

Chapter 18

Celebrity and Influencer in a Fan Economy: Unfolding the Fans' Roles in Enhancing Endorsement Effects

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ABSTRACT

Celebrity endorsement (CE) constitutes a popular marketing strategy. A large body of research and practices recognize the salience of celebrity traits such as credibility and attractiveness in enhancing endorsement effectiveness. According to these approaches, celebrity fans are at the receiving end of the marketing strategy, and they function primarily as brand purchasers. Their varied roles in enhancing CE are less understood. Aided by the proliferation of social media, fans are connected nationally and globally to form not only a formidable force but also a talent pool. Together, they play an increasingly important role in the CE process. This chapter investigated the changing role of celebrity fans and their contributions. Both traditional celebrities and social media influencers were examined. In both cases, the fans are active shapers of the endorsement process. This is a recent development, where the celebrity, their fans, and the endorsed brand are forming a co-creation platform. The implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Celebrity Endorsement

Celebrity endorsement (CE) has been a popular advertising strategy over the past five decades. About 25% of today's ads deploy celebrities as their core appeal (Elberse & Verleun, 2012; Sliburyte, 2009). In some Asian countries such as China, the rate is even higher at 70% (Hsu & McDonald, 2002). The popularity of this practice suggests that CE is an attractive and highly effective advertising strategy. Nevertheless,

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its ubiquity has led some critics to wonder if the overuse of CE in some industries such as fashion and cosmetics has reduced celebrities to “simply wallpapers” in these ads (Roberts, 2009). Given the different perspectives and opinions, it is not surprising that there is a vast literature aimed at understanding the workings and effects of CE. Such an understanding would allow marketers to take advantage of this strategy’s strengths and at the same time reduce its weaknesses that may lead to advertising wastage.

There are three widely recognized approaches in the CE literature, namely, source credibility, affect/image transfer, and image congruence (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016). These approaches emphasize the characteristics of the celebrity such as their credibility and attractiveness as source factors that can exert positive CE effects. Additionally, the “fit” between characteristics of the celebrity and the advertised product or brand provide another factor that enhances CE influences. While these approaches have generated much insight on the research topic, together they have paid limited attention to the role and involvement of celebrity fans. It is presumed under these approaches that celebrity fans are passive and play a limited role during the CE process.

Celebrity Fans

The lack of recognition of celebrity fans’ varied roles in CE may be a result of three reasons. First, celebrity fans’ sometimes over-the-board attitudes and behaviors have fascinated and irked the general public. This image of obsessed and hysterical fans has led to a perceptual bias against fans in popular imagination (Doss, 1999). Second, there is a sizable literature within fandom studies that examines celebrity fans’ extreme behaviors (e.g., stalking and impersonation) and their pathological state (Kahr, 2019; Maltby, McCutcheon & Lowinger, 2011; McCutcheon, Lange & Houran, 2002). These studies within the pathological tradition have inadvertently perpetuated the popular imagination of fandom with its excessive behaviors. Third, unlike the direct relations between brand and brand fans, or between celebrity and celebrity fans, the relationship between celebrity fans and their effects on an endorsed brand is less direct. Thus, while there are studies that have shown brand fans to be a brand asset (Acton, 2018; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Russo & Gregori, 2017), the effect of celebrity fans on brands remains under-explored.

The objective of this chapter is to investigate this research issue by tracing the roles that celebrity fans play and their contributions to the CE process. The author draws on theory strands in CE to provide the conceptual framework of this investigation. In addition to the three aforementioned CE approaches, the author draws on the relational approach to investigate the roles of fans, when they become connected, and networks on social media (Hung, 2014). Further, recent research shows that there is a diversity of celebrity fan segments with different motives and behaviors (Jia, Hung & Zhang, 2018; 2020). While some fans are overly obsessed with their idol, many others hold positive parasocial relationships with the celebrity. These fans engage in “healthy” celebrity-worship behaviors that allow them to fulfill their entertainment, belonging, and aspirational needs and at the same time, provide benefits to the endorsed brand (Hung, 2014).

There are three events of note that mark the celebrity fans’ changing roles of engagement over the past decades: the pre-social media era, the current social media era, and the emergence of influencers. While celebrity fans played a limited role prior to the prevalence of social media, they become active as they connect virtually and engage in behaviors that contribute to CE effects. Further, the emergence of influencers provides their following of fans with a highly interactive platform to engage with both

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