



Understanding Consumer Parasocial Interaction through Celebrity Images: A Conceptual Study

Sarita¹, Dr. Yadvinder Parmar^{2*}, Dr. Yogesh Kumar³

¹ Assistant Professor, University School of Financial Studies, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, Punjab, India

² Assistant Professor, University Business School, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, Punjab, India

³ Assistant Professor, Department of Social Sciences, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, Punjab, India

Corresponding Author: Dr. Yadvinder Parmar

Abstract

The current research aims to develop a conceptual framework on the celebrity-consumer relationship and its impact on consumer behaviour. Consumer images get shaped through multiple media exposures which leads to formation of one-sided relationship with celebrities known as parasocial relationship. The research highlights that potent parasocial relationships can lead to positive brand outcomes. These findings can aid marketing practitioners in building better consumer engagement promotional materials.

Keywords: Celebrity advertising, parasocial interaction, celebrity images and India

Introduction

The role of celebrities in today's world can be defined as that of referents. They have been elevated to this status owing to their professional performances and lifestyles (Choi and Rifon, 2007) ^[10]. The influence of celebrities has been greater than ever, as share of TV ads featuring a celebrity ranged from 25% (China) to 61% (South Korea) in Asian context while it was around 15% in European countries and US. In some of the Asian countries, the celebrities feature in almost half of the advertisements as in India (60% of advertisements), South Korea (60%; Choi, Lee, & Kim, 2005), and Taiwan (45%). McCracken (1989) confer that the success of the celebrity endorsements depends upon the public perception of their distinctive images.

Seno and Lukas (2007) ^[10] define celebrity image as the perceptions about an individual who enjoys public recognition as reflected by the celebrity associations held in consumer memory. Celebrities develop their own unique image in the minds of the consumer. These images are a result of the assumption a consumer makes based on the knowledge they have acquired about a celebrity over a period of time. Business practises have shown that as celebrity images develop favourably, the emerging celebrities get an opportunity to augment their endorsement fees and thereby, highlighting the significance of celebrity images in the endorsement process.

Advertisements are successful because the consumers who are in front of a television screen are relatively unwary and form pseudo-social interactions with celebrities which help to make up even if the advertisement is flat. As a celebrity makes repeated appearances across programming, it develops an intertextual web which could be associated with actual social relationships. The viewers use advertisements as a mean for creating, altering and even, ending relationships (Alperstein, 1991) ^[1].

Some consumers form imaginary relationships with celebrities due to their recurring appearances on mass media platforms (Alperstein, 1991) ^[1]. Such interpersonal interaction can be established by the audience reaction to meanings ascribed to a media persona. Horton and Wohl

(1956) ^[3] defined it as "intimacy at a distance" as individuals tend to form illusion of an interpersonal relationships with popular media figures such as celebrities and TV news broadcasters. The main reason for forming such relationships is that TV gives an illusion that media figures are talking to them even though there is no direct contact between two parties. As celebrities are popular media figures, consumers have pre established knowledge structures regarding different aspects of celebrity's lives which influence their relationship with celebrity endorsers and their attitude towards endorsement and product and services being endorsed (Alperstein, 1991) ^[1].

Celebrity-consumer para-social relationships are essential for understanding their consumption behaviour. Earlier, these relationships were formed based on their appearances on TV, Newspaper, Magazines, Radio etc. and were limited only for their publicity and promotional works. But, with the growth of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc., the chances of consumers interacting with celebrities have increased as the relationship has become more mutual (Chung and Cho, 2017) ^[2]. The depiction of celebrity images in various media platforms attracts consumers to form empathic connections with celebrities (Kim & Ko, 2010) ^[4].

Despite the evidence of literature on exploring relationship between celebrities and consumers, the focus of those research has been on celebrities content on social media; motives for following celebrities; celebrities self disclosure on social media (Chung and Cho, 2017) ^[2]; celebrity reputation. However, there has been very little information regarding how consumers identify with and build para-relationships with celebrity endorsers. There is a need for developing an understanding of the factors and processes that impacts how consumers foster parasocial interactions with celebrities. As also suggested by Chung and Cho (2017) ^[2], there is lack of understanding regarding the ways in which consumers' parasocial interaction with the celebrities impacts the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements. Thus, this study attempts to fill this research gap by investigating the relationship between celebrity images, parasocial relationships and purchase intentions.

Literature review and hypotheses

Horton and Wohl (1956)^[3] described parasocial interaction as a one sided relationship between audience and media personality. It happens when audiences are repeatedly exposed to the media personae and the audiences develop a sense of understanding, friendship and identification with them. Plethora of literature relating to parasocial interactions shows that it has been studied by using different media personalities, such as, soap opera characters (Rubin & Perse, 1987)^[9], celebrity advertisement (Alperstein, 1991), TV shopping hosts (Lim and Kim, 2011)^[1, 7], comedians, talk and radio show hosts, sports celebrities, celebrities including moviestar and pop star (Chung and Cho, 2017)^[2].

Previous research has shown that consumer-celebrity parasocial interactions have yielded positive impact on the consumer attitudes and behaviour. Lim and Kim (2011)^[7] found that the parasocial interactions of the consumers with the TV shopping hosts results in increased levels of satisfaction. Knoll *et al.* (2015)^[5] found that parasocial interactions with the celebrity endorsers resulted in positive attitude towards the products. Kim *et. al.* (2015) found that celebrity reputation plays a key role in formation of parasocial interactions and developing strong purchase intentions towards the products endorsed by them. Labrecque (2014)^[6] found that increased levels of openness and interaction with brands led to increase in parasocial interaction with brands and further leading to increase in brand loyalty and willingness to provide information. Chung and Cho (2017)^[2] found that consumer-celebrity parasocial interactions had a positive impact on the brand credibility and purchase intentions towards products endorsed by the celebrities. They used only one dimension of source credibility, namely, source trustworthiness in studying the relationship model. There are other celebrity images residing in the minds of the consumers. Therefore, there is a need to identify which of the celebrity images have been key factors in determining parasocial interaction with celebrities.

Discussion and Managerial Implications

This research provides a theoretical framework to understand the role that parasocial interaction plays in the relationships between celebrity image dimensions and outcome variable, purchase intention. Consumers develop a sense of parasocial interaction with a celebrity through their lifestyle, social responsibility and ethical actions, interaction with fans and their professional performance. The feeling of being associated with the celebrity through parasocial interaction goes beyond the relationship between celebrity and consumer and impacts consumers intentions to purchase the products endorsed by the celebrity. The results of the study help to explain the role of parasocial interaction in developing consumer-brand relationships and also provide verification of mediation.

Marketing practitioners are using every marketing platform available, namely, Radio/Magazines/TV/Internet for promoting their products. However, little academic research is available to marketers to understand the practices for fostering relationship between the celebrity and the consumer through these channels of communication. Thus, this research offers significant implications for academicians as well as marketing practitioners.

The finding provides a framework for building relationship between the celebrity and the consumer. This research extends support to celebrity endorsement literature by

establishing that consumers form parasocial interactions with celebrities and enhance their purchase intentions towards a brand endorsed by the celebrity. The academicians may use the findings to understand the underlying dimensions of the celebrity-consumer relationship and how the brands can utilize these dimensions to their own advantage. This study also adds to the parasocial interaction by uncovering the four dimensions namely, image, friendship, understanding and exciting. Thus, the current research offers a detailed account for how celebrity-consumer relationship develops in different media platforms.

The marketers may create a sense of parasocial interaction with consumers through the use of message content and cues highlighting the celebrity images. It would also help brand managers in identifying the celebrity images which are essential for developing consumer-celebrity relationship so that they can use these dimensions for evaluating the celebrity's effectiveness. Based on the findings of the study, a celebrity endorser should not only be evaluated in terms of their celebrity images but brand managers should also evaluate the quality of parasocial interaction between the celebrity and the consumers in order to select the appropriate celebrity endorser. It also provides strong implications for brand managers that a close friendship like relations built on the deeper understanding of celebrity images will have a positive impact on consumers evaluation of the brand endorsed by a celebrity.

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