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The Influence of Sports Celebrities' Brand Personality on Celebrity Identification and Consumers' Intention to Buy the Endorsed Brands

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Abstract: Celebrity endorsement is becoming very popular, especially in sports. The purpose of this study was to determine the influence of sport celebrities' brand personality on sport celebrity identification and consumers' intentions to buy the endorsed brands. A descriptive research design and quantitative method were employed in the study. The participants of the study were drawn from Generation Y consumers in South Africa. The results of the study show that the attributes of "sophistication", "sincerity" and "classic" positively influence sport celebrity identification. Furthermore, the results indicate that sport celebrity identification positively influences purchase intentions of the endorsed brands. It was found that "sophistication" is the most important factor that influences sport celebrity identification, followed by the attributes of "classic" and "sincerity". The study offers recommendations for the brand personality of a sport celebrity and suggests ways to influence sport celebrity identification and purchase intentions with regard to endorsed brands.

Keywords: sport celebrity; brand; brand personality; customer intentions; endorsed brands

1. Introduction

South Africa is a rainbow nation, represented by a population of approximately 61.53 million in 2023 (Statista, 2023). These individuals are united through sport (Yeros,

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2023). South Africa is well known as a sporting nation, featuring three big sporting codes, namely cricket, rugby and soccer (Kaplan, 2015). Among these, there are athletes that have shown outstanding performance throughout their careers. Athletes like Siya Kolisi, Itumeleng Khune and Kagiso Rabada have been rewarded with many awards throughout their careers. As such, these individuals have been considered as role models. Celebrities come from different fields, such as entertainment, politics, sports etc. A celebrity can be defined as any person who enjoys recognition from the public audience (Shank & Lyberger, 2015). The popularity of individual athletes has attracted the interest of marketers wishing to boost their marketing campaigns. This strategy is known as celebrity endorsement (Shank & Lyberger, 2015). The purpose of this study is to investigates the role of sport celebrity brand personality influence on celebrity identification and purchase intentions of the endorsed brands among consumers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Celebrity Endorsement

These days, companies interested in offering endorsement deals to celebrities do thorough background checks on celebrities, their followers and their activities on social media before offering and negotiating an endorsement deal with them (Rai et al., 2021). Celebrity endorsement is an advertisement campaign featuring a well-known celebrity, using his/her fame to promote a product (Dissanayake & Weerasiri, 2017, p. 1). Bergkvist and Zhou (2016) formally defined a celebrity endorsement deal as a mutual agreement between a well-known, recognisable athlete and a business that uses this celebrity to promote its brands. Most successful companies use celebrity endorsement as part of their marketing communication strategies, the way Nike used the popular sport celebrity Michael Jordan (Mitsis & Leckie, 2015). Such celebrities are expected to give testimonials about the brand and appear on the advertisements of the brand being endorsed (Osei-Frimpong et al., 2019).

Abimbola et al. (2010) considered celebrity endorsement to be a very important concept for marketers. Marketers benefit a lot from celebrity endorsement, in the form of financial rewards, increased brand recognition and competitive advantage of the endorsed brands (Kaplan, 2015; Abimbola et al., 2010; Voráček & Čáslavová, 2019). Celebrities are considered as human brands (Carlson & Donavan, 2013). They have unique characteristics that contribute to brand personality. Rai et al. (2021) emphasised that it is important for organisations to study the overall brand personality of the celebrity before signing an endorsement deal.

2.2. Brand Personality

Aaker (1997) defined brand personality as the human characteristics assigned to a brand. In other words, brand personality refers to consumer perceptions about a particular brand, as reflected in the human features they ascribe to it. For example, an automotive brand like BMW is perceived as sophisticated, upper class and successful (Carlson et al., 2009). Several studies strongly argue that human beings are considered as brands (Carlson & Donavan, 2013). Such branded human beings are usually the popular ones labelled as celebrities from different fields. In sports, that would, for example, be the likes of Pitso Mosimane, Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi. Having understood that celebrities are brands like any other brand, it important to understand that these individuals have brand personality as well. Marketers interested in celebrity endorsement must ensure that the personality of the celebrity to whom they intend to offer an endorsement deal matches the brand to be endorsed. Such assessment will assist in identifying a suitable celebrity to match the brand to the targeted market segment.

The concept of brand personality offers several benefits to marketers. According to Sung and Kim (2010), marketers can use brand personality to enhance their marketing campaigns and set their brands apart from those of their competitors. Brand personality plays a huge role in positioning the brand, entering new markets and introducing new offerings (Louis & Lombart, 2010; Akin, 2011; Farhat & Khan, 2011). Thereafter, consumer could be encouraged to buy new products at premium prices (Farhat & Khan, 2011). As such, the personality of a brand influences identification (Carlson & Donavan, 2013). Once a celebrity successfully endorses a brand, consumer identification usually follows.

2.3. Celebrity Identification

Celebrity identification involves selecting a popular human being from a particular field, say, Cristiano Ronaldo as a soccer star. Such identification requires taking the personal preferences of customers into account. The more popular (identifiable) the celebrity is, the bigger the tendency to adopt the values, beliefs and behaviour of that celebrity (Prameswara & Sjabadhyni, 2018). Marketers interested in employing celebrities to endorse their brands are advised to select a very identifiable celebrity. According to Prameswara and Sjabadhyni (2018), a person with a high level of identification is more likely to prompt purchases by customers. In other words, celebrity identification results in purchase intentions.

2.4. Purchase Intentions

The willingness of a consumer to buy a particular product is known as their purchase intention. Zahid and Dastane (2016) formally define purchase intention as consumers' future intent to buy particular goods and services within a short time. Consumers' purchase intentions can be negative or positive (Varela et al., 2015). Sometimes consumers may be motivated to purchase a product (positive purchase intentions), and sometimes they may be less motivated to purchase the product (negative purchase intentions). Negative purchase intentions could be brought about by many factors, such as a bad brand image, bad publicity, a higher price, or sometimes just tough competition from other similar competing products. In the situation where consumers are less motivated to buy a product, the marketers of the affected product can employ a celebrity to endorse the product as a comeback strategy. Marketers can choose such a celebrity from any of a variety of fields, such as entertainment, politics or sport. In most cases marketers prefers to select sport stars as products endorsers, for example, Michael Jordan and David Beckham (Mitsis & Leckie, 2015). Osei-Frimpong et al. (2019) argue that a sports celebrity endorser can bring about a change in consumers' negative mindsets and influence them to try purchasing the product again. Therefore, this study investigates the role of sport celebrity brand personality in influencing purchase intentions of the endorsed product among consumers.

3. Theoretical Background

3.1. Social Learning Theory (SLT)

Sports celebrity endorsement as the marketing communication stems from the social learning theory (Mitsis & Leckie, 2016). Social learning theory is a behavioural theory that posits that new behaviours can be learned by observing and imitating others (TeachThought, 2022). This would suggest that consumers can learn new behaviour through celebrity identification and celebrity endorsement. They learn something from the written recommendation or positive review of a brand by the sport celebrity. In terms of strategic marketing communication, marketers must select a sport celebrity who is a top performer in his field to ensure that authentic value is attached to the brand (Mitsis & Leckie, 2016). Thus, social learning theory is employed as a theoretical foundation of the current study.
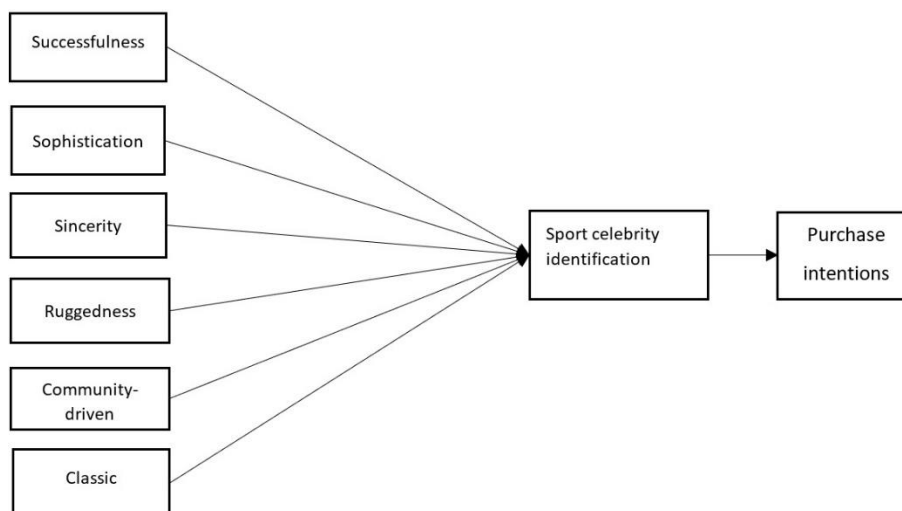
Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Model
Source: Author's compilation

3.2. Hypotheses Development

H1: Successfulness of sport celebrity positively influences sport celebrity identification.

H2: Sophistication of sport celebrity positively influences sport celebrity identification.

H3: Sincerity of sport celebrity positively influences sport celebrity identification.

H4: Ruggedness of sport celebrity positively influences sport celebrity identification.

H5: Community-driven of sport celebrity positively influences sport celebrity identification.

H6: "Classic" of sport celebrity positively influences sport celebrity identification.

H7: Sport celebrity identification positively influences purchase intentions.

4. Methodology

For the purposes of this study descriptive research was used in combination with the quantitative research method. The target group for this study was individuals aged between 18 and 24 years who resided in Johannesburg in the Gauteng province of South Africa.

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A non-probability and convenience sampling technique was used to select 202 participants. This number was deemed satisfactory for the data analysis required to achieve the objectives of the study. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from the participants. The questionnaire had five sections, namely: Section A Demographics, Section B Sport interest, Section C Sport celebrity identification, Section D Purchase intentions, and Section E Brand personality. Section C Sport celebrity identification (Swanson et al., 2003; Ha & Tuan, 2019), Section D Purchase intentions (Swanson et al., 2003), and Section E Brand personality (Braunstein & Ross 2010) contained the measurement constructs. Section C Sport celebrity identification had 10 measurement items, Section D Purchase intentions had 5 measurement items, and Section E Brand personality had 43 items (14: Successfulness, 11: Sophistication, 6: Sincerity, 6: Ruggedness, 3: Community-drivenness, and 3: Classic). In the questionnaire, participants were asked to rate each statement from each construct using a six-point Likert scale. The scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

The IBM SPSS Statistics software tool version 28 was used to analyse the data collected. The next section presents the results after data analysis.

5. Results

5.1. Reliability and Validity

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha and Correlation Coefficients

Construct	α)	F1)	F2)	F3)	F4)	F5)	F6)	F7)	F8)
Purchase intentions (F1)	.643								
Sport celebrity identification (F2)	.870	559**							
Successfulness (F3)	.939	109	236**						
Sophistication (F4)	.886	142	305**	527**					
Sincerity (F5)	.671	055	153*	582	571**				
Ruggedness (F6)	.780	045	202**	489**	552**	592**			
Community-driven (F7)	.643	098	154**	450**	403**	509**	609**		
Classic (F8)	.886	188	294**	090**	233**	411**	248**	156**	
	** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).								
	* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).								

Source: Author's compilation

Table 1 shows the results for the Cronbach alpha and correlation coefficients. All values for the Cronbach alpha are above 0.6 (Malhotra, 2010). This shows good internal-consistency reliability of the scales used in this study. In addition, there is statistical significance between all the variables. As such, nomological validity of the measurement theory is confirmed (Malhotra, 2010). The correlation coefficients presented above are not above 0.90 or higher. Therefore, there are no obvious multicollinearity issues between the variables (Hair et al., 2011). The following section gives a report on the regression analysis.

5.2. Regression Analysis

Table 2. Brand personality influencing sport celebrity identification

Sport celebrity identification	Standardised beta coefficient	T-values	P-values
Successfulness	.142	1.387	0.167
Sophistication	.317	3.270	0.001
Sincerity	-.248	-.2.211	0.029
Ruggedness	-.003	-.030	0.976
Community-driven	.050	.520	0.604
Classic	.298	3.539	0.001
Model summary			
R	Adjusted R-squared value	F	Significance level
0.432	0.154	5.762	0.001

Source: Author's compilation

Table 2 above shows the regression analysis for brand personality and sport celebrity identification. As indicated in the table, the brand personality factors are Classic, Community-driven, Ruggedness, Sincerity, Sophistication and Successfulness, entered as independent variables, while Sport celebrity identification was entered as a dependent variable. All six independent variables were significant and explained approximately 17% of the variance in sport celebrity identification (adjusted R^2 0.154). This suggests that there are other factors influencing sport celebrity identification. Only three out of six factors were found to have a statistically significant influence on sport celebrity identification, at the $P = 0.005$ level of significance. These results are presented in Table 2 above (Sophistication 0.001, Sincerity 0.029 and Classic 0.001). In addition, Sophistication ($\beta = 0.317$), Classic ($\beta = 0.298$) and Successfulness ($\beta = 0.142$) were the main factors contributing to sport celebrity identification with Sophistication ($\beta = 0.317$) being the strongest factor.

The hypothesis testing could be done from the results presented in Table 2 above. Considering that Sophistication, Sincerity and Classic most influenced the identification of sport celebrities, H1, H2 and H6 could be accepted.

Table 3 provides the results of the regression analysis for sport celebrity identification and purchase intentions.

Table 3. Sport Celebrity Identification and Purchase Intentions

Purchase intentions	Standardised beta coefficient	T-values	P-values
Sport celebrity identification	0.559	8.850	0.001

Source: Author's compilation

Table 3 shows the regression analysis results for the influence of sport celebrity identification on purchase intentions with regard to endorsed brands. Sport celebrity identification was entered as an independent variable and purchased intentions as a dependent variable. An adjusted R^R of 0.309 was obtained. This suggested that sport celebrity identification explain 31% of the variance of purchase intentions with regard to endorsed brands. Sport celebrity identification contributed $\beta = 0.559$ towards the purchase intentions of endorsed brands. In addition, the P-value of sport celebrity identification was found significant at 0.001, influencing purchase intentions with regard to endorsed brands. Therefore, H7 was accepted.

Table 4. Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses	Results	Decision
H1: Success positively influences sport celebrity identification.	0.167	**Rejected**
H2: Sophistication positively influences sport celebrity identification.	0.001	**Accepted**
H3: Sincerity positively influences sport celebrity identification	0.029	**Accepted**
H4: Ruggedness positively influences sport celebrity identification	0.976	**Rejected**
H5: Community-driven positively influences sport celebrity identification.	0.604	**Rejected**
H6: "Classic" positively influences sport celebrity identification.	0.001	**Accepted**
H7: Sport celebrity identification positively influences purchase intentions of endorsed brands.	0.001	**Accepted**

Source: Author's Compilation

6. Managerial Implications and Recommendation

The concept of brand personality has been a norm for marketing practitioners across the globe. The concept is believed to be very effective in all marketing communication strategies implemented by marketers to the target market. Several studies from the literature have proven that applying brand personality in the marketing activities of a brand adds value and produces better marketing communication with the target market. Hence, brand personality is an important topic for marketers.

Some marketers have already implemented this strategy by selecting human brands. These are individuals/celebrities who are chosen for their popularity status in their fields of specialisation. Celebrities have unique characteristics that can be associated with products. They may, for instance, be popular sport stars perceived to be successful, down to earth, sincere, tough etc. Marketers approach such athletes and offer them endorsement contracts, which results in sports celebrity endorsement. The aim is to increase the sales volumes of the endorsed brands. It is therefore important for marketers to collect information regarding the brand personality of the celebrity, to develop better marketing strategies for their brands.

The findings of this study confirm the importance of sport celebrity brand personality in influencing sport celebrity identification and the purchase intentions of the endorsed brands. Marketers must understand that not all the brand personality factors/attributes of a sport celebrity influence sport celebrity identification. In addition, marketers are advised to select a sport celebrity who shares a similar brand personality to that of their brands. Therefore, marketers must first carefully evaluate the brand personality of a sport celebrity chosen to endorse their product before finalising an endorsement contract with the celebrity. This will help them to achieve the end goal of improving marketing communication and increasing the purchase intentions with regard to the endorsed brands.

7. Limitations, Future Research and Conclusion

The results of this study are not a true reflection of the entire population, as the study employed a non-probability sampling method. As mentioned previously, data was collected from participants residing in Johannesburg only. This decision presents a research limitation. As a result, it is recommended that future studies include other provinces in South Africa. Other studies could also use qualitative or mixed qualitative and quantitative methods.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of sport celebrity brand personality on sport celebrity identification and purchase intentions with regard to endorsed brands, in order to empower marketers who are interested in closing

endorsement deals with sport celebrities. It is important for marketers to understand which brand personality factors influence sport celebrity identification. Three factors, namely sophistication, sincerity and "classic" were found to be significant. In contrast, successfulness, ruggedness and community-drivenness were found not to be statistically significant. In other words, these three factors are not predictors of sport celebrity identification. Future studies should include these six factors to be confirmed as predictors or non-predictors of sport celebrity identification. Sport celebrity was found to be a predictor of purchase intentions of endorsed brands. These results suggest that customers are willing to spend on products that are endorsed by their favourite sport celebrity. Therefore, marketers are advised to use sport celebrities in their marketing campaigns.

It important for marketers to understand the concept of brand personality, as this will inform them about the factors to consider when selecting a sport celebrity as an endorser to boost the marketing campaigns of the endorsed brands. In addition, marketers must also make sure that the personality of the brand matches the personality of the selected sport celebrity. For example, if the brand is perceived by customers as "classy", then the selected sport celebrity as an endorser must portray some traits of "classy" as well. A considered choice of celebrity will be beneficial for marketers hoping to implement successful marketing campaigns in order to generate maximum sales.

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