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Celebrity endorsements, self-brand connection and relationship quality

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The extant literature on celebrity endorsement effects largely focuses on the endorsement effects on consumer evaluations of the endorsed brand. The current study extends the literature by assessing the impact of endorser credibility on two consumer-brand relationship-oriented outcomes — brand relationship quality and consumer self-brand connections. Additionally, the self-brand connection is positioned as a partial mediator of the effect of endorser credibility on relationship quality. A conceptual model is developed and estimated on a sample of 535 Generation Y (youth) consumers from India. The hypotheses are supported and the model demonstrates acceptable fit to the data. Overall, the present study introduces a relationship-building perspective to the celebrity endorsement literature. The results suggest that celebrity endorsers possess the ability to provide meaningful self-definitional benefits to consumers as well as cultivate enhanced relationship quality with the endorsed brands, thus contributing novel insights into celebrity endorsement dynamics.

Keywords: celebrity endorser credibility; self-brand connection; relationship quality

Introduction

Celebrity endorsements represent a multi-billion dollar industry globally, and continue to be used regularly as part of marketing campaigns (Eisend and Langner 2010; Kelting and Rice 2013). A reason for their continued usage is that celebrity endorsers possess symbolic and aspirational associations (Escalas 2004) that are readily transferred to brands that they endorse (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). Brands with such added associations are able to generate high visibility and persuasive impact in the market, generally culminating in greater levels of advertisement and brand recall (Stafford et al. 2002). Academic research reveals that a major determinant of celebrity endorsement effects is consumer-perceived credibility associated with an endorser (Amos et al. 2008; Ohanian 1990), representing a dominant paradigm in the endorsement literature (Stafford et al. 2002). Endorser credibility, as typically comprising consumer perceptions of a celebrity’s attractiveness, expertise with the endorsed product and trustworthiness (Ohanian 1990), is generally positively associated with greater persuasiveness of the delivered message (Erdogan 1999), enhanced brand information recall (Speck et al. 1988), endorsed brand evaluations (Stafford et al. 2002), as well as consumer-based brand equity (Spry et al.

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Despite advancements in examining the effects of endorser credibility on consumer behavior, the celebrity endorsement literature provides relatively limited insights into the influence of endorser credibility on certain critical aspects of consumer behavior that are relevant to brand marketing. Two such aspects that are the focus of the current investigation are consumer–brand relationships and the consumer self-brand connection.

The marketing discipline has adopted a relationship-based paradigm whereby building long-term consumer–brand relationships with consumers is considered vital to long-term business success (Grönroos 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002). However to date, explicit empirical investigations into celebrity endorsements effects on consumer–brand relationships has been limited to indirect support in the trade literature. For instance, celebrity endorsements have shown to improve consumers’ emotional engagement with an endorsed brand, culminating in stronger consumer relationships with the endorsed brand (Yelin and Kinnear 2012). Similarly, practitioners also stress the need for the endorsement process to be able to resonate with the intended target audience (Cahal 2012), thereby implying the need for investigating a relationship-building role of the endorsement process.

From a theoretical standpoint, development of a consumer relationship with brands serves the purpose of providing functional and emotional benefits such as enabling consumers to look and feel better, as well as providing an opportunity to behave consistently with valued ideology (MacInnis et al. 2009). Brands by virtue of fulfilling such emotional and hedonic needs are increasingly being viewed as relational partners by consumers (Fournier 1998). For firms, development of consumer–brand relationships favorably impact valued consumer outcomes, such as enhanced positive word-of-mouth, brand loyalty, brand forgiveness and involvement in brand communities (MacInnis et al. 2009). Given the importance of consumer–brand relationships to consumers and firms alike, and the extensive use of celebrity endorsements, it is worthwhile to investigate the influence of endorser credibility on the strength of consumer–brand relationships, i.e., relationship quality (Grégoire et al. 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002). We define relationship quality as perceived by consumers as their trust in and commitment to a brand, along with the perceived social benefits gained from the relationship. Theoretically, the current study contributes by extending the scope of endorsement effects from brand-related outcomes to relationship-orientated outcomes. From a managerial perspective, the current investigation has implications for using celebrity endorsers as facilitators of long-term relationships with consumers.

The second aspect investigated in the current study is the potential impact of celebrity endorsements on the consumer self-brand connection. The construct of self-brand connection was first introduced by Escalas and Bettman (2003) who define it as the extent to which a consumer integrates a brand into his or her self-concept. The construct is relevant to understanding celebrity endorsement effects since consumers use celebrities as reference groups for constructing and redefining their desired self-identities (Escalas and Bettman 2005). Literature on self-concept theory (Belk 1988; Sirgy 1982) and meaning-transfer models (McCracken 1989) supports this logic. Consumers actively engage in the process of self-identity creation, and purchase of products and brands helps to address such self-definitional needs (Belk 1988). Furthermore, brands endorsed by celebrities can facilitate the transfer of cultural meaning as the meaning of a brand for consumers ultimately draws from the culturally constituted world (McCracken 1989) and the celebrity acts a conduit of meaning transfer to the brand. Consumers in turn use this shared meaning as a resource (Holt 2002) to construct a more individualized meaning (McCracken 1989), which is vital to fulfillment of self-definitional needs (Eisend 2011).
and Langner 2010; Escalas and Bettman 2013), resulting in formation of self-brand connections.

Additionally, investigation of self-brand connection as an outcome of the endorsement process helps address a vital issue in the advertising literature. A perplexing concern typically raised in the context of celebrity endorsements is that despite consumers being able to recall a particular celebrity-based advertisement, consumers are unable to recall or relate to the advertised brand (Keller 2013; Rossiter and Percy 1987). This situation raises questions about the effectiveness of an ad campaign. Therefore, within an endorsement-type advertising scenario, experts have highlighted the need for the creation of stronger links between consumers and an endorsed brand per se (Van Kuilenburg et al. 2011; Zdravkovic and Till 2012; Wang and Muehling 2012). More recently, in a large practitioner-initiated multi-national study of brand consumption behavior, it was revealed that self-identification with a brand is a vital factor leading to brand preference among consumers (Sbarbaro et al. 2011; Van den Bergh and Behrer 2011). Despite possessing theoretical appeal and practitioner relevance, empirical investigations into the impact of celebrity endorsements on consumer self-brand connection are only beginning to emerge in the literature. For instance, Escalas and Bettman (2008) as cited in Escalas and Bettman (2013) observe that well-liked celebrity endorsers lead to formation of self-brand connections among consumers. The present study extends this work, addressing a vital gap in the literature by empirically examining the impact of endorser credibility on the self-brand connection, representing the second contribution of the current study. Furthermore, we argue that the effect of endorser credibility on brand relationship quality may materialize via two pathways. Endorser credibility is likely to have direct influence on relationship quality, as well as indirectly via impacting a self-brand connection. Thus, a self-brand connection acts as a partial mediator of the influence of endorser credibility on relationship quality. The current study represents an attempt to examine such effects under a holistic framework of celebrity endorsement effects, empirically examining the proposed effects using structural equation modeling. The conceptual model of the current study is presented next.

The conceptual model

The conceptual model (Figure 1) is developed to address the core issue of the present research – how do celebrity endorsements impact consumers’ brand relationship quality? A starting point in model development is to understand and conceptualize endorser credibility – the prime endorser characteristic driving subsequent consumer behavioral effects. With origins in source credibility theory (Hovland et al. 1953), endorser credibility receives substantial investigation in the literature as a major determinant of consumers’ endorser-initiated behavior in the marketplace (Amos et al. 2008). Initially conceptualized as being composed of perceived trustworthiness and expertise of a source (Hovland et al. 1953), the construct was later expanded in the celebrity endorsement domain by Ohanian (1990) who investigated it as a three-dimensional construct representing consumer evaluations of a celebrity endorser’s level of trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness. Ohanian’s (1990) conceptualization of endorser credibility is adopted in the present research. Trustworthiness refers to the honesty and integrity and the degree of confidence associated with an endorser (Erdogan 1999; Ohanian 1990). Some experts claim that trustworthiness of a source is a critical component of credibility in the persuasion process (Perloff 2010). Expertise is a consumer perception of knowledge, experience or ability associated with an endorser with the product being endorsed (Erdogan 1999).
The expertise associated with a source is found to be positively associated with attitude change (Ohanian 1990) as well as enhanced persuasive impact (Erdogan 1999). Finally, the attractiveness dimension captures consumer perceptions of physical appeal of an endorser (Ohanian 1990). Physical appeal of a communicator (endorser) facilitates enhanced receiver (consumer) attention to message arguments, leading to favorable attitude change (Erdogan 1999). The focus of the current research is on understanding the effect of endorser credibility on relationship quality, which is hypothesized next.

**Endorser credibility and relationship quality**

Consumers tend to be generally attracted to celebrities (Thompson 2006) and to the objects associated with them (Radford and Bloch 2013) as celebrities represent repositories of cultural meaning that is valued by consumers (McCracken 1989). This added meaning is attached to the brands that are endorsed by admired celebrities, thereby imbuing the endorsed brands with added value as perceived by consumers (Richins 1994). For instance, a wrist watch endorsed by Leonardo DiCaprio is likely to be valued more by consumers as a result of the added meaning (say, elegant and trustworthy) being associated with the product. Specifically, if an endorser is perceived as credible, that is, perceived as attractive, trustworthy and an expert in the use of the endorsed product, such perceptions are readily transferred to the endorsed brand (McCracken 1989). Moreover, as a result of such endorser-infused value, consumers may begin to form emotional bonds or relationships with an endorsed brand (Fournier 1998). Such relational bonding may begin to manifest over time as various relationship-oriented behaviors, such as development of enhanced trust in the brand (Arantola 2002), a greater commitment towards maintaining the relationship (Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995) and enhanced perception of deriving social benefits (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002). Additional support for the expected relationship is derived from reference-group theory (Bearden and Etzel 1989) that states people compare themselves to reference groups to whom they look for guidance for their own

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Figure 1. The conceptual model.
Note: Endorser-brand fit and consumer satisfaction are specified in the model as control variables.
behavior. For consumers, celebrities represent aspirational reference groups (Escalas 2004), and consumers refer to the normative practices of celebrities and develop values and standards for their own behavior (Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995; Bearden and Etzel 1989). Shaping one’s behavior in line with that of a reference group entails a dual benefit for consumers. On one hand, there is a fulfillment of an aspirational motivation, and on the other hand, a reduction of psychological risks (Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995). Therefore, we argue that consumers will engage in favorable relationship behaviors with celebrities that are perceived as credible (Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995; Schiffman et al. 2011). Thus:

**H1:** Endorser credibility has a direct positive impact on relationship quality.

**Endorser credibility and self-brand connection**

The self-brand connection is an emergent concept in the marketing literature (Moore and Homer 2008), and is defined as the extent to which a consumer integrates a brand into his or her self-concept (Escalas and Bettman 2005). The concept of self-brand connection is related to the self-identity theory (Belk 1988), the central premise of which is that consumers use brands as tools for creation and maintenance of self-identity (Belk 1988). Despite being related to the concept of a consumer’s sense of self, the current study considers the self-brand connection construct as conceptually distinct from ‘brand-engagement in self-concept’ (BESC) (Sprott et al. 2009). The distinction is important as the two constructs pertain to consumers’ sense of self and the role of brands in relation to consumers’ sense of self. The difference lies primarily in the levels of abstraction of the two constructs. Sprott et al. (2009) define BESC as ‘consumers’ propensity to include important brands as part of how they view themselves’ (92). Where BESC is a *generalized* consumer tendency to incorporate brands as a part of the self-concept, self-brand connection is *brand-specific* in its level of abstraction and conceptualization. This distinction is also acknowledged by Sprott et al. (2009). Additionally, a self-brand connection is individual-specific in nature. Celebrity endorsers imbue brands with symbolic associations and consumers use the brand symbolism to shape their self-concept and behavior (Cutright et al. 2013). The strength of this highly individualized self-definitional meaning is captured by the construct of self-brand connection (Escalas and Bettman 2013).

Given that celebrities represent symbolic and aspirational reference groups for consumers (Escalas 2004), a positive relationship is expected between endorser credibility and self-brand connection. Support for this logic is derived from meaning transfer dynamics (McCracken 1989) and the value-expressive function of reference groups (Bearden et al. 1989). As stated previously, celebrity endorsements are a mechanism by which meaning from the culturally constituted world transfers to brands (McCracken 1989). However, brands not only possess a shared (common) culturally derived meaning, but also a highly individualized meaning that is created by and is unique to a consumer (Alan et al. 2008). The self-brand connection concept allows consumers to ascribe their own meanings to a brand (Escalas and Bettman 2013), which is vital to fulfillment of their self-definitional needs (Belk 1988; Escalas and Bettman 2013). For instance, consider a consumer who aspires to be as successful and confident as Roger Federer, who endorses Gillette razors. In order to appropriate Federer’s meanings to construct his own identity, this consumer may engage in tennis and use Gillette razors. As a result, he may form a self-brand connection with the endorsed brand. Furthermore, celebrities by virtue of their reference group status provide a value-expressive function to consumers, meaning that consumers are motivated to enhance individual self-concept by identifying themselves with the celebrity reference
group (Bearden et al. 1989). Therefore, it is expected that when a brand is endorsed by a celebrity who is perceived as credible, it is likely perceived by consumers as salient to fulfillment of self-definitional needs. Consumers are thus likely to emulate a celebrity endorser’s behavior and use the endorsed brand as a resource to craft an individual self-meaning (Holt 2002), increasing the likelihood of integrating the brand as a part of their self-concept. Emergent empirical evidence supports this theorization, whereby well-liked celebrity endorsers were observed to facilitate self-brand connections among consumers (Escalas and Bettman 2008 as cited in Escalas and Bettman 2013).

Endorser trustworthiness, i.e., dependability, honesty, reliability and sincerity (Ohanian 1990), may help reduce the psychological risk associated with incorporating the brand into the self-concept. Endorser expertise may boost the consumer’s belief that the brand will perform well, possibly increasing the consumer’s confidence enough to incorporate the brand into her/his self-concept. Endorser attractiveness, i.e., likeability, familiarity and similarity (Amos et al. 2008), may affectively draw consumers closer to the brand. Erdogan’s (1999) findings that endorser credibility leads to greater persuasiveness may create positive associations with the brand. Enhanced brand information recall due to endorser credibility (Speck et al. 1988) may indicate that the brand is more salient to the consumer. Finally, endorsed brand evaluations (Stafford et al. 2002) may lead the consumer to be more open to incorporating the brand into his or her self-concept. Thus, the following hypothesis is formulated:

\[ H_2: \] Endorser credibility has a direct positive impact on self-brand connection.

**Self-brand connection and relationship quality**

It is expected that the self-brand connection is positively associated with relationship quality. As outlined in the preceding section, development of a self-brand connection directly fulfills self-definitional needs of consumers (Belk 1988; Sirgy 1982). Once such vital self-concept motivations are addressed, consumers may begin to develop a favorable relationship with the brand. Consumers may begin to develop greater trust in the particular brand as it has served a vital purpose of self-identity creation (Wang and Bloemer 2008). In addition, consumers may commit to using the brand in the future in order to maintain the desired sense of self (Albert et al. 2013). Furthermore, a perception of social benefits may materialize as a result of possible enhancement in endorser-inspired social self-image (Schiffman et al. 2011). Therefore, when consumers perceive a brand as fulfilling self-definitional needs, they are likely to engage in long-term relational behavior with such brands (Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995). Additional theoretical support for this logic is drawn from the theory of reciprocal action (Li and Dant 1997), a central tenet of which is that consumers often develop a strong sense of commitment towards a firm in response to its perceived relationship-building efforts. The theory has been validated across diverse consumer–brand relationship contexts (Kim et al. 2008; Yoon et al. 2008), and can be extended to the present context. Thus, consumers who perceive that a brand provides them with valuable self-identity-defining benefits are likely to reciprocate by engaging in long-term relational behavior with the brand, enabling them to continue to derive such self-definitional benefits (Dolich 1969). This dynamic likely enhances the importance and quality of the relationship for the consumer (Brodie et al. 2013). Hence:

\[ H_3: \] A self-brand connection has a direct positive impact on relationship quality.

Thus, we posit that endorser credibility influences consumer–brand relationship quality through two routes. The first is a direct effect of endorser credibility on relationship
quality as per theoretical mechanisms outlined for Hypothesis H1. The second route is mediated through the self-brand connection.

**Impacts of endorser-brand fit and consumer satisfaction**

Consumer—brand relationship quality may be influenced by a number of factors other than endorser credibility and a self-brand connection. Two factors that likely play an important role in developing the consumer—brand relationship are endorser-brand fit and consumer satisfaction. Therefore, these are used as covariates in the current study. Consumer-perceived endorser-brand fit is expected to positively influence perceived relationship quality. Endorser-brand fit is defined as a degree of consumer-perceived similarity between the image of the celebrity endorser and the brand being endorsed. Our conceptualization of endorser-brand fit draws upon cognitive categorization mechanism that consumers use to make sense of the consumption environment (Cohen and Basu 1987). Categorization theory explains how people group various stimuli in their environment into discrete categories so as to make sense of the consumption environment, thereby enhancing information processing efficiency (Cohen and Basu 1987). In a celebrity endorsement scenario, consumers would likely judge fit (or similarity) between an endorser and a brand using naïve ‘mental explanations’ that are not based on much scientific foundation (Murphy and Medin 1985, 290). Ultimately, endorser-brand fit is judged based on the degree to which the pairing ‘makes sense to the perceiver’ (291). Such mechanism of consumer assessment of fit between entities receives widespread support in the branding and advertising literatures (e.g., Bridges et al. 2000; Zdravkovic and Till 2012). Given that celebrities personify consumers’ diverse aspirational associations, enhanced endorser and brand fit potentially leads to favorable relational behaviors on the part of consumers such as the development of a greater trust in and relationship commitment towards the endorsed brand. The endorser-brand match-up framework observes a positive relationship between perceived endorser-brand fit and favorable outcomes such as enhanced brand attitude (Misra and Beatty 1990) and purchase intentions (Kahle and Homer 1985). A similar positive effect on relationship quality is expected. Therefore, the following hypotheses are formulated:

**H4:** Endorser-brand fit has a direct positive impact on relationship quality.

Consumer satisfaction with a product (service) is also likely to play an explanatory role in the hypothesized model. Hence, we include satisfaction as a covariate in the current study. Satisfaction is defined as a customer’s overall evaluation of the performance of an offering to date (Gustafsson et al. 2005). Conceptualized as relative (dis)confirmation of expectations (positive or negative), the literature outlines a prominent role of overall satisfaction in affecting consumer relationships (Anderson and Mittal 2000; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002). Thus, a positive influence of satisfaction on relationship quality is suspected. Additionally, satisfaction likely exerts an impact on consumer self-brand connection. Brands are tools for consumers to differentiate themselves and to express their personality and individuality (Escalas 2004). However, such creation and maintenance of the desired self-image necessitates that consumers be satisfied with a brand’s performance (i.e., a brand either meets or exceeds expectations), because non-performing brands carry negative associations of incompetence, resulting in a possible dissonance. Thus, consumers would not like to associate their self-identities with poorly performing brands (Markus 1977). Hence:
**H5:** Consumer satisfaction has a direct positive impact on relationship quality.  
**H6:** Consumer satisfaction has a direct positive impact on self-brand connection.

**Research design**

A self-administered cross-sectional survey was used to collect data from a convenience sample of 620 users of telecom services. Data were collected from a management institute in New Delhi, India, in 2012. The respondents, enrolled in business courses, were contacted in classrooms at the beginning of lecture time for the purpose of the survey. The academics were given explicit instructions by the research team regarding how to brief the respondents prior to the start of the survey. The specific research objectives were not revealed to the respondents so as to limit social desirability responding. The respondents were instructed to attempt the survey on their own without consulting other participants. Data collection was completed within three weeks of first contact. The respondents all belong to the Generation Y (youth, 18–25 years old) cohort. The young consumer segment (under 25 years old) constitutes roughly half of the Indian population (Euromonitor 2007), and is considered as a major consumer segment for telecoms services (Evalueserve 2009). The segment is speculated to be a driver of future growth in the telecom services sector (Chaturvedi 2011). The survey was targeted at respondents belonging to middle-income households, which represent the biggest consumer group in the country (Ablett et al. 2007).

**Stimulus design**

The study was conducted in the telecom services industry. We chose this context for primarily two reasons. First, the telecom service sector in India represents one of the dominant adopters of celebrity endorsers (Indiantelevision.com 2009), thereby being suitable for the current study. Second, India is one of the fastest growing mobile phone markets in the world (Euromonitor 2007), with approximately 890 million subscribers nationally (Telecomcircle.com 2012). Furthermore, in New Delhi, where the data for the current study were collected, there are approximately 42 million active subscribers (Telecomcircle.com 2012).

Around three-quarters of the market share of the Indian telecom services is controlled by five brands, viz., Airtel (20% share), Reliance (17% share), Vodafone (16% share), Idea (11% share) and BSNL (11% share) (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India 2011). Three of the top five brands (i.e., Reliance, Idea and BSNL) were offered as choices to respondents. Airtel was not offered as a choice in the current study since it is endorsed by multiple celebrity endorsers, thereby potentially introducing confounding effects of different endorsers. Vodafone was excluded since its current advertising campaign in India uses spokes-characters (called Zoo Zoos), study of which is beyond the scope of the current research (see Garretson et al. 2012 for a discussion). The three brands that are offered as choices to respondents are endorsed by Indian movie celebrities, namely, Hritik Roshan (for Reliance), Abhishek Bachchan (for Idea) and Deepika Padukone (for BSNL), respectively. The respondents were asked to base their responses on the endorser-brand combination for a service brand that they use most of the time (i.e., their primary service brand).

**Questionnaire, measurement and analysis**

Several steps were taken to enhance the validity of the study. The survey questionnaire was structured and formatted to minimize the potential of common method bias...
Construct items are operationalized clearly (consistent with their usage in the literature) in order to reduce the risks of ambiguity and item-demand characteristics. Item intermixing was not adopted, thus eliminating a potential source of common method bias. Finally, respondent anonymity was ensured, and the questionnaire was broken up into sections, design aspects that help to minimize common method bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003). A post hoc test of common method bias was conducted to test its severity in the data. Also, the context of the survey pertains to consumer assessment of their telecom service brands (a general topic), which does not seem to be susceptible to a social desirability bias.

We use previously validated scales to operationalize the constructs, measured on multi-item five-point Likert scale type format. Relationship quality is the dependent variable in the present study, and is investigated for the first time in the context of celebrity endorsements. In the relationship marketing literature, relationship quality is operationalized variously in the literature, ranging from unidimensional measures (Goodman and Dion 2001) to multi-dimensional ones (Grégory et al. 2009), with no consensus to date regarding its operationalization. In the present study, relationship quality is conceptualized as a fully reflective second-order construct, defined as consumer perceptions of trust in a brand, commitment towards maintaining a relationship and perceptions of social benefits received from a brand. The first dimension, trust, is defined as consumer perception that a brand is dependable and can be relied on to do the right thing (Ganesan 1994). The second dimension, relationship commitment, is defined as consumers’ tendency to maintain the relationship (Aurier and N’Gaola 2010). Perception of social benefits received (the third dimension) is defined as consumer perception of personal recognition by a brand (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002). This conceptualization of relationship quality is consistent with prominent conceptualizations adopted in the literature (Grégory et al. 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002). Moreover, relationship quality is conceptualized as a fully reflective construct, that is, reflective at the first- and second-order levels (referred to as a Type-I construct by Jarvis et al. 2003). Endorser credibility is operationalized as a second-order fully reflective construct (Ohanian 1990), that is, measured using five items each for perceived attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness as dimensions. Self-brand connection is measured using four items derived from Escalas and Bettman (2003). Finally, three items from Till and Busler (2000) operationalize endorser-brand fit, and overall satisfaction is measured using three items derived from Aurier and N’Goala (2010).

Structural equation modeling is used as the analytic tool. A measurement model analysis is first conducted for the purpose of assessing the validity of the proposed factor structure, followed by an analysis of the hypothesized structural model. Model fit is assessed using four indices as recommended by Bagozzi and Yi (2012). These are Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker and Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR).

Data analysis and results

Preliminary analyses

The raw data were first cleaned. Records with substantial extreme and mid-point responses, and substantially large missing values, were eliminated. A total of 535 usable responses were available as the usable dataset. Missing values were less than 3% of the data, and were substituted using a full-information maximum-likelihood estimation.
procedure (Enders and Bandalos 2001). The usable sample adequately meets the 10:1 respondent-to-item ratio (Hair et al. 2009). We first examine the extent of common method bias in the data using the single-factor test suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003). We compared the five factor measurement model of the current study with a common-methods factor. The single-factor model elicits a significant Chi-square ($\chi^2 = 3363.42$, degrees of freedom = 350, $p < 0.01$) with unacceptable fit to data (CFI = 0.58, TLI = 0.55, SRMR = 0.120 and RMSEA = 0.126). The research measurement model, on the other hand, is significantly different from and better fitting than the single-factor model (i.e., $\chi^2 (334) = 583.10; p < 0.01; \text{CFI} = 0.96, \text{TLI} = 0.96, \text{SRMR} = 0.039$ and RMSEA = 0.037), meeting the model fit cut-offs suggested by Bagozzi and Yi (2012). Thus, no serious threat of common-method bias is suggested in the data. Furthermore, these results indicate that the model fits the data well.

### Descriptives

The means, standard deviations, inter-construct correlations and square root of average variance extracted (AVE) scores are reported in Table 1. The construct means range from 3.09 to 3.67 (out of 5.0), and corresponding standard deviations range from 0.84 to 0.98. Inter-construct correlations are positive and significant ($p < 0.05$) for all pairs of constructs. The only exception is the correlation between perceived endorser attractiveness and consumer satisfaction that is significant at the 10% level.

### Construct validity

We examine construct reliability and validity using traditional tests. Standardized factor loadings, reliability estimates and AVE scores are reported in Table 2. All Cronbach alphas are 0.75 or greater for all the constructs, exceeding the traditionally accepted level of 0.70. Similarly, composite reliability estimates are above 0.75 for all constructs. Convergent validity is demonstrated as factor-loadings are highly significant and load strongly on respective constructs. The AVE score for each construct is greater than 0.50, further supporting convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Furthermore, discriminant validity is evidenced as the square-root of AVE (refer to Table 1) for any given

Table 1. Descriptives, bivariate correlations and square root of AVE estimates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>TWR</th>
<th>ATT</th>
<th>EXP</th>
<th>FIT</th>
<th>SBC</th>
<th>BT</th>
<th>COM</th>
<th>SOC</th>
<th>SAT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness (TWR)</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.76</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Attractiveness (ATT)</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.36*</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Expertise (EXP)</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.49**</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Endorser-brand fit (FIT)</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.36**</td>
<td>0.19**</td>
<td>0.48**</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-brand connection (SBC)</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>0.09**</td>
<td>0.25**</td>
<td>0.25**</td>
<td>0.78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brand trust (BT)</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.27**</td>
<td>0.14**</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
<td>0.49**</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment (COM)</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.17**</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.32**</td>
<td>0.57**</td>
<td>0.65**</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social benefits (SOC)</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.32**</td>
<td>0.59**</td>
<td>0.59**</td>
<td>0.52**</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction (SAT)</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.17**</td>
<td>0.11*</td>
<td>0.14**</td>
<td>0.24**</td>
<td>0.62**</td>
<td>0.60**</td>
<td>0.60**</td>
<td>0.60**</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: **Significance at 0.01 level; *significance at 0.10 level. The square root of the average variance extracted is given in italics along the diagonal.
Table 2. Reliability and validity estimates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct and items</th>
<th>Standardized loading (sig.)</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>AVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trustworthiness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Endorser] is trustworthy</td>
<td>0.80**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Endorser] is honest</td>
<td>0.77**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Endorser] is reliable</td>
<td>0.72**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attractiveness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Endorser] is good looking</td>
<td>0.85**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Endorser] is attractive</td>
<td>0.77**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Endorser] is sexy</td>
<td>0.75**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expertise</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Endorser] is an expert</td>
<td>0.71**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Endorser] is knowledgeable</td>
<td>0.70**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Endorser] possesses experience</td>
<td>0.70**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Endorser-brand fit</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is match-up</td>
<td>0.76**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is similarity</td>
<td>0.73**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination is appropriate</td>
<td>0.71**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-brand connection</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider my telecom brand as a part of myself</td>
<td>0.85**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a special bond with my telecom brand</td>
<td>0.78**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel a personal connection with my brand</td>
<td>0.77**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My brand is an important indication of who I am</td>
<td>0.71**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brand trust</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The [brand] is honest in addressing my concerns</td>
<td>0.83**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cares about its customers</td>
<td>0.81**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can count on it to do what is right</td>
<td>0.74**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship commitment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proud to be a customer</td>
<td>0.80**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intend to maintain an indefinite relationship</td>
<td>0.77**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The brand has a lot of personal meaning</td>
<td>0.75**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social benefits</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relation based on brand’s ability to make me feel important</td>
<td>0.78**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relation based on brand’s ability to know my needs</td>
<td>0.77**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relation based on brand’s ability to build a one on one connection</td>
<td>0.75**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Performance satisfaction</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did the right thing when I signed up</td>
<td>0.84**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied with my service</td>
<td>0.80**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My choice is a wise one</td>
<td>0.72**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Alpha refers to Cronbach’s alpha reliability estimate; CR refers to composite reliability estimate; AVE refers to average variance extracted. **Significance at 0.01 level.
construct is greater than the standardized correlation coefficient of that construct with all other constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Moreover, the measurement model analysis using a confirmatory factor analysis demonstrates acceptable fit to data, as noted previously. These results suggest that adequate construct validity can be assumed in the study.

We would like to clarify that we collected data on the original 15-item Ohanian (1990) scale (i.e., five items for each of the three dimensions). However, preliminary measurement analysis revealed that two items of each of the dimensions load weakly (i.e., standardized factor loading < 0.70) on the respective construct. For instance, items ‘endorser is classy’ and ‘endorser is elegant’ load inadequately on the attractiveness dimension. Similarly, items ‘endorser is dependable’ and ‘endorser is sincere’ load weakly on the expertise dimension. These items were eliminated from further analyses, resulting in the use of a shortened version of the Ohanian scale.

**Structural model analysis and hypotheses tests**

The structural model analysis elicits a significant Chi-square statistic (i.e., \( \chi^2 \) (335) = 583.12, \( p < 0.01 \)). Other fit indices reveal an acceptable fit to data (CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.96, SRMR = 0.039 and RMSEA = 0.037). The individual hypotheses are examined next. Table 3 reports the parameters of the structural model. As expected, endorser credibility exerts a direct significant impact on relationship quality (standardized beta coefficient, \( \beta = 0.16 \), C.R. = 2.48, \( p < 0.05 \)). Thus, Hypothesis H1 is supported. Endorser credibility exerts a direct significant impact on the self-brand connection (\( \beta = 0.16 \), C.R. = 3.40, \( p < 0.01 \)), eliciting support for Hypothesis H2. Relationship quality is significantly impacted by self-brand connection (\( \beta = 0.19 \), C.R. = 3.10, \( p < 0.01 \)), thus supporting Hypothesis H3.

Endorser-brand fit exerts a direct significant influence on relationship quality (\( \beta = 0.15 \), C.R. = 2.92, \( p < 0.05 \)), supporting Hypothesis H4. Overall satisfaction exerts a strong significant impacts on relationship quality (\( \beta = 0.64 \), C.R. = 9.33, \( p < 0.01 \)), supporting Hypothesis H5. Finally, Hypothesis H6 was supported as satisfaction exerted a significant impact on the self-brand connection (\( \beta = 0.70 \), C.R. = 13.15, \( p < 0.01 \)). Overall, the estimated model explains 56% of variation in self-brand connection and 82% variation in relationship quality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesized path</th>
<th>( \beta )</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>95% C.I.</th>
<th>Bootstrap ( p )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1: Endorser credibility ( \rightarrow ) Relationship quality</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.01–0.32</td>
<td>0.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2: Endorser credibility ( \rightarrow ) Self-brand connection</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>0.05–0.26</td>
<td>0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3: Self-brand connection ( \rightarrow ) Relationship quality</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.05–0.31</td>
<td>0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlled influences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4: Endorser-brand fit ( \rightarrow ) Relationship quality</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>0.01–0.29</td>
<td>0.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5: Satisfaction ( \rightarrow ) Relationship quality</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>9.33</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>0.52–0.75</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6: Satisfaction ( \rightarrow ) Self-brand connection</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>13.15</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>0.59–0.78</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \( \beta \) refers to the standardized beta coefficient; CR refers to critical ratio; n.s. refers to ‘not significant’. *** \( p < 0.001 \). Bootstrap \( p \) refers to the bootstrapped significance level (using 5000 bootstrap samples).
Assessing parameter stability

In order to assess stability of the parameter estimates in the preceding analysis, a bootstrapping procedure in structural equation modeling was carried out. Bootstrapping is a form of resampling in which the original data are repeatedly sampled with replacement for model estimation. Multiple sub-samples of the same size are randomly drawn with replacement from the original sample and data for the parameter distributions for each of the spawned sub-samples are generated (Byrne 2010). Parameter stability is assessed through an examination of bootstrap standard errors, bias estimates (i.e., difference between the bootstrap estimates and the original estimates) and an examination of the bias-corrected confidence intervals (Byrne 2010). In the current study, bootstrapping is conducted using 5000 samples with 95% confidence intervals. The analysis reveals bias (i.e., the difference between original and bootstrapped estimate) values are all below 0.01. More importantly, the 95% confidence intervals for the parameter estimates exclude a zero point (refer to the last two columns of Table 3). These results suggest that the parameters of the estimated model are stable, implying plausibility in a much larger sample than the one used in the current study (Byrne 2010).

Discussion and implications

The present study adds a consumer–brand relational perspective to the celebrity endorsement literature. Specifically, the impact of endorser credibility was modeled on consumer-perceived relationship quality with the endorsed brand. The results suggest that endorser credibility exerts a direct significant impact on consumer-perceived relationship quality with an endorsed brand. A theoretical implication of our study pertains to extending the conceptual scope of celebrity endorsement effects. Traditionally, such effects are modeled on brand evaluations such as brand attitudes (Silvera and Austad 2004) and brand equity (Till 1998). We add relationship quality as an outcome of celebrity endorsement effects, thereby complementing the literature on consumer–brand relationships (Fournier 1998). A managerial implication of the finding is that celebrity endorsers can be used as relationship building and enhancement tools. In an era of media fragmentation, a credible celebrity may be able to break through the clutter and directly facilitate long-term relational ties with a brand’s consumers.

The self-brand connection is introduced as another outcome in the nomological network of celebrity endorsement effects. A desire to maintain and enhance one’s self-concept is considered as a core consumer motivation (Sirgy 1982). The present study supports the notion that celebrities are repositories of cultural meaning, aspects of which are used by consumers to construct a desired sense of self (Holt 2002). The results of the present study reveal that endorser credibility directly impacts consumers’ self-brand connection. A theoretical implication of this finding is that endorsement effects have more of a multi-faceted impact than previously envisaged. Credible celebrity endorsers are thus likely to engage the brand as part of long-term self-image development. A practical implication of the finding is that brand managers can consider using celebrities not only to enhance or expand brand awareness, but to engage with consumers on a much deeper self-concept level. A practitioner need for facilitating deeper connections with consumers has been recently highlighted in the sponsorship/endorsement literature (Wang and Muehling 2012; Zdravkovic and Till 2012). Consumer beliefs and perceptions that resonate in relation to the self-concept are thus likely to be more enduring than simpler awareness effects. Additionally, the results support the logic that celebrities can potentially play...
a more meaningful role in brand (re)positioning that is based on consumers’ aspirational values. A case in point is that of the US automobile brand Lincoln that is attempting a comeback in the domestic luxury auto sector (Black 2008). Lincoln’s use of the celebrity rap artist Common for the brand’s Navigator model is designed to attain deep connections (engagement) with the target market. A clear implication for brand managers is that advertisements featuring celebrity endorsers must communicate deeper self-concept-related benefits, possibly through the use of a transformational ad executional style and symbolic visuals. However, choice of a celebrity endorser per se is also of critical importance. Practitioners suggest that celebrity-brand fit is a vital ingredient to attaining favorable outcomes and are likely to materialize only if credible celebrities endorse a brand (Pringle 2012; Thompson 2010). In the present study, although celebrity-brand fit was specified as a control variable, its positive impact on relationship quality is consistent with the literature on the effects of endorser-brand fit (e.g., Misra and Beatty 1990).

Furthermore, self-brand connection was hypothesized as a partial mediator of the effect of endorser credibility on relationship quality, which is empirically supported in the analysis. Theoretically, the partial mediation via self-brand connection supports McCracken’s (1989) cultural meaning transfer mechanisms that underline endorsement effects. Specifically, the study supports McCracken’s logic of transference (through a celebrity with mass appeal) of culturally constituted shared meaning into a more individualized meaning for consumers in the form of self-brand connection. Thus, culturally shared meaning created through credible endorsers not only directly leads to improvement in consumer perception of brand relationship quality, but also indirectly via self-brand connection — that is the shared meaning first translates into individualized meaning for consumers, which subsequently influences relationship quality. From a managerial perspective, the partial mediation result implies that investments into recruitment of credible celebrity endorsers entail a multiple return on investment. In the first instance, consumer experience enhanced relationship quality with the endorsed brand because of the credible reference group associations. Second, consumers ascribe a highly individualized meaning to the brand which further impacts relationship quality.

Limitations and future research

The findings of the current study should be accepted in light of its limitations. The current study is conducted using Indian consumer responses to local celebrities, thereby limiting the scope of our study’s external validity. However, given the global similarity of Generation Y (youth) segment’s consumption of the celebrity culture, this limitation is not likely to seriously impact the external validity of the findings. Future investigations should, nonetheless, consider replicating the research model internationally in order to achieve greater generalizability. The use of convenience sampling represents potential limitation of the study though the demographic profile of the respondents closely resembled those of the target population. A limitation pertains to the potential influence of self-generated validity, which arises when a respondent’s answer to a survey question is influenced by the preceding questions (Feldman and Lynch 1988), likely influencing the correlation estimates. However, self-generated validity is not likely to be a serious threat as critical questions were separated by sub-headings and page-breaks in the questionnaire. More importantly, items measuring relationship quality and self-brand connection were listed on separate pages. Future research may consider using multiple methods for measuring antecedent and outcome variables to further mitigate self-generated validity concerns. Furthermore, the current study investigates the hypothesized relationships at a given point
in time, thus limited with regard to capturing a change in perceptions. Consumer perceptions of endorser credibility may change over time as a result of a celebrity’s behavior in personal (but well documented) life. Future research should consider examining the research model using a longitudinal design to model such changes in consumer perceptions of relationship quality over the course of a celebrity’s involvement as an endorser of a brand. Finally, the present study investigates direct effects, some of which are likely moderated by consumer behavioral variables. For instance, consumer perception of the level of a celebrity’s social connectedness (i.e., high versus low) may moderate the impact of endorser credibility in relationship quality. Celebrities that are perceived as being highly involved in the social media circuit may facilitate a greater transfer of aspirational values from the celebrity to the endorsed brand, and vice versa.

Conclusion
The current study shows that the credibility of a celebrity endorser may play a crucial role in strengthening the quality of the relationship between the consumer and the brand. We show that this link occurs directly and through the consumers’ incorporation of the brand’s meaning into their self-concept. These results enhance our understanding of the role of celebrity endorsers and the mechanisms by which they effectively promote a brand.

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Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References


