981) exceeded the minimum acceptable values. Fourth, convergent validity was confirmed as the measurement items represented their constructs significantly; the critical ratio of every item exceeded the 1.96 (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The approach suggested by Fornell and Larkner (1981) was adopted to test the discriminant validity. The results showed that the average variance extracted for each pair of variables was greater than the squared correlation for the same pair, indicating that each construct was a different construct.

The overall fit indices for the proposed structural model were $CMIN = 1.59$, $GFI = 0.897$, $RMSEA = 0.061$, $CFI = 0.958$, $IFI = 0.959$, $TLI = 0.939$ (Hair *et al.*, 2006). These values show that the model fits the data reasonably well. The details are presented in Table 1.

The results indicate that emotional attachment with the endorsing celebrity positively affects brand attractiveness, perceived quality, and purchase intention of the endorsed product; lending a support for Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. Meanwhile, brand attractiveness and perceived quality were found to positively affect purchase intention of the endorsed product; supporting Hypotheses 4 and 5.

To test the mediation effects of brand attractiveness and perceived quality, this study used the approach proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) suggesting three series of conditions to comply with. The three conditions are (1) the independent variable (emotional attachment to endorsing celebrity) must have significant effects on the mediating variables (brand attractiveness and perceived quality), (2) independent variable (emotional attachment to endorsing celebrity) must have a significant effects on the dependent variable (purchase intention), and (3) the mediators (brand attractiveness and perceived quality) must have a significant effect on the dependent variables (purchase intention). Partial mediation occurs when all the conditions show significant results, while full mediation happens when the second condition is not met.

Following the procedures implemented by prior studies (Yen & Gwinner, 2003), in order to perform the mediating effect analysis, two structural equation models using AMOS 23 were developed, examined, and compared. The first model was the original model proposed for this study as depicted in Figure 1 asserting both direct and indirect relationships between celebrity attachment, brand attractiveness, product quality, and purchase intention. The second model illustrated the fully-mediating situation.

As reported in Table 1, both models fit the data appropriately. The difference test indicated no significance difference between the two models. Both models were also equivalent on the overall statistics fits (CFI = 0.93). Most conceptual model paths are supported at $p < 0.05$ level or better. Most of the fully mediated model's paths are also supported at the same level. The proposed impact of celebrity attachment on purchase intention was the only path that was found insignificant in both models. In the original model, the proposed relationship between celebrity attachment on product quality was also found insignificant, but it was significant in the competing model. In relation to the ability of the models to explain variance in the outcomes, as measured by R^2 , the fully mediated model explains brand attractiveness better than the original model (0.857, 0.829, respectively). On the other hand, the original model was slightly better at explaining the variance of purchase intention; 0.551 versus 0.523. Finally, the fully mediated model had a higher PNFI value than the original model; 0.729 and 0.699, respectively. As shown in Table 1, although the differences between the two models were small for some criteria, the fully mediated model is a more accurate and useful representation of the relationships. Thus, H6 and H7 were supported.

Table 1. Results of structural equation analysis for two competing models

Relationship between Variables	The original model	The fully-mediated model
Attachment → Attractiveness	0.271*	0.279^
Attachment → Product Quality	Not Significant	0.174*
Attachment → Intention	Not Significant	Not Significant
Attractiveness → Intention	0.392*	0.687*
Product Quality → Intention	0.309*	0.545*
χ^2	1,231	1,273
df	413	419
χ^2/df	2.97	3.01
CFI	0.93	0.93
PNFI	0.699	0.729
Significant paths (%)	60	80
R^2 (brand attractiveness)	0.778	0.789
R^2 (product quality)	0.816	0.829
R^2 (purchase intention)	0.551	0.523

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.001$

This study has investigated the nexus of celebrity, brands, and celebrity fans in Indonesia, a country that has been under-represented in the marketing literature. At least, there are two

important findings resulted from this study. First, consumer attachment to a celebrity was found to have indirect influence on consumer intention to purchase a product. This particular finding is consistent with what many other prior studies have found (e.g., Ilicic & Webster, 2011; Khan, Memon, & Kumar, 2019). In other words, emotional connection with a celebrity does not directly discourage or encourage consumers to engage in purchasing a product endorsed by the celebrity, as the impact of emotional attachment on purchase intention was mediated by brand attractiveness and product quality. Therefore, choosing a popular and likeable celebrity to endorse a product is a good strategy, but it is not enough to drive consumers to purchase, if the brand is not considered as attractive or having lower quality. This finding contributes to marketing literature by extending the source effect theory (Steyn *et al.*, 2011) that the power of likeable celebrity endorser is not adequate to secure purchase intention.

Second, both brand attractiveness and product quality had a positive influence on purchase intention. While the mediating effects of both brand attractiveness and product quality were expected, the fact that brand attractiveness has stronger mediating power was surprising. It seems that BTS fans (the Army) are most likely to think that products or brands endorsed by BTS to be attractive and having high product quality. Having said that, it is the brand attractiveness that has stronger impact on purchase intention than product quality. This result validates the relevance of the meaning transfer theory (McCracken, 1989) in the context of BTS Army consumers in Indonesia, that when BTS endorses any brands; especially brands of low-involved products; the image of BTS is more likely to transfer to be transferred to the endorsed brands.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that brand attractiveness and product quality mediate the effect of consumer emotional attachment with a celebrity on purchase intention of the endorsed brand. In view of this finding, employing celebrities to endorse brands in advertising is a good strategy for firms, but marketers need to ensure that the endorsing celebrities are highly likeable, as strong likeability has a powerful impact on attractiveness and perceived quality of the endorsed brand or product.

Moreover, the results of mediating effect also suggested that consumer perception of product quality mediates the impact of consumer attachment to celebrity on purchase intention of the advertised product. This finding offers an insight for marketers that it is important to build consumer perception about the quality of the product, as it determines whether or not consumers are willing to purchase.

This study should be of interest to marketers of low-involved products as this study validates that celebrity still has a strong influential power to drive consumer behaviours. From this perspective, they should consider emphasizing the use of celebrity endorsers in order to create perceptions of brand attractiveness and product quality in order to secure purchase intention. In doing so, marketers need to craft the advertising message that showcase the brand attractiveness or product quality.

The findings presented here must be understood in light of certain limitations on the research that at the same time point to potential avenues for future study. To begin with, the focus on BTS Army members in Indonesia limits the generalizability of the findings to other groups of another celebrity or other consumer groups in other countries, and to consumers who might not be a fan of the investigated celebrity. Thus, researchers could in subsequent studies explore the same issues across consumer groups, as well as across celebrity fans groups. Issues to be investigated include whether male and female fans display similar behaviours in relation to level of emotional attachment to the celebrity, or whether the impact of emotional attachment on purchase intention may differ for high-involved or hedonic products. Marketers would also benefit from comparison of consumers or fans of different types of celebrities.

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