





Sports celebrity endorsement impact on purchase intention

Impacto do patrocinio de celebridades deportivas na intención de compra

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Abstract

This research aims to study celebrity endorsement in the context of social media when done by sports celebrities and its influence on purchase intention. Four dimensions have been studied: word of mouth, brand image, brand trust, and brand attitude. By relating these variables, we seek to answer the following questions: Will consumers be influenced by a sports celebrity that they admire to buy a product/service from a brand that they support? Will the brand's components be valued as a result of celebrity endorsement? Using a questionnaire shared on social networks, 303 valid answers have been obtained. Our statistical analysis has used a structural equation model and the results have been analyzed using SmartPLS software, which has confirmed all the model assumptions. Therefore, celebrity endorsement has an impact on brand image, word of mouth, brand attitude, and brand trust. Furthermore, it directly affects purchase intention. The effectiveness of celebrity endorsement has been verified in the context of social media and this research can thus help marketers understand the importance of using sports celebrities to endorse brands. Implications for brands have been identified, based on the research results.

Keywords: Celebrity Endorsement; Sports Celebrities; Social Networks; Purchase Intention.

Resumo

Esta investigación pretende estudar o respaldo de famosos no contexto das redes sociais cando o fan celebridades do deporte e a súa influencia na intención de compra. Estudáronse catro dimensións: o boca a boca, a imaxe de marca, a confianza na marca e a actitude cara á marca. Relacionando estas variables, pretendemos responder ás seguintes preguntas: Veranse influídos os consumidores por unha celebridade deportiva á que admiran para comprar un produto/servizo dunha marca que apoian? Valoráranse os compoñentes da marca como resultado do respaldo da celebridade? Mediante un cuestionario compartido nas redes sociais, obtivéronse 303 respostas válidas. A nosa análise estatística utilizou un modelo de ecuacións estruturais e os resultados analizáronse mediante o software SmartPLS, que confirmou todos os supostos do modelo. Por tanto, o respaldo de famosos inflúe na imaxe de marca, o boca a boca, a actitude cara á marca e a confianza na marca. Ademais, afecta directamente á intención de compra. A eficacia do apoio de famosos comprobouse no contexto das redes sociais, polo que esta investigación pode axudar aos profesionais do márketing para comprender a importancia de utilizar a famosos do deporte para promocionar marcas. A partir dos resultados da investigación, identificáronse implicacións para as marcas.

Palabras clave: Patrocinio de famosos; famososvdo deporte; redes sociais; intención de compra.

JEL Codes: M31.

1. INTRODUCTION

The major transformation in the purchasing context of social media prompted by Celebrity Endorsement (CE), supported by the development of the internet, translates into greater access to information, and nowadays consumers can easily search for substitute products, details, and prices (Shouman, 2020). Knowing that purchasing is now tremendously influenced by the information gathered in the pre-purchase phase, which online is practically infinite, it is crucial for companies to study information-seeking behavior (Bhatnagar & Ghose 2004).

Celebrity endorsement has become a standard aspect of a brand's own marketing plans, with research showing that this strategy is used in approximately 25% of advertizing in the US, about 65% in Asia (Sharma et al., 2021), and 25% in European countries (Gomez et al., 2021). Since sports celebrities already have a respected reputation in their specific field in the world of sports, celebrity endorsement is the best and fastest procedure to promote brand recognition and recallability for consumers (Shouman, 2020). Previous research has analyzed the impact of celebrity endorsement on several variables, but no model has tried to explain the impact on purchase intention via the presence of sports celebrities on social networks associated with a brand. In addition, several antecedents of purchase intention and consequences of Celebrity endorsement have been evaluated, and how they have influenced them directly or indirectly, to develop a robust explanation of the relationship between these two constructs. This study addressed a gap in the existing literature by focusing specifically on sports celebrities and how they can condition their followers in multiple aspects regarding the way they feel towards a brand, such as trust, attitude, Word of Mouth (WOM), and image.

This paper begins with a brief literature review of the topics to be addressed, followed by the construction of the conceptual model that has established the relationship between sports celebrity endorsement on social media, brand image, word of mouth, brand attitude, brand trust, and purchase intention. The questionnaire used to evaluate the veracity of the hypotheses is explained, verifying both the model and the hypotheses contained in it by some benchmark measures, using the PLS system. After data analyses, the results are discussed. The paper ends with some conclusions of the author and similarities found with previous studies, as well as some limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1. SPORTS CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

2.1.1. Celebrity endorsement

It is often vital, but challenging, to use celebrity endorsement to promote a business in the market (Dinh & Lee, 2021). Pringle (2004) states that there is a substantial return on investment when using celebrity endorsement strategies, which is about 27 times its cost. This celebrity branding is most effective when there is harmony between the celebrity's personality traits and the brand's attributes (Ahmed et al., 2012). Gomez et al. (2021) have identified an increase in the use of celebrities in advertisements all over the world. According to Charbonneau and Garland (2010), the celebrity's "fit" with the brand is even deemed crucial, as the celebrity's image complements the brand. Furthermore, it increases brand

recognition when successful, as well as the differentiation of the endorsed brand vis-à-vis its competitors (Sagar et al., 2011). Failure to strike a balance between celebrity endorsement and brand image can confuse the consumer and lead to a negative attitude toward the brand (Charbonneau & Garland, 2010).

2.1.2. Celebrity endorsement on social media

Consumers learn more about their favorite celebrities and become familiar with them through social media posts, creating in them a sense of deepened knowledge (Aw & Labrecque, 2020). Aw and Labrecque (2020) state that nowadays celebrities not only post marketing-related material on social media, but also share moments from their personal lives, often trying to integrate products they are endorsing in a natural way to make brand endorsement seem genuine. These frequent updates intensify the consumer's feeling that they know the celebrity well (Wood & Burkhalter, 2014). Thus, social media — where celebrities and consumers can interact instantly — allow for deeper and easier development of parasocial interactions with celebrities (Aw & Labrecque, 2020).

2.1.3. Sports celebrity endorsement

Sports celebrities are social influencing agents and role models whose behaviors, attitudes, and skills attract consumers, who see these celebrities as highly dynamic people with outstanding qualities (Chan, 2008). Athletes are effective as brand ambassadors, since they are often associated with a symbolic aspirational reference group (Kamins, 1990). Since sports celebrities already have a respected reputation in their specific field in the world of sports, celebrity endorsement is the best and fastest way to promote brand recognition and recallability (Shouman, 2020). According to Zhou et al. (2020), sports celebrity endorsement can affect consumers' preference for a brand. Sports celebrities also have a positive effect on consumers' purchase intentions (von Felbert & Breuer, 2020). According to Dix et al. (2010), sports celebrity-endorsed products have a 36% influence on the total weekly expenditure of Australian young adults. The younger audience is more affected by sports celebrities, but at the same time more resistant to marketing strategies (Wong et al., 2015).

2.2. CELEBRITY RESEARCH

2.2.1. Brand image

Brand image is the product of a customer's positive evaluation of a brand's attributes, which is subsequently stored in their mind (Hsieh & Lindringe, 2015). A consumer understands the value of a brand as the promise or guarantee by the manufacturer to deliver a quality product (Merz et al., 2009). When this promise fails to deliver, or is not fulfilled in its entirety, the consumer's experience associated with the brand is damaged (Pribadi et al., 2019). On the other hand, if the promise is delivered, the brand image immediately improves (Maroko & Uncles, 2008). As mentioned above, brand image is the consumer's generalized opinion and perception of the brand (Wymer, 2013). However, building brand image is a complex process and is determined by brand identity, competency, personality attitude, and association (Wijaya, 2013). Among all these factors, brand association is the only component that is always associated with external factors, such as a celebrity (Chan et al., 2013). This

association encourages a consumer, who follows a certain celebrity, to become more involved with the brand (Gong & Li, 2017) and to see the value and image of their idol attached to the brand (Chan et al., 2013). Therefore, it is expected that:

H1: Sports celebrity endorsement is positively related with brand Image.

2.2.2. Word of mouth

Online word of mouth is the sharing and exchange of information by consumers about a product or company via the Internet (Sari & Yulianti, 2019). Nowadays, word of mouth is not limited to oral communication, but it has also emerged on social platforms, such as Facebook or any other social network (Radighieri & Mulder, 2013). Brands strategically sign contracts with the right celebrities to try to spark conversations about the brand and connect with their potential customers more directly and at a larger scale (AdWeek, 2015). In this online context, negative word of mouth prevents potential customers from considering a specific brand, thus affecting its reputation and image (Pfeffer et al., 2014), since it is known that negative information generally has more impact on an opinion about a brand than positive information (Xia & Bechwati, 2008). Therefore, this impact can occur when sports celebrities are considered. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2: Sports celebrity endorsement is positively related with word of mouth.

H3: Word of mouth is positively related with brand attitude.

2.2.3. Brand attitude

Brand attitude is related to consumers' preferences and overall evaluation of a brand, which often portrays their likes and dislikes (Solomon, 2014). Clark and Horstmann (2005) state that, on occasion, celebrity endorsement can contribute to consumers' recallability and evaluation of products and brands. Through the reputation of celebrities and their experience when using a certain product or brand, the information conveyed by celebrity endorsement can influence the consumers' overall perception of the product and brand (Shouman, 2020). Previous studies have examined this construct — celebrity endorsement — regarding a product or brand (McCracken, 1989; Till & Busler, 2000), and have shown that it can create a real impact on the attributes of the product or brand in question. Therefore, we can expect that:

H4: Sports celebrity endorsement is positively related with brand attitude.

2.2.4. Brand trust

We can define brand trust as the confidence that customers have in a brand's ability to deliver on what it promises (Lin et al., 2019). Since trust is a complex construct that can be studied in a wide variety of environments, McCole et al. (2010) identify three dimensions: trust in the internet as the facilitating system for the transaction, trust in the seller/website, and trust in third parties involved (for example, payment methods, delivery systems for purchased products, logistics) (McCole et al., 2010). In the context of e-commerce, we can consider that the trust placed in the online seller is important for the consumer to accept any

risk associated with a transaction of this type (McCole et al., 2010). In the literature on trust in e-commerce, some studies prove that trust indices strongly influence consumers' intention to shop online (Gefen & Heart, 2006). Furthermore, according to Gefen and Heart (2006), lack of trust is the primary reason why consumers do not shop more often from online sellers. Online sellers' and brands' reputations are central to communicating and instilling consumer confidence in their skill, integrity, predictability, and benevolence. This reputation and the brand itself are also known as strong determinants of trust (Fang et al., 2007).

Brand image strength is determined by its stability, favorability, and uniqueness (Wang & Yang, 2010). Thus, Liao et al. (2009) state that a strong brand image can promote brand trust. 60% of new consumers of a brand are influenced by WOM (Mutinda & Mayaka, 2012). Furthermore, brand trust is established based on brand reputation and a favorable reputation can increase consumer trust, as well as enhance loyalty or purchase intention (Rittichainuwa & Mair, 2011). Thus, Scarinci and Pearce (2012) refute that WOM impacts brand trust and indirectly influences consumer behavior. Furthermore, the positive effects of WOM on consumer perceived value, which consequently influences brand trust, are evidenced (Whitfield & Webber, 2010).

Black (2009) states that to reinforce brand trust, catalysts of customer trust should be associated with brands. These trust drivers include external opinion leaders such as celebrities (Erdogan et al., 2001). A consumer evaluates the celebrity's knowledge and behavior and decides whether he/she can sustain such attributes to meet the public's expectations, including what the celebrity supports and encourages people to use (Herjanto et al., 2020). Therefore, brand trust can be influenced by several constructs, which leads to the following hypotheses:

H5: Brand image is positively related with brand trust.

H6: Word of mouth is positively related with brand trust.

H7: Sports celebrity endorsement is positively related with brand trust.

2.2.5. Purchase intention

Purchase intention can be defined as the degree to which a consumer is inclined to purchase certain products or services (Diallo, 2012). The purchase intention occurs when a customer simultaneously experiences a strong psychological state marked by longing for a product and the desire to purchase it (Lin & Lu, 2010). Purchase intention is an attitude variable that should be used to predict future purchasing of a brand's products by consumers (Raza & Zaman, 2021). According to Erkan and Evans (2018), predicting consumer behavior is important for all brands.

Brand trust encourages a stronger and more exciting relationship between consumers and brands (Xie et al., 2014). For Kim et al. (2015), the closer this relationship is, the fewer negative perceptions and the greater the consumer's tolerance toward the brand. This happens because a consumer is more willing to believe that the brand will not take advantage of them and will always deliver quality products (Herjanto et al., 2020). Additionally, Hahn and Kim (2009) state that when consumers are consistently satisfied with the products and the shopping experiences, they are more willing to rely on the brand and make future purchases. Punyatoya (2014) confirms in his study that a strong brand trust can influence purchase and repurchase intention.

Different psychological states are responsible for purchase intention (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2004). Among these psychological factors, different brand components are considered very important for the consumers (Tseng & Lee, 2013). This is because these same components are evaluation tools that help build brand attitude, which in turn produces stronger purchase intention (Herjanto et al., 2020).

When consumers want to maintain or increase their status or sense of belonging to a social circle, they are more likely to boost their own self-image by adopting a brand that has been endorsed by celebrities (Herjanto et al., 2020). These celebrities play a vital role in consumers' decisions, especially when buying expensive and/or new products or services (Shouman, 2020). Psychologically speaking, adopting a celebrity-endorsed brand reinforces consumers' identity and, in some cases, makes them feel a certain personal proximity to celebrity (Dib & Johnson, 2019), which in turn increases their self-confidence and makes their lives more meaningful (Tantiseneepong et al., 2012). This positive feeling leads the consumers to develop a more robust brand attitude (Chin et al., 2017), which in turn encourages greater brand connection (Escalas & Bettman, 2015) and produces solid brand preference (Albert et al., 2017), which ultimately increases purchase intention. Consequently, it is relevant to analyze the impact of several constructs on the purchase intention. The following hypotheses are thus formulated:

H8: Brand attitude is positively related with purchase intention.

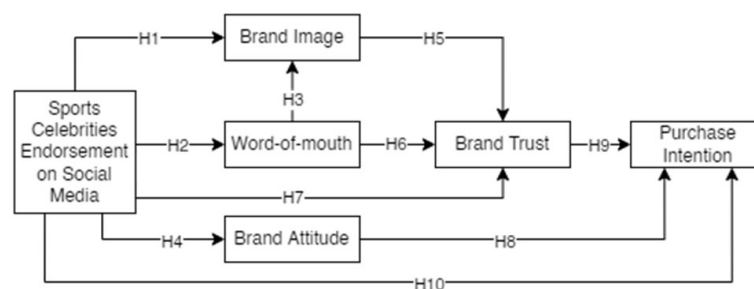
H9: Brand trust is positively related with purchase intention.

H10: Sports celebrity endorsement is positively related with purchase intention.

2.3. RESEARCH MODEL

As explained in the literature, several models have tried to explain the consequences of celebrity endorsement (Febrian & Fadly, 2021; Herjanto et al., 2020; Khan & Zaman, 2021), but there is no model to explain the impact of sports celebrity endorsement on purchase intention through brand image, word of mouth, brand trust, and brand attitude. Therefore, this research aims to understand the impact of Sports celebrity endorsement on social media and purchase intention. To this end, the following model (Figure 1) has been proposed.

Figure 1. Model of sports celebrities endorsement on social media impact on purchase intention.



3. METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

3.1. Methodology, measures, and sample

To meet the objective of the study, a questionnaire has been constructed and subsequently used as an instrument, according to the adaptation of several scales and the previous tests conducted by several authors in recent literature.

First, the scale by Wang et al. (2017) has been adapted for the measure of celebrity endorsement. They divide this construct into attractiveness, knowledge, and trustworthiness, focusing on 4 items of the total 12. This is followed by a scale for the measurement of brand image, composed of 8 closed questions in an adaptation of the study by Alić et al. (2020). These latter authors also divide this point into 3: functional image, affective image, and reputation, arguing that the product of the 3 results is brand image in its entirety. Next, to measure word of mouth, the scale by Goyette et al. (2010) has been adapted regarding the points that have evaluated its positive and negative valences, i.e., the word-of-mouth strategy and whether it is favorable or unfavorable for the brand. This scale consists of 8 items. In addition, for the following three constructs —brand attitude (8 items), brand trust (8 items), and purchase intention (9 items) —, Febrian and Fadly's (2021) scale has been adopted, and for the brand attitude items, the scale by Wang et al (2017) has been used for a more thorough measurement.

Before distributing the questionnaire, a re-test was performed with 10 people in order to address potential issues regarding the items and to identify whether any question could lead to non-response bias. The respondents stated that the questionnaire was clear: they either had no difficulty in answering or were unwilling to answer any of the questions. Furthermore, all the questions were mandatory, so all the answers obtained were completed. Additionally, some inversed scales were added to detect response bias. In the beginning of the questionnaire, respondents were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

The proposed model has been built on reflective measures and the partial least squares method (PLS-SEM), which is suitable for exploring new constructs while the theoretical foundations have yet to be established. To confirm the factorial structure of the instrument, the reliability and validity of the indicators have been determined. These indicators (reliability and validity) have been determined through some measures that have evaluated the quality of the adjustments — the Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha— and allow us to estimate the internal consistency of the model and its constructs. The values of these measures should be greater than 0.7, and some lesser values that could be accepted in the case of exploratory investigations (Marôco, 2014).

Regarding the validity of the instrument, three other measures are usually used: factor, and convergent and discriminant validity, according to Hair et al. (2012). The first case is verified when each construct is assumed as specific and is evaluated by the factorial weights of each item in relation to the construct to which it belongs. These factor weights reveal the correlation between each item and that same construct (Hair et al., 2012; Marôco, 2014). Thus, according to Hair et al. (2012) and Marôco (2014), these weights should always be greater than 0.5, and preferably greater than 0.7.

Convergent validity also allows us to see whether the items belonging to the construct are strongly related to it (Hair et al., 2012). Here, we have used as a measure the Average Extracted Variable (AVE), which is valid for values greater than 0.5.

We can also consider that the discriminant variable allows assessing whether the items of a construct differ sufficiently from one another. This is measured based on whether the square

root of the AVE (or VEM) of a construct is greater than or equal to the correlation between the two constructs that we are validating (Hair et al., 2012; Marôco, 2014). In that case, the items of the constructs differ sufficiently from one another.

A snowball strategy has been used to distribute the questionnaire via social networks and e-mails. The sample for this study has consisted of 306 subjects (n=306), but only 303 subjects have been considered valid, as 3 could not recall any partnership between brands and sports celebrities. Out of these 303, 56.8% (n=172) were male and 43.2% (n=131) were female. Regarding age distribution of the surveyed population, the vast majority (61.1%, n=185) belonged to the 20–29 age group. In addition to the predominant 20–29 age group, there was also an age group under 19 years old (10.6%, n=32) and another between 30–39 years old (16.2%, n=49). Regarding the respondents' educational level, a balance can be observed between the number of respondents with a university degree (43.9%, n=133) and those with a high school diploma (37.3%, n=113). Moreover, the third most selected response was a master's degree, with 35 responses (11.6%). When it came to demographics, a breakdown has been made according to the occupations of the respondents. As in the previous questions, the responses were influenced by the fact that it was a convenience sample and that students have been preferentially used 41.9% (n=127) and employed 37.3% (n=113).

3.2. Reliability and validity

The analysis performed here — the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)— is based on bootstrapping in Smart PLS software. This method consists of simulating many samples (in this case, 5,000) and estimating the respective model for each of the subsamples. Some measures have been calculated in the software (which are summarized in Table 1), namely: Cronbach's Alpha (α) and Composite Reliability, which define the reliability of the survey, i.e., the internal consistency and reproducibility of the measure; the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), which shows the variance of the indicators explained by the latent variable; the t-statistic (t-values) and factor loadings.

Cronbach's alpha has shown values well above 0.7. The measures of these indicators have demonstrated therefore very good reliability. As the generally accepted lower limit for Cronbach's alpha is 0.7, which can drop to 0.6 in exploratory research (Matthiensen, 2010), this measure proves good internal consistency of the test, explained by the correlation between the items.

Regarding the parameters of the Composite Reliabilities (CR) and the Average Extracted Variances (AVE), the values are also above the ones usually recommended in the existing literature. According to Hair et al. (2010), the minimum recommended values of CR and AVE are 0.7 and 0.5, respectively. However, for the good health of the test and the analysis, 4 items have been removed from the construct “sports celebrity endorsement” on social media (CE5, CE6, CE9, and CE10) and 3 from the brand attitude construct (BA5, BA6, and BA7). This has happened because the AVE values have been previously below 0.5, which was not recommended. By removing these items — which have had loadings below 0.6, and therefore have been less impactful —, the AVE values of these two variables have risen higher than 0.5, which intensifies the viability of the model. Apart from these 7 removed items, all loadings have had values above 0.6. Furthermore, the T-values are all high, which reflects the strong correlation between the items and the constructs, thus validating them.

After conducting factor analysis, discriminant validity analysis has been performed. This has been calculated through the square root of the AVEs of the indicators, as well as the correlations between them.

When the correlations did not exceed 0.85, and consequently the AVE of each variable has been higher than the correlations between it and the other constructs (Bagozzi et al., 1988), the model's validity has been supported. The first statement has been confirmed, with the highest value of a correlation being 0.772 (correlation between Brand Trust (BT) and Brand Attitude (BA)). These assumptions have been generally met, except for the correlation between BA and BT, by a derisory value (the correlation is 0.772, and AVE is 0.763). The following table contains the data described above.

Table 1. CFA results

ITEM	Loadings	t-value	Mean	CR	AVE
Sports Celebrity Endorsement on Social Media ($\alpha=0.860$)				0.891	0.505
CE1: I prefer to see advertising on social media by sports celebrities, because they are attractive.	0.671	12.120	3.73		
CE2: I think attractiveness is an important characteristic in a brand-sponsored sports celebrity.	0.669	14.041	3.80		
CE3: I feel that an attractive sports celebrity influences my purchase intention regarding the brand they support.	0.784	32.619	3.42		
CE4: I remember many brands that are backed by attractive celebrities.	0.704	16.129	3.60		
CE7: I buy a product if the sports celebrity endorsing it is an expert on the product/brand they endorse.	0.698	18.400	3.43		
CE8: I think that a brand supported by a celebrity who specializes in the product/brand they support is more reliable.	0.715	20.520	3.60		
CE11: The sports celebrity endorsing the brand is a trustworthy and reliable person.	0.685	16.220	3.69		
CE12: I think a brand that is endorsed by a trusted sports celebrity is more respectable and desirable.	0.751	23.408	3.95		
Brand Image ($\alpha=0.891$)				0.913	0.570
BI1: The product of the supported brand is of great quality.	0.819	36.267	3.97		
BI2: The product of the supported brand has better features than the products of its competitors.	0.781	25.368	3.77		
BI3: Products from competitors of the supported brand are usually cheaper.	0.580	11.161	3.65		
BI4: The supported brand is interesting.	0.789	31.432	4.08		
BI5: The character of supported brand differentiates it from its competitors.	0.735	24.724	4.05		
BI6: It is a brand that does not disappoint its consumers.	0.798	37.779	3.91		
BI7: It is one of the best brands in its sector.	0.804	37.316	4.01		
BI8: The supported brand is well established in the market.	0.707	21.277	4.31		
Word of Mouth ($\alpha=0.859$)				0.892	0.521
WOM1: I have recommended the brand.	0.838	39.288	3.63		
WOM2: I have talked about the good attributes of this brand.	0.804	29.930	3.67		
WOM3: I am proud to tell others that I am a consumer of this brand.	0.860	52.316	3.45		

ITEM	Loadings	t-value	Mean	CR	AVE
WOM4: I strongly recommend that people shop online from this brand.	0.791	27.315	3.39		
WOM5: I mostly talk positively to others about this brand.	0.687	17.231	3.81		
WOM6: I have told others positive things about this brand.	0.764	24.384	3.65		
WOM7: I mostly highlight the negative traits to others about this brand (inverse scale).	0.431	6.488	4.01		
WOM8: I have already spoken negatively of this brand to others.	0.460	6.667	4.11		

ITEM	Loadings	t-value	Mean	CR	AVE
Brand Attitude ($\alpha=0.820$)				0.874	0.583
BA1: I think that the brand that my favorite sports celebrity supports is a very good one.	0.826	38.542	3.95		
BA2: I think that the brand that my favorite sports celebrity supports is very useful.	0.762	20.068	3.94		
BA3: I have a very favorable opinion about the brand supported by my favorite sports celebrity is.	0.803	28.755	3.86		
BA4: I have bought products of specific brands that I like to use.	0.734	19.912	3.97		
BA8: Sports celebrities help me remember a brand.	0.684	17.442	3.99		
Brand Trust ($\alpha=0.874$)				0.903	0.576
BT1: This brand gives me a sense of security.	0.810	29.511	3.94		
BT2: I trust the quality of this brand.	0.812	31.773	3.95		
BT3: The services of this brand are a guarantee of quality.	0.827	37.958	3.83		
BT4: This brand is interested in its consumers.	0.747	20.099	3.84		
BT5: This brand always disappoints me (inverse scale)	0.505	7.374	4.02		
BT6: The products of this brand are a guarantee of satisfaction for me.	0.794	26.948	3.87		
BT7: I trust that this brand is honest and sincere when responding to my concerns.	0.770	28.895	3.73		
Purchase Intention ($\alpha=0.933$)				0.944	0.651
PI1: I would buy a brand's products because of the opinions of the sports celebrities I follow on social media.	0.828	36.130	3.57		
PI2: I would follow recommendations from the sports celebrities I follow on social media about brands.	0.783	28.010	3.55		
PI3: In the future, I will buy products from brands endorsed by the sports celebrities I follow on social media.	0.838	38.774	3.41		
PI4: Brands endorsed by sports celebrities easily attract my attention.	0.822	38.795	3.58		
PI5: Brands and products endorsed by sports celebrities easily come to my mind when I am making a purchase.	0.787	32.530	3.64		
PI6: If my sports celebrity endorses a brand, I will buy one of its products.	0.700	21.436	2.80		
PI7: I buy some product if I like the sports celebrity who endorses it.	0.850	54.653	3.17		
PI8: I always buy a product endorsed by my favorite sports celebrity.	0.831	43.331	3.47		

ITEM	Loadings	t-value	Mean	CR	AVE
PI9: I am happy to buy a brand endorsed by my favorite sports celebrity.	0.814	36.001	3.57		

3.3. Testing of hypotheses

Multiple regression analysis has been performed to evaluate the relationship between a single dependent variable and multiple independent variables (Gil, 2008). For this purpose, the coefficient of determination (R2) has been used. This R2 shows the total proportion of explained variation. The conceptual model with the standardized estimates (R2, Path Coefficients, and P-values) can be seen in Figure 2. This same model has revealed good quality of adjustment (SRMR= 0.064), of less than 0.08 (Hair et al., 2012).

Figure 2. The conceptual model with the standardized estimates.

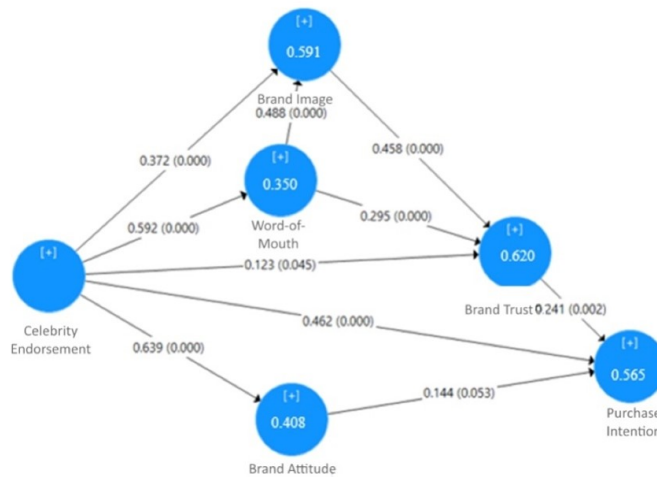


Table 2 shows the dependent variables and their respective independent variables.

Table 2. Results of path coefficient, t-value, p-value, and hypothesis status.

HX: Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Path Coefficient	t-value	p-value	Hypothesis Status
H1: Sports celebrity endorsement on social media	Brand image	0.372	7.593	0.000	Not Rejected
H2: Sports celebrity endorsement on social media	Word of mouth	0.592	14.337	0.000	Not Rejected
H3: Word of mouth	Brand image	0.488	9.394	0.000	Not Rejected
H4: Sports celebrity endorsement on social media	Brand attitude	0.639	16.338	0.000	Not Rejected
H5: Brand image	Brand trust	0.458	7.879	0.000	Not Rejected
H6: Word of mouth	Brand trust	0.295	6.205	0.000	Not Rejected
H7: Sports celebrity endorsement on social media	Brand trust	0.123	2.005	0.045	Not Rejected
H8: Brand attitude	Purchase intention	0.144	1.938	0.053	Rejected

H9: Brand trust	Purchase intention	0.241	3.123	0.002	Not Rejected
H10: Sports celebrity endorsement on social media	Purchase intention	0.462	7.901	0.000	Not Rejected

Two threshold values must be considered: if $p\text{-value} < 0.05$ and $t\text{-value} > 1.96$, then the hypothesis has been accepted, otherwise it would have been rejected (Kock, 2016). Thus, we can verify that these two values have been confirmed in all hypotheses, except for H8 (brand attitude is positively related with purchase intention), so all other hypotheses have been accepted.

Hypotheses 1, 2, 4 and 7 which evaluate the impact of Sports Celebrity Endorsement (SCE) on Social Media (SM) on brand image; word of mouth, brand attitude, and brand trust have been all accepted ($p < 0.01$ or $p < 0.05$ for H7), which shows the importance of this social media strategy and its impact on brands. Word of mouth impact on brand image and brand trust was also tested on hypotheses 3 and 6, which were both accepted ($p < 0.01$), showing that WOM also improves consumers' trust on brands and benefits the image that is thus created. H5 has tested the relationship between brand image and brand trust and has also been accepted: therefore, in the context of SCE on SM, if brand image is improved, consumers' trust on the brand also improves. Finally, the impact on purchase intention has been tested through hypotheses 8, 9 and 10. This research has shown that consumers' purchase intention tends to increase when SCE on SM increases, and so does brand trust. This result shows once again the importance of this research.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Brands use celebrity endorsement as a strategy on social media and this study has aimed to analyze its impact on several brand aspects and especially on purchase intention. The results obtained show that the online context and the sports context can and should be further explored by brands from different sectors.

In our study, sports celebrity endorsement has been analyzed and a model that explains its impacts on purchase intention and different consequences has been tested through PLS; 303 valid answers have been accepted. We have also given out a questionnaire to a sample of respondents who were mostly male, aged 20–29, and students.

Hypothesis 1, referring to sports celebrity endorsement impact with social media on brand image has been confirmed and supports previous findings by Herjanto et al. (2020), thus reinforcing the idea that the individual who admires a certain celebrity does become more involved with the endorsed brand (Gong & Li, 2017) and sees the value and image of the celebrity attached to the brand (Chan et al., 2013).

H2, which refers to sports celebrity endorsement on social media and its impact on word of mouth, supports the findings by Wong et al. (2015). Furthermore, it verifies other factors, such as 1) the facilitating role of social media in bringing sports celebrities closer to their fans and thus creating opportunities at the level of interpersonal contact (Loureiro & Sarmiento, 2018); and 2) its ability to prompt organic conversations about the brand, which is one of the main goals of the contracts signed between brands and sports celebrities, promoting connections on a larger scale and more directly with potential customers (AdWeek, 2015).

Positive word of mouth contributes to improving brand image, which has been one of the conclusions drawn by Mihardjo et al. (2019) and has been verified in our study, so H3 has also

been accepted. Previous studies have reinforced the impact of word of mouth on brand image, and the acceptance of this hypothesis in this paper, in the context of the relationship between sports celebrities and brands, corroborates the importance of companies strengthening not only the connection with their consumers, but also the precedents of the construct to achieve a stronger image.

Hypothesis 4, which states that sports celebrity endorsement on social media positively affects brand attitude, has been accepted, meaning that this result is consistent with previous research by [Khan and Zaman \(2021\)](#) and [Febrian and Fadly \(2021\)](#). Furthermore, it agrees with previous studies that have examined the relationship between these two variables ([McCracken, 1989](#); [Till & Busler, 2000](#)), which have stated that a sports celebrity endorsement can have a real impact on the attributes of the product or brand in question.

Regarding hypothesis 5, it has been verified that customer trust in a brand can influence brand image. The ability a brand has to make consumers trust it has been thus confirmed with this study, for customer trust has a positive influence on the perceived image, thus corroborating the hypotheses put forth by other authors: brand reputation is indeed a strong determinant of trust ([Fang et al., 2007](#)), therefore [Liao et al. \(2009\)](#) have stated that a strong brand image can promote brand trust.

The relationship between word of mouth and brand trust has been confirmed, and therefore H6 has been accepted, since it has agreed with the existing literature. [Wu \(2017\)](#) has corroborated this same hypothesis in his previous study, and both [Scarinci and Pearce \(2012\)](#) and [Whitfield and Webber \(2010\)](#) have stated that word of mouth affects brand trust, albeit having other indirect influences.

Hypothesis 7 has been accepted, thus corroborating the studies by [Herjanto et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Khan and Zaman \(2021\)](#), and confirming that sports celebrity endorsement on social media positively influences brand trust. As [Black \(2009\)](#) has mentioned, to increase brand trust, customer trust catalysts should be added to brand strategies, such as opinion leaders like sports celebrities ([Erdogan et al., 2001](#)). Consumers who trust a sports celebrity endorsing a brand become more trusting of that brand.

Hypothesis 8 has not been accepted; therefore this study's results contradict the existing literature. In our research, a positive impact of brand attitude on purchase intention has not been accepted, contradicting what [Khan and Zaman \(2021\)](#) and [Febrian and Fadly \(2021\)](#) have concluded. Brand attitude can indirectly contribute to purchase intention, but not directly. This shows that consumers can have a positive attitude toward a brand promoted by a sports influencer, other factors are required so that costumers' purchase intention increases.

The results regarding hypothesis 9 are in line with the existing literature; therefore it has been accepted ($p < 0.01$). According to [Herjanto et al. \(2020\)](#), some brand components serve as evaluation tools that build brand attitude, producing stronger purchase intention.

Finally, the positive influence of sports celebrity endorsement via social media on purchase intention has been confirmed, so H10 has been accepted ($p < 0.01$). This assumption is in harmony with the theories proposed by [Herjanto et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Febrian and Fadly \(2021\)](#). This implies that consumers who want to maintain or increase their status are more likely to improve their image by buying brands endorsed by celebrities ([Herjanto et al., 2020](#)).

Using PLS to estimate the model, it has been concluded that sports celebrity endorsement on social media impacts brand attitude, brand image, word of mouth, brand trust, and purchase intention. This result is consistent with the literature, as it confirms the relevance of using sports celebrities to impact brand attitude. However, this study has not been able to prove the direct influence of brand attitude on purchase intention, although an indirect effect has been found. Therefore, other constructs have proven to be more effective in influencing

purchase intention. This bridges the literature gap, not only because it focuses on SCE, but also because it explains purchase intention by using a model and a combination of constructs that have never been tested before, thus stressing the significance of working on several aspects of a brand to obtain the desired results.

Furthermore, we have evaluated the impact of the consequences of celebrity endorsement on purchase intention, and we have found a strong direct impact. The impact of brand attitude on purchase intention has not been proven in this study; although SCE may not have a direct impact on sales, it has proven that it clearly has had an impact on brand attitude, and brands can benefit from it when it is positive.

Our research has confirmed that using sports celebrities as brand endorsers can help brands achieve their goals, so this strategy should be included in brands' portfolios of digital marketing strategies. It has confirmed in particular the relevance of sports celebrity endorsement on social networks by celebrities as it increases purchase intention. This result is important for companies, since they can clearly determine how to invest in their digital marketing strategies, and how to develop partnerships with famous sports celebrities, since it can increase sales and also brand awareness, brand trust, brand image, word of mouth, and brand attitude. If one or several of these variables are significant to a brand, safe investments can be made and there can be more economic growth.

This study also highlights the relevance that respondents attribute to the opinions of their favorite sports celebrities; therefore this result should be taken into consideration by Marketing and e-Business professionals. Companies with lower budgets can invest in this strategy if they can find someone with the right fit for the brand's positioning.

This study has performed research on a sample of 303 valid responses, and we have obtained interesting results, but no generalizations can be made. Conducting this research with a larger and more representative sample might help consolidate the conclusions that have been drawn or clarify some results. The demographic separation of the sample could have been more uniform and broader, so that different multi-group analyses could be performed; the compared groups could have been more balanced in terms of the number of respondents. Further research might also compare brands and analyze which other factors impact purchase intention, such as market share.

Another suggestion would be to perform this study in other sociocultural contexts — in other countries, for example. The same model could be used to analyze other types of celebrities, and the results could then be compared. Finally, other consequences of SCE could be added to the model, or purchase decisions could be tested instead of purchase intention.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization, F.M.; data curation, F.M.; formal analysis, F.M. and I.V.P.; investigation, F.M.; methodology, F.M. and I.V.P.; software, F.M.; supervision, I.V.P.; validation, I.V.P., J.D.S. and P.B.P.; writing—F.M., I.V.P., J.D.S. and P.B.P.; writing—review & editing, I.V.P., J.D.S. and P.B.P.

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