

# **Celebrity endorsement weakening: when brand's impact on fans goes beyond endorsers.**

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## **Abstract**

Marketing communication campaigns have been frequently rooted on celebrities, given their impact on generating awareness and goodwill towards a brand, as literature suggests. Specifically, celebrity endorsement has been a communication tool constantly increasing in recent decades, mostly in the sport industry. While the choice of attractive and credible celebrities appears to be an extremely important aspect for brands, scarce are the studies on the celebrities' weight when it comes to trigger consumer attitudes and decisions, compared to brands', when these are prominent. To fill this gap, an online survey to 324 fans of the Spanish football championship was conducted to analyse how attitude and purchasing intentions towards endorsed brands differ when there is a brand/celebrity association. Results provide evidence of prominent brands not appearing to need the celebrity to enhance fans' attitude and purchase intentions.

**Keywords:** celebrity endorsement; brand management; consumer behaviour; sport marketing; sponsorship.

## **Introduction**

Sponsors worldwide invested more than \$60 billion yearly until the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly in the sports sector (IEG, 2019). In the last decades, athletes have become stars and endorsement is widely considered a tool to increase communication effectiveness (Till, 2001). Searching the right celebrity is a task of great importance for marketers and a topic of great interest among scholars (Bergkvist & Qiang Zhou, 2016). Studies have mainly analysed fans' reactions to stimuli when brands are associated with celebrities (Um, 2013; Wann, Carlson, & Schrader, 1999), considering this association as a whole. Nevertheless, there is a gap when analysing the weight of the celebrity in these association, that is to say, their differential effect on triggering attitude and purchase intention of the endorsed brand, when the brand is already prominent. In the events sponsorship field, when a little-known brand is related to a famous event, its perceived image improves but, this doesn't happen when the brand is widely known (Dean, 2002).

The goal of the present paper is to move this finding to the endorsement arena and analyse the effects of celebrities associated with brands that are also very popular and prominent. In short, we aim at analysing whether celebrities are powerful enough to determine customers' attitude and purchase intentions towards the prominent endorsed brands.

## **Conceptual framework and hypotheses**

Brand prominence is considered to be one of the main factors of success of a sponsorship campaign (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Lacobucci, 2010), as it not only helps brand recall and triggers future purchase intentions (Baghi & Gabrielli, 2018), but also improves brand image (Cornwell & Humphreys, 2013). Regarding the celebrity, attractiveness and credibility have been identified as the main ones (Erdogan,

1999), as attractive endorsers foster brand recall and positive evaluations (Liu & Brock, 2011), as well as credible ones do, generally the top performing ones (Eisend & Langner, 2010). However, studies in sponsorship have proven that prominent brands with favourable brand image don't see evaluations improved due to sponsorship agreements (Dean, 2002). According to the author, the less-known ones are more likely to change due to sponsorship, as the image fans perceived is less-structured. However, the image of the well-known brands is less likely to change by sponsoring an event, given the associations people already attribute to them. Additionally, fostering strong attitudes takes time (Ajzen, 1991), then well-known brands' image shouldn't differ by the fact of being endorsed by a football celebrity, given brands' reputation developed over decades. These findings are transferred to the endorsement context of this work, aiming at seeing whether they also happen in this field.

Hence, two hypotheses arise. As per Baghi & Gabrielli (2018), *Hypothesis 1* sets that endorsed prominent brands are likely (a) to trigger positive attitudes and (b) purchase intentions. Meanwhile, according to Dean (2002), *Hypothesis 2* sets that prominent brands endorsed on celebrities do not get (a) more positive attitudes towards the brand nor (b) higher purchase intentions.

## **Method**

To test these hypotheses, we developed a quantitative research addressed to football followers of three of the biggest football clubs of the Spanish LaLiga's (Real Madrid C.F., F.C. Barcelona, and Valencia C.F.). Six endorsers were considered in the study. The two most followed players from each club were selected, being one of them a Nike endorser and the other one an Adidas endorser, the two most prominent brands in the football arena (Nielsen, 2016). Data was collected using a self-administered online questionnaire sent

to 324 individuals. Study-takers were asked first about their attitude and their purchase intentions towards the two endorsed brands before mentioning the athletes, so as to isolate the brand from the endorser. Second, they were said the celebrities who were endorsing each brand, and they were asked again about their attitude towards those brands and their purchase intentions, once they knew the brand/celebrity association. A non-probabilistic convenience sampling method was used, reaching people from football websites, and a descriptive statistical analysis was performed with univariate and bivariate quantitative techniques.

## **Findings**

Both brands obtained high scores in attitude and purchase intentions giving support to hypotheses H1a and H1b. As both brands were prominent, results were consistent with findings by Baghi and Gabrielli (2018). To know whether the attitude and purchase intentions towards the two brands were influenced by the celebrity, once the brand/celebrity association was disclosed, four one-sample t-test analyses were performed. Study takers were slightly in disagreement regarding having a better attitude and more purchase intention towards the brand once they knew the endorser, supporting H2a and H2b. Celebrities appear not to be powerful enough when the endorsed brands are already the most prominent ones, reinforcing consistency of findings by Dean (2002).

To conclude, it can be said that even if prominent brands choose to be associated to celebrities in endorsement campaigns, they don't need to, as this paper suggests brand evaluations of a popular brand are unlikely to change.

## **Limitations and suggestions for future research**

The present study is not exempt from limitations. Based on football, the most viewed in the world (Sawe, 2018), it is maybe not representative of a global scenario. It would be required to deepen in other fields so as to check if brands have such a weight over the endorsers. Moreover, basing the study on very popular brands and athletes might not advisable to isolate specific effects. Thus, adding a control variable with no prominent brands and less popular celebrities of each team would be the next step for future research.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors. The authors have not plagiarized the paper and all the sentences written within are original.

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