

WHAT INFLUENCES MOST: CELEBRITIES, INFLUENCERS, OR MASCOTS?

**INVESTIGATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF
DIFFERENT ENDORSERS IN CONSUMER
COMMUNICATION**

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What influences most: Celebrities, Influencers, or Mascots? : Investigating the effectiveness of different Endorsers in Consumer Communication

Abstract:

This thesis aims to bring insights into the field of endorser marketing. Celebrity, mascot, and influencer endorsements, especially with the rise of social media, are very popular and often-used by marketers in B2C marketing. Endorser marketing is believed to provide a higher degree of appeal, attention, and customer recall ability, in comparison with when an endorser is absent. In this study, a quantitative experiment (n = 366) was completed through a survey, where participants were shown an advertisement featuring one of the three endorsers mentioned, accompanied with questions regarding purchase intention, brand attitude, brand recall, to find out which endorser is the most effective in consumer communication. We also investigate how this consumer behavior is mediated through the source attractiveness and source credibility model, and whether the fit between the product and endorser matters. Our results showed that the mascot and the celebrity of the used design had greater levels of purchase intention and greater levels of brand attitude than the influencer of the design. All mediators except one had no statistical support. Celebrities were also perceived as the most trustworthy out of the three endorsers.

Keywords:

Endorsement, Endorser Marketing, Influencer Marketing, Celebrities, Mascot, Consumer Behavior, B2C Marketing, Source Credibility Model, Source Attractiveness Model, Product Match-Up Hypothesis

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1. Introduction

Brands compete daily to catch the attention of consumers in the competitive world of marketing. Endorsements are an effective way to enhance advertisements, and a company's presence in the public (Erdogan, 1999; McCracken 1989). Nowadays, there are several endorser options, and research is still inconclusive on which is the most effective in generating a positive effect on consumer behavior. Picking an appropriate spokesperson for a product or service is important, but it can be a difficult decision.

Many studies have confirmed that celebrity endorsements significantly increase advertisement effectiveness (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Erdogan, 1999). However, many companies today increasingly turn to social media influencers to endorse their brands (Marwick, 2015). Present studies show that influencers may be perceived as more credible endorsers compared to celebrities, due to their commercial forms and authentic settings (Russell, C. A. & Rasolofoarison, 2017; Zhu & Tan, 2007). Their success is also often based on devoting themselves to a particular interest, and may therefore be perceived more as an expert (Erz & Heeris Christensen, 2018).

Over the years, human endorsers have been associated with a wide range of undesirable behaviors. Till and Ship (1998) found that negative information about a spokesperson can damage product evaluation through the associated link between celebrity and brand. One example is Kanye West, who has recently posted a series of anti-semitic tweets, and consequently, Adidas (a leading sportswear company) has cut ties with the famous musician which together held a lucrative collaboration accounting for 8% of the company's total sales (CNN, 2022). Another example is the Swedish influencer Margaux Dietz, who recently posted a clip of an unconscious man outside of her apartment. This led to strong reactions online, and the influencer has since lost thousands of followers, as well as a termination of collaboration with several brands (SVT, 2022). These examples highlight the risk of brands relying on human endorsers.

Mascots on the other hand would be more or less immune to these types of problems, as one has control over how the mascot is portrayed. A study by Malik & Guptha (2014) states that the use of mascots in marketing has been on the decline for the past few years, however, some companies have recently gone viral by putting their mascots front and center on the social media platforms such as TikTok. Mascots including Duolingo's Duo the Owl, and Mucinex's Mr- Mucus have become a great success by leaning into memes and trends on the app (Ypulse, 2022; Bain 2022). Duolingo's owl has nearly 5 million followers on TikTok, with posts obtaining as many as 28 million views. A study by Aaker (1997) also shows that consumers show no difficulties in assigning a personality to inanimate brand objects as if they were human characteristics, which calls for further examination of mascots.

1.1. Background

1.1.1. Development in celebrity endorsements

Celebrities have endorsed products since the late nineteenth century (Erdogan, 1999), and the emergence of cinema extended the scope of endorsement as an advertisement technique. However, the present day popularity of celebrities is largely due to the growth of commercial radio in the 1930s and commercial television in the 1950s (McDonough, 1995). The supply of celebrities was limited, but started to increase in the late 1970s (Thompson, 1978). Today, celebrity endorsements have become a central part of many marketing campaigns (McCracken, 1989).

1.1.2. Influencer marketing

Digital technology has given rise to a raft of different media and opportunities for advertisers to reach their audiences (Baines et al., 2019). In the last 10-15 years, smartphones and other electronic devices equipped with digital applications and services have been introduced to the market, and have increasingly become more integral to people's lives, with daily usage from customers (Baines et al., 2019). Marketing has since become more digitized, with a focus on social media, where it can have a huge impact on a company's reputation, development, and even survival (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Social media has fundamentally changed the lifestyles of individuals, especially our social lives and identities. This has led to the rise of certain social media users with a substantial network, and the possibility to influence other users through their content (Kim et al., 2022), also known as "social media influencers". The International Advertising Bureau (2018) defines social media influencers as: "social media users who have the potential to create, engage, drive conversation, and/or sell products/services with the intended target audience; these individuals can range from celebrities to more micro-targeted professional or nonprofessional peers". Influencer marketing is based on the concept of social media marketing, i.e. marketing in social media (Baines et al., 2019), and has attracted increasing research attention in the last couple of years. Many studies have compared the impact of social media influencers and celebrities, however, findings have remained inconclusive.

1.1.3. Mascots in marketing

The definition of anthropomorphism is "the tendency to imbue the real or imagined behavior of non-human characteristics, motivations, intentions, or emotions" (Epley et al., 2007).

Brand mascots (also known as brand icons, advertising ambassadors, brand-equity or trade characters, and non-celebrity spokes-characters) and cartoon media characters (also called celebrity spokes-characters) is another type of endorsement that has been present since the late nineteenth century (Malik & Guptha, 2014), and can portray a

broad range of fictional or animated objects, and human anthropomorphic beings. Examples of such mascots include the Nesquik rabbit, Ronald McDonald, and Tony the Tiger. A mascot is the intellectual property of a company, and can be used for commercial licensing, merchandising, and franchising, to build a foundation for brand loyalty. Marketing practitioners also believe that the use of mascots often has important implications for brand equity, trust, preference, brand awareness, as well as purchase intention (Garretson & Burton, 2005).

1.2. Problem Area

The rise of social media has enabled endorser marketing to be spread in new ways (Baines et al., 2019; Kietzmann et al., 2011), not only for influencers, but for endorser marketing as a whole. Celebrities also frequently share content on social media platforms, and some mascots even have their own accounts on certain platforms. As a result, customers are starting to learn more about the faces behind the brands, and even create parasocial relationships with them (Bond & Calvert, 2014; Colliander & Dahlén, 2011).

The effectiveness of traditional celebrity endorsements has been widely investigated, however, with the rise of social media and social media influencers, frictions have emerged. Recent studies have stated that influencer marketing is more effective (Schouten et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2019; Erz & Heeris Christensen, 2018; Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Zhu & Tan, 2007), but the field of influencer marketing is relatively understudied. Therefore, more validation is needed to fully understand and support which endorser marketing strategy is the most effective.

Influencer endorsement is also evolving, and becoming more multifaceted. A few years back, the concept was relatively new, however, fast forward to today, we have social media influencers reaching the same status and fame as celebrities (Gräve, 2017). Furthermore, mascots have recently picked up steam in social media marketing, but this has not caught much academic interest for further research yet. Therefore, we believe that the field of endorser marketing can also benefit from further investigation into the development in the field, and cross-comparison between these endorsers.

1.3. Purpose and Research Question

This thesis aims to examine which type of endorser in B2C marketing is the most effective in influencing consumer behavior (i.e., purchase intention, brand attitude, and brand recall). Three types of endorsers will be used: celebrities, social media influencers, and mascots. We will also investigate the mechanism behind this process, and compare different factors regarding credibility, attractiveness, and fit with the product.

The following sub-questions are formulated: Depending on the endorser, how does it influence...

- consumer behavior (i.e., purchase intention, brand attitude, and brand recall)
- the consumer perception of attractiveness (similarity, familiarity, and likeability)
- the consumer perception of credibility (trustworthiness and expertise)
- the consumer perception on expertise and trustworthiness based on product-endorser fit

Our ambition is that this thesis might bring new insights to filling the research gap that has emerged with developments in the industry, and bring new valuable insights into the field of endorser marketing. Selecting an endorser may imply significant investments and risks to a brand, and therefore, we hope that this study can potentially lead to prominent managerial implications for selecting the most effective endorser in B2C marketing.

1.4. Limitations

Our study primarily focuses on the Swedish market, as different norms and cultures may to some extent affect the results. This will also allow the participants to be manipulated by the advertisements more effectively, as they are more likely to recognize all endorser types.

We limited the manipulation to a picture format, as this is common on social media, magazines, and in public areas (such as subways, bus shelters, etc). Our stimuli consisted of images of an endorser next to a product, resembling a basic advertising format, and enabling experimentally valid comparisons between endorser types. It may on the other hand not be representative for all possible formats of advertisements. For example, influencers often endorse a product by integrating it into a larger message in a social media post (such as a vlog or a more subtle post). However, this may not be as common with celebrities or mascots. Thus, a relatively simple advertisement yielded such effects to show the power of different types of endorsements in a neutral and controlled manner, without other stimuli distracting the respondent.

2. Theoretical Framework

Here we discuss the chosen models and theories which we will base our experiment and hypotheses on. We will present a holistic view of the different endorsers by providing different perspectives.

2.1. Endorsements

2.1.1. Endorser Marketing

Endorsement marketing is a common advertising and marketing strategy which uses a character to build a stable brand image, and has been adopted by many companies (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Erdogan, 1999; Friedman & Friedman, 1979). As the endorser's popularity and positive image is associated with the product or brand being advertised (Erdogan, 1999), it consequently increases the effectiveness of advertisements: recognition, brand recall and purchase intention (Till & Busler, 2000; Friedman & Friedman, 1979). However, deciding on the right endorser is difficult (Erdogan, 1999), and is often discussed in marketing literature.

2.1.2. Social Media Influencers

Influencer marketing is a marketing strategy that uses social media influencers. After gaining the attention of potential consumers, influencers may then establish engagement with a product or a brand (Brown and Hayes, 2007). Over the last five years, influencer marketing has grown as a prominent strategy for consumer communication. According to an industry report, over 75% of brand marketers planned to invest in influencer marketing in 2022 (Geyser, 2021). Furthermore, in 2021, the global market size of influencer marketing was estimated to be \$13.8 billion, and is expected to grow to \$16.4 billion in 2022.

Academic research investigating the impact of influencer marketing and brand perception is also increasing. Several recent studies have compared social media influencers to traditional celebrities, and concluded that influencers are more effective at creating positive consumer evaluations and product attitudes (Schouten et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2019; Erz & Heeris Christensen, 2018; Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Zhu & Tan, 2007).

Based on past research of influencers being superior to celebrities in endorser marketing, and the recent significant growth of influencer marketing, we hypothesize that:

H1: Influencer endorsers will lead to higher purchase intention, brand recall, and brand attitude compared to the celebrity and mascot endorsers.

Djafarova & Rushworth, (2017) have also found that the success of influencers may be attributed to their perception of being more approachable and relatable. Several studies support that influencers make the consumer feel a more positive attitude towards the endorsed brand, a stronger social presence, and feel more envious of the influencer compared with a celebrity (Schouten et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2019). Influencers are also more similar to an everyday person (Sprinklr, 2021), as they have more relatable characteristics and backgrounds. They also often address their followers on their social media platforms, which connotes closeness and makes followers see them as friends (Erz & Heeris Christensen, 2018). Therefore, the possibility for followers to interact with influencers may strengthen the feeling of similarity (Schmidt, 2007).

As influencers are more relatable and are perceived to be more approachable, we hypothesize that:

H2a: Influencer endorsers will lead to a higher perceived similarity compared to celebrity and mascot endorsers.

Present studies also argue that influencers may be perceived more as experts than celebrities (Erz & Heeris Christensen, 2018). This is because influencers are known to share user-oriented product reviews and recommendations on their social media channels. Furthermore, endorsers in an authentic setting are perceived as more knowledgeable compared to commercial forms of endorsements (Russell, Cristel Antonia & Rasolofoarison, 2017). A study by Uzunoğlu & Kip, (2014) also explains how bloggers seem more competent and knowledgeable than other endorsers, as their posts demonstrate that they have tried the product themselves, and hence understand the product and its features better, compared to a celebrity endorser (Evans et al., 2017; Zhu & Tan, 2007). However, a growing amount of this content is sponsored by companies, and many customers are also aware that endorsers get compensation for their posts (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Influencers' success is also often based on a devotion to a particular interest (e.g. beauty), and becoming specialized in that area. This makes it more likely for influencers to be perceived as knowledgeable on products in their domain, compared with traditional celebrities (Erz & Heeris Christensen, 2018; Balog et al., 2008).

In sum, based on influencers' user-oriented content, experience with the products, and specialization in a specific area, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H3a: Influencer endorsers will lead to a higher level of perceived expertise compared to celebrity and mascot endorsers.

2.1.3. Celebrity Endorsement

A celebrity endorser is defined as an individual who possesses public recognition, and utilizes this recognition by promoting a product or a service (McCracken, 1989). By bringing prestige and attention to brands, celebrities may encourage higher recall (Erdogan, 1999).

A celebrity may be famous for various reasons, such as being highly talented or skilled in a certain area (e.g. sports, film, music), being socially desirable, or having entertaining personal attributes, which in return leads to a wide appreciation by the public. However, sometimes it is also enough to appear a lot in the media to become a celebrity, i.e. becoming famous for being famous (Ghersetti, 2001), such as the Kardashian family. Celebrities also participate in various events and contexts, which can further increase publicity and reach (McQuail, 2005). This leads to celebrities having substantial social networks, as well as admirers who are interested in everything about their personal lives, including what products they use (Hashaw, 2019).

People also enjoy gossiping and evaluating celebrities' behavior, as it makes us evaluate events with our own beliefs, and by making downward comparisons, we tend to feel better about ourselves as well. It also helps us learn and feel more connected to our social network (Robbins & Karan, 2020). Furthermore, celebrities are an integral part of our culture, for instance, when Tiger Woods was cheating on his wife, the social norm of not cheating on your spouse was further emphasized (Psychology Today, 2009). Therefore, the above can lead to celebrities becoming even more familiar to people, by talking about them, and spreading information about them on social media (Robbins & Karan, 2020).

With celebrities' public recognition and their wide following, we hypothesize the following:

H2c: Celebrity endorsers will lead to a higher familiarity compared to influencer and mascot endorsers.

2.1.4. Mascots

Mascots have been referred to as a meeting point for communication between products and consumers (Lury, 2004). In a comparative study by Malik & Guptha, (2014) it was found that brand mascots are as efficient as celebrity endorsers, and a strong brand mascot can be even more successful than a celebrity. They can lead to a higher recall, are more cost-efficient, and also convey higher brand loyalty (Malik & Guptha, 2014). As mascots can often be the intellectual property of companies, they will never endorse other brands without some type of legal agreement, and therefore, mascots may appear

more trustworthy and loyal to the endorsed brand (Malik & Guptha, 2014; Keel & Natarajan, 2012).

Brand mascots have also proven to be a successful marketing strategy as they may be customized and sculpted, and therefore, their image, actions, and personality can fit better with the brand's values and ideals (Keel & Natarajan, 2012). This means that companies can have more control over how consumers perceive the endorser and brand, as with human endorsers, you cannot be completely sure that they fit with the brand. Negative publicity about human endorsers may also impact consumer evaluation of endorsed brands (Till & Shimp, 1998). However, with mascots, you eliminate the risk of scandals, thus increasing trustworthiness (Malik & Guptha, 2014). Furthermore, as mascots do not receive any financial compensation for their endorsements, trustworthiness may also increase.

In sum, a mascot could be perceived as more trustworthy as they are non-human, and can be sculpted by a company. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3b: Mascot endorsers will lead to a higher level of trustworthiness compared to celebrity and influencer endorsers.

Marketing researchers also advise managers to endow brand mascots with values and personalities similar to their audience to build lasting bonds of loyalty, brand advocacy and commitment (Delbaere et al., 2011). As mascots are non-human, they also do not experience events such as aging. This means that mascot features you endowed on day 1 will remain even after decades, allowing for strong associations of likeability to be built over time. Endowing personalities to mascots is also done with more ease compared to human endorsers, who you may need to compromise with at times. For example, Tony the Tiger would not complain about the content or be busy when he is needed at Frosted Flakes promotional events (Chu, 2016), leading to fewer reasons for consumers to dislike mascots.

Furthermore, a study by Aaker, (1997), shows that consumers show no difficulties in assigning a personality or human characteristics to inanimate brand objects. Children are especially receptive towards mascots, as they tend to convey positive messages and other prosocial qualities (Bond & Calvert, 2014). They are also often paired with musical themes, taglines, slogans, as well as humorous, nostalgic, unique, and emotional appeals (Hémar-Nicolas & Gollety, 2012; Malik & Guptha, 2014), for which adults can be influenced by as well (Trivedi, 2018). In social media contexts, we have seen that content with mascots is increasing, for example, Duolingo's Duo the Owl on TikTok has posts reaching over 20 million views. Mascot characters also allow for more creativity and imaginative storylines, and this can lead to admiration and likeability on a different level compared to human endorsers. For example, the sportswear company

Under Armor was able to inspire consumers to purchase workout apparel with the Superman logo, as consumers may want to feel like a superhero with matchless abilities by wearing the clothes (Blackmon, 2014). However, this fanciful narrative may be difficult to create with human endorsers.

As mascots have strong longevity, are easier to work with, and may also be customized with more creativity, we hypothesize that:

H2b: Mascot endorsers will lead to a higher likeability compared to influencer and celebrity endorsers.

2.2. The Product Match-Up Hypothesis

Whether a collaboration between an endorser and brand is effective depends on the fit between the source and the product. The match-up hypothesis states that a stronger perceived congruence between an endorser's image and a brand leads to more effective communication (Kamins, 1990), as a strong fit increases the possibility that the endorser's positive qualities are transferred to the brand. Brand recall is also found to be enhanced (Misra & Beatty, 1990) under a good fit. However, when there is a weak perceived congruence between a brand and an endorser, it may lead to an unsuccessful collaboration (Kamins & Gupta, 1994; Kamins, 1990; McCracken, 1989).

Till & Busler, (2000) found that the product-endorser fit was extremely relevant to a source's credibility, rather than with a source's attractiveness (Natarajan & Chawla, 1997). As mentioned above, some endorsers may be associated with a specific category. So when the product-endorser fit does not make sense, an endorser may be perceived as lazy and inauthentic, and lead to suspicions that the endorsement is driven by external incentives such as financial compensation (Lee, E. et al., 2015; Till & Shimp, 1998), which all lower the endorser's trustworthiness. Furthermore, as many endorsers have a niche and knowledge in a specific area, their perceived expertise will decrease in a situation with poor product-endorser fit. For example, a swimmer will probably not have a lot of experience and knowledge about beauty products. As an endorser's knowledge of the product is a fundamental element affecting consumer attitudes (Harmon & Coney, 1982; Wu & Shaffer, 1987), it is important to make sure that the product fits with the endorser.

In sum, for the endorser to be perceived as trustworthy and experienced, the product-endorser fit is essential, as endorsements may otherwise be perceived as doubtful and incentive-driven. Thus, we expect that:

H4: The effect of product-endorser fit has a moderating effect on perceived expertise and trustworthiness.

2.3. The Source Model¹

2.3.1 The Source Credibility Model

The source credibility model states that the perceived trustworthiness and expertise of an endorser are key factors in influencing consumer behavior, through a process called internalization. This process occurs when a receiver accepts information in terms of attitude and value structures. The “source” in this case is the endorser, and different endorser types may lead to different results (Ohanian, 1990; Hovland & Weiss, 1951).

Expertise

Expertise refers to the level of knowledge, skill, and experience an endorser possesses, and whether the communicator is perceived as a valid source (Erdogan, 1999). An endorser does not actually need to have an expert occupation within a given field to influence the consumer behavior, as it is enough that the target audience perceives the endorser as an expert (Erdogan, 1999; Ohanian, 1990). There are many studies that indicate perceived expertise can influence purchase intention and attitude towards an advertisement (Pornpitakpan, 2004; Braunsberger, 1996; Ohanian 1990).

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) explains how humans have a conservative system that acquires the best solutions from our surroundings, and their past learnings or expertise, which keeps us from repeating or making new mistakes. This mental system is stronger than the system looking at novel solutions on our own, which may explain why an endorser with high perceived expertise is so influential in consumer communication, as consumers will want to avoid mistakes on their own, and instead listen to advice from someone with more experience and knowledge in a field.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the level of perceived honesty, believability, and dependability of a source. Previous studies have shown that consumers are more likely to positively evaluate products endorsed by people that they perceive as trustworthy (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Erdogan 1999). Trustworthiness can also induce opinion change, purchase intention, and brand attitude (Osei-Frimpong et al., 2019; Zainal et al., 2017; Cheung et al., 2009). Without trust, the information provided by endorsers may be perceived as being inauthentic (Zovitsky, 2022), and also lead to consumers not believing in the brand and product. Furthermore, trustworthiness can be linked with System 1 thinking (Kahneman, 2003), where the dependability of the endorser is automatically associated with the dependability of the brand and product in the consumer’s mind. This means that scandals and negative publicity not only has an effect on the trustworthiness of endorsers, but may also affect the trustworthiness and reputation of brands and products associated with them. An example showcasing the impact of endorser misconduct is Subway, where their former spokesperson Jared Fogle was convicted of charges

¹ The source models are mediating models as they propose that the source’s characteristics regarding credibility and attractiveness explain why the source has a particular effect on the consumer’s attitude or behavior.

including child pornography in 2015. This led to its reputation score from RepTrak to fall by 6%, and also saw their sales decrease by 3% that year, despite opening several new stores. Today, Subway is still trying to regain trust from consumers (Newton, 2018). Therefore, when companies select an endorser, they generally look for individuals with high trustworthiness (Erdogan, 1999).

In sum, a source's credibility affects the receivers' attitude and value structure. Individuals tend to turn to best practice solutions rather than novel ones, and are also concerned with the authenticity and dependability of endorsers. Consequently, credible endorsers have proven to have an effect on consumer behavior. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H3c: Perceived expertise and trustworthiness mediate the relationship between the endorser, and purchase intention, brand recall, brand attitude

While the source credibility model has received a lot of support, it has also been criticized for overlooking certain factors in the endorsement process, and for being too subjective (McCracken, 1989). Ohanian (1990), has therefore constructed another component evaluating endorsers: attractiveness.

2.3.2 The Source Attractiveness Model

The source attractiveness model is similar to the credibility model above, but explains how familiarity, similarity, and likeability of an endorser can determine a source's attractiveness (McGuire, 1985).

Likeability

McGuire (1985) states that likeability is the "affection for the source as a result of the source's physical appearance and behavior". A reason why endorsers are used in commercials and advertisements is because when people like an endorser, it will influence the consumer's perspective of a company's image, and may result in them liking the accompanying brand as well (McGuire, 1985). Likeability extends to personality properties such as: intellectual skills, lifestyles, and athletic performance (Erdogan, 1999), however, most marketers still choose to use endorsers that are physically attractive. This may be due to a concept called the halo effect: a cognitive bias suggesting that people will assume that when someone ranks high in a specific aspect, they will also rank high in other aspects (Erdogan, 1999). A study by Nisbett & Wilson (1977), proved that high physical attractiveness can be linked to good product functionality. Physically attractive people have also proven to induce significantly greater persuasion on consumer behavior compared to less attractive people, which can partly be explained by the fact that attractive people often possess characteristics connected with effective communication, such as confidence and charisma (Chaiken, 1979). However, an endorser's personality is also a factor when it comes to influencing

consumer behavior. Dedicated fans are an example of how enthusiasm for both physical appearance and personality influences them to purchase products (Pearson, 2010). For example, BTS's (a K-Pop boy band with each member having a unique personality) collaboration with McDonald's led to sauce containers and cups going for ridiculous amounts on eBay (Dished, 2021).

Overall, the likeability of endorsers has an important role in influencing consumer behavior, as you tend to support those you like. It has also shown the ability to persuade consumers' purchase intention, and feelings towards a brand (Du Plessis, 1994; Haley & Baldinger, 1991; Biel & Bridgwater, 1990).

Similarity

Similarity is defined as "a supposed resemblance between the source and the receiver of the message" (Erdogan, 1999; Feldman, 1984). The more a consumer perceives an endorser to be similar to them, the more they attempt to compare and know about them (Filieri et al., 2018; McCutcheon et al., 2002). Furthermore, Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison and other previous studies found that similarity positively influences word-of-mouth, purchase intention and other consumer behavior (Zhang et al., 2021; Schouten et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2019; Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). This is because individuals implicitly assume that similar people will have similar preferences and needs (Prendergast et al., 2010), and may be more receptive to the information provided by them. With high similarity, consumers can also understand and simulate the effects of a product. Therefore, by having common values, interests and characteristics with an endorser, consumers are more likely to support and adopt their attitudes, beliefs and behavior (Kelman, 2006; Cialdini, 1993).

Familiarity

The level of public exposure an endorser has is referred to familiarity (Erdogan, 1999). The more a consumer is exposed to an endorser, the more it will make the consumer prefer the endorser; this is known as the mere exposure effect (Zajonc, 1968). As humans are exposed to something unknown or new, we tend to react by aversion, and therefore, high exposure of an endorser has been shown to influence brand preference and attitude (Baker, 1999). A study by Osei-Frimpong et al., (2019) also found that by using a well-known endorser, the consumer shows more interest in the advertisement, attraction to the product increases, and the perception of brand and product quality increases.

To summarize, likeability of the endorser also makes people like the accompanying brand. Similarity has also shown to influence purchase intention and attitudes as individuals tend to assume that they have the same preferences as people they relate to, and mere exposure has shown to have an effect on purchase intention and attitudes. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H2d: Perceived similarity, likeability, and familiarity mediate the relationship between the endorser, and purchase intention, brand recall, brand attitude

3. Method

This section will present the scientific approach, study design, and the manipulation behind our study. We will also present the measures used, the sample, statistical methods, and discuss reliability and validity.

3.1. Scientific approach

Ontology describes whether social phenomena should be seen as independent of social actors or not, i.e., objectivism and constructionism. Since this essay aims to understand consumer behavior, it will take a constructionist approach, as we consider a phenomenon that is not external, but rather something that is influenced and occurs between individuals (Bell et al., 2022).

Epistemology is the idea of what knowledge is, in a specific field. There are two different components: positivism and interpretivism. Positivism often aims to explain the cause and effect of various variables (e.g. hypothesis formulation), as the individual creates meaning based on what is reasonable rather than the absolute truth, and this is partly adopted in our study. At the same time, reality is complex. Positivism can also be considered to have a weak connection to meaning-making. Hence, our essay will also consider interpretivism, which draws attention to a difference in studying people's behaviors and actions, as well as investigating multiple perspectives (Bell et al., 2022).

As our study is based on existing theories on endorsement marketing, we have used a deductive approach. These theories are used for causal research in the chosen field of marketing, where the main method is experimentation (Bell et al., 2022). This study was completed as an experiment through an online survey, a common form of data collection. The participants in the study were randomly divided into groups, and received different treatments. To detect any differences, the results from the groups were then compared.

The experiment was carried out in accordance with a quantitative method, as it enables the generalization of results to a greater extent than a qualitative method (the sample is usually much smaller and not as representative of an entire population) (Bell et al., 2022). It is also considered the best option for research on this topic as it enables the possibility to manipulate independent variables, and a randomization of treatment. Quantitative methods are also considered to generate more credible conclusions and are easier to replicate compared to a qualitative approach.

3.2. Study design

The survey was constructed in the online survey software, Qualtrics (see Appendix B for the questionnaire), and the data was collected by distributing the survey through our personal network.

This study employed a 3 (type of endorser) X 2 (product-endorser fit) between-subjects experimental design. We manipulated the type of endorsement by creating advertisements with either a celebrity, influencer, or a mascot, which was our independent variable. Each participant was shown an advertisement: a randomly selected endorser with a beauty product (e.g., lip gloss) or a fitness product (e.g., protein powder), where the three endorsers had a better fit with the beauty product than the fitness product, according to our second pre-study. This would allow for further examination of the product match-up hypothesis. After the advertisement is displayed, participants were also presented with questions regarding consumer behavior, consumer thinking, and demographics. All hypotheses are visualized in the conceptual model in Figure 1.

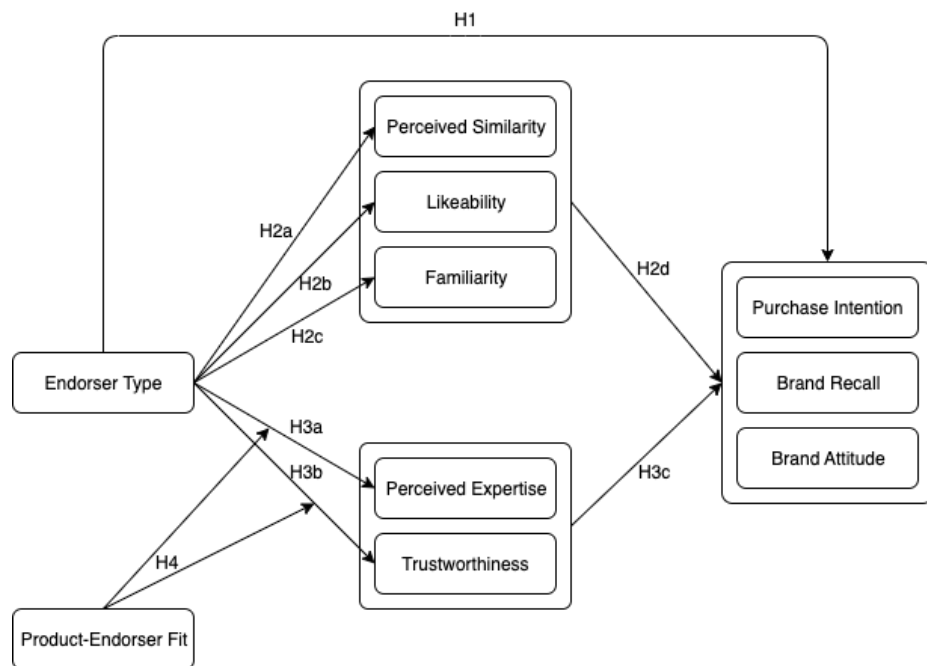


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

3.2.1. Manipulation

The treatment in our experiment was manipulated advertisements, and each advertisement consisted of a photo of the endorser and a picture of the product, with decorative stimuli to enhance credibility and visual appeal (Russell, 1998). The pictures of the two products were the same in all groups, thereby the participants were all exposed to the same advertisement design, to ensure that differences in results were caused by the experimental manipulation, i.e., the different endorsers. Furthermore, through a Student's t-test, $t(364) = -15.84$, $p < .001$, it can be confirmed that the

advertisements with a good product-endorser fit ($M_{Good\ fit} = 4.65$, $SD = 1.59$) were indeed considered a better fit than the advertisements with a bad product endorser-fit ($M_{Bad\ fit} = 3.26$, $SD = 1.54$).

We composed advertisements with only female endorsers, as they are more frequently found in social media marketing according to (Lin et al., 2018). Furthermore, there was greater ease in finding endorsers that would fit each group, as well as selecting endorsers that did not differ drastically in terms of attractiveness and similarity. However, this does not mean that the study is exclusive to women, as men may also participate, as they may be for example, purchasing a product for someone else. The photos of the endorsers were also taken close-up, without major distractions from the endorsers' expressions or attention-grabbing backgrounds. This is to ensure that the only attribute that varies between the different endorsers are the endorser types. The participants were also presented with the name and the profession of the endorsers, so that they could still evaluate the advertisements even if they did not recognize them (Schouten et al., 2020). We selected the product categories and the endorsers based on two pretests (see below).

3.2.2. Selecting the endorsers and products for our stimuli

To make sure that the study maximizes its contribution and that the advertisements were effective as stimuli, two pre-studies were completed through personal networks.

Pre-test 1

Our first pre-test was conducted ($n = 69$) using Qualtrics, where participants were asked to rank the top three types of endorsers that they were exposed to in everyday life. This resulted in the selection of the endorsers: celebrities, influencers, and mascots, maximizing the relevance of this study. Next, participants were asked which product segment they see the most endorsements with. This resulted in the selection of the beauty product segment as our good-fit condition, and the fitness product segment as our bad-fit condition. This also ensures that we chose endorsers and products that the participants were familiar with, so that they can make a fair assessment in our main study. (See Appendix C for detailed Pre-test 1 results).

Pre-test 2

Based on our first pre-study, we then completed a second pre-study ($n = 30$) to select the most suitable endorsers for each type and the products that would be used in the advertisements. Participants were presented with the pictures and names of three endorsers from each endorser type, and were then asked to indicate the perceived fit for the beauty product segment on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very Well). This resulted in the selection of the endorsers, each with the highest fit-score in each type to be used in the main study. Our celebrity endorser was Margot Robbie (a famous film actress, known for her role in *The Wolf of Wall Street*), our influencer being Bianca

Ingrosso (a Swedish influencer and media personality known for her expertise in beauty products), and our mascot being Barbie (a fashion doll and cartoon character, often also associated with beauty). The participant was then presented with four products from the beauty segment and the fitness segment, where they were asked to rate how well each product would fit an endorser of that segment on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very Well). This resulted in the selection of lip gloss as the product to represent the beauty segment, and protein powder as the product to represent the fitness segment, ensuring that the advertisements looked realistic, and also emphasized the effect of the product-endorser fit.

The endorsers and products for the pre-test were selected based on our knowledge of well-known celebrities, influencers, and mascots, as well as using Google's top results to confirm our beliefs. The endorsers were carefully selected to not differ in terms of gender, attractiveness and overall similarity based on our own judgment, so to ensure that the main attribute that was different between endorsers was the endorser type. (See Appendix D for pre-test 2 results).

3.3. Procedure and measures

Our main study consisted of 14 questions, including attention check questions to ensure participants paid attention over time (Meade & Craig, 2012). Almost all responses were measured on a 7-point Likert scale², as this is appropriate in accurately measuring differences between respondents' reactions, and makes it easier for the participants to answer the questions (Bell et al., 2022). Each variable is assessed with four questions/statements to ensure reliability, and the mean value of these questions is used as the variable. Using Cronbach's Alpha, we observe that all variables have a value of over $\alpha = .70$, which indicates that the variables have an acceptable level of internal consistency (Bell et al., 2022). This is also the case when the variables are investigated for each endorser separately (see Table 1).

The survey started by asking for the participants' intentions and attitude from the advertisement. The brand attitude variable was based on previous research (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). Participants answered how they perceived the advertisement on a 7-point Likert scale between: Bad - Good, Dislikeable - Likable, Not desirable - Desirable and Not interesting - Interesting ($\alpha = .90$).

Purchase intention was measured by formulating questions regarding the participants intention to buy the product according to Taylor & Baker, (1994). The questions asked were: "How likely would it be for you to purchase the product in the advertisement?" (Extremely unlikely - Extremely likely), "Next time you need the type of product shown in the advertisement, you would choose the brand shown in the advertisement you just saw" (Strongly agree - Strongly disagree), "If you needed the type of product shown in

² The scales in the survey may potentially be unclear, as each number was not anchored with specific responses. The results of the study could therefore potentially have been affected (see more in section regarding research limitations & further research).

the advertisement during the past year, you would have purchased from the brand shown in the advertisement you just saw” (Strongly agree - Strongly disagree), and “In the next year, if you need the type of product shown in the advertisement, you would choose the brand shown in the advertisement” (Strongly agree - Strongly disagree) ($\alpha = .92$).

We tested brand recall by asking the participant to select the correct brand name, i.e. an aided brand recall, as the options included the correct brand and three incorrect brand names (Keller et al., 1998). Furthermore, the brands used in this study are not real, so to reduce any bias of the participant knowing the brand already.

Based on the source attractiveness model (McGuire, 1985), familiarity was measured using four questions: “How familiar are you with the endorser?” (Unfamiliar - Familiar), “I know the endorser” (Totally disagree - Totally agree), “I am familiar with the endorser shown above” (Strongly disagree - Strongly agree), “This endorser is familiar to me” (Strongly disagree - Strongly agree). The answers ($\alpha = .93$) were measured on a 7-point Likert scale with the support from several empirical studies (Lee, J. et al., 2022; Schouten et al., 2020; Fanoberova & Kuczkowska, 2016; Gefen, 2000).

Likeability was measured by asking four questions: “The endorser shown above seems friendly” (Strongly disagree - Strongly agree), “The endorser shown above seems likable” (Strongly disagree - Strongly agree), “The endorser shown above seems approachable” (Strongly disagree - Strongly agree), and “How physically attractive do you consider the endorser to be?” (Ugly - Beautiful) (Erdogan, 1999; Ohanian 1990). The answers were measured on a seven-point Likert scale ($\alpha = .86$).

Perceived similarity ($\alpha = .94$) was measured by asking to evaluate the following question on a 7-point Likert scale: “The endorser thinks like me” (Totally disagree - Totally agree), “The endorser behaves like me”, (Totally disagree - Totally agree). “The endorser is like me” (Totally disagree - Totally agree), and “The endorser is similar to me” (Totally disagree - Totally agree) (McCroskey et al., 1975).

Later, we asked further questions relating to the source credibility model. Expertise was measured by asking the participants if they perceived the endorser to be a valid source. On a 7-point Likert scale, the respondent stated to which extent they perceived the endorser from being: Not an expert - Expert, Inexperienced - Experienced, Unknowledgeable - Knowledgeable, Unqualified - Qualified (Erdogan 1999; Ohanian, 1990; Hovland & Weiss, 1951) ($\alpha = .92$).

Trustworthiness ($\alpha = .91$) was examined by asking the participant to rate the endorser from being: Untrustworthy - Trustworthy, Undependable - Dependable, Dishonest - Honest, Unreliable - Reliable (Erdogan, 1999; Ohanian 1990).

Finally, product-endorser fit to ensure our manipulations were reliable was measured through four different statements based on the product match-up hypothesis on a 7-point

scale between: Bad - Good, Not appropriate at all - Very appropriate, Not natural at all - Very natural, Not at all logical - Very logical (Keller & Aaker, 1992; McCracken, 1989) ($\alpha = .94$).

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha separately for celebrity, influencer, and mascot

	Cronbach's Alpha		
	Celebrity	Influencer	Mascot
Brand Attitude	0.89	0.86	0.87
Purchase Intention	0.88	0.86	0.88
Familiarity	0.86	0.82	0.88
Likeability	0.91	0.87	0.89
Similarity	0.89	0.86	0.87
Expertise	0.88	0.86	0.88
Trustworthiness	0.86	0.82	0.88
Product-Endorser fit	0.91	0.87	0.89

3.4. Sample

The survey was mainly distributed through our personal networks by providing the link on our social media (LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook). We also asked our network to share the survey.

Table 2: Sample demographics, gender, location

	n	%
Number of participants	366	100
Gender		
Male	144	39.3
Female	204	55.7
Non-binary/third gender	6	1.6
Prefer not to say	12	3.3
Location		
Sweden	250	68.3
Outside Sweden	116	31.7

The total sample of our study consisted of 366 valid participants. For age, the minimum was 18 and the maximum was 74, with a mean age of 27.31 ($SD = 12.73$). For daily

social media usage, the minimum was 0 and the maximum was 14, with a mean usage of 3.05 ($SD = 2.14$). Responses from participants who incorrectly answered the attention check question, or filled in any of the fields invalidly (e.g. negative values, age over 100, social media usage over 16 hours a day) were excluded from the sample. The participants consisted mostly of females. Although this may not be representative of the population, young females are actually more prone to be influenced by endorsements (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This means that females may be overrepresented in the context of endorser marketing, which makes our sample appropriate.

Overall, we can conclude that our sample was relatively young, and this is not surprising as we collected the majority of our responses from our personal social networks, who are closer to our own age (21 years old). Consequently, this sample is perhaps not representative of the whole population, and especially not older age groups. However, as the younger age group is more exposed to the world of social media (Perrin, 2015), it makes them good contestants to evaluate all three endorsers.

The average daily social media usage of the participants is also quite similar to the overall population (Oberlo, 2022), and therefore, may indicate that they are exposed to endorser marketing similarly to an ordinary population, also making this sample suitable for this study.

In terms of nationality, almost a third were from outside Sweden. Participants that are not from Sweden are most likely from other parts of Europe, where our network also extends to. Cultural differences may exist in our sample, however, we try our best to control for this by selecting endorsers that are internationally known. We also provide the name and occupation of the endorser, so that participants may still evaluate the advertisement (Schouten et al., 2020). In our results, we also find that the difference in familiarity between the three endorsers is not significant (see more in results), which may indicate that the level of familiarity between the endorsers should not affect the study significantly. Furthermore, as more internationals migrate to Sweden for education and work, our sample may be indicative of the more internationalized population (OECD, 2022).

3.5. Statistical methods

To test the hypotheses above, we employed various statistical analyses using the data analysis program R. For H1, H2a, H2b, H2c, H3a, and H3b, we employed an ANOVA on each of our dependent variables (brand attitude, purchase intention) and mediating variables (familiarity, similarity, likeability, expertise, trustworthiness) for each endorser type to investigate significant differences between the means³. Exclusively for brand

³ A critique against the utilization of mediation analyses is that they may result in unjustified assumptions regarding cause & effect relationships. Using single mediator models, when multiple mediators are present may lead to inaccurate interpretations of the mediators' role. To increase reliability, assumptions such as normal distribution, homoscedasticity, and independence of variables should be addressed. Several methods such as bootstrapping, sensitivity analysis, and bias correction are also of importance to obtain robust results (Fiedler et al., 2011).

recall in H1, we employed a Pearson's Chi-square test instead. For significant results, we then employed a post-hoc test with the Tukey Multiple Comparison analysis to investigate where these differences lie.

To test the hypotheses regarding mediation: H2d, H3c, we employed a non-parametric bootstrap causal mediation analysis with 500 simulations (Tingley et al., 2014) for each mediating variable (familiarity, similarity, likeability, expertise, trustworthiness) and dependent variable (brand attitude, purchase intention, brand recall).

Lastly, to test the moderating effect of product-endorser fit on expertise and trustworthiness in H4, we employed an OLS regression analysis between the endorser type and expertise and trustworthiness, and investigated the effect of the interaction term.

3.6. Reliability and validity

Reliability refers to the consistency of a measure of a concept, whereas validity refers to the issue of whether or not an indicator that is devised to gauge a concept really measures that concept (Bell et al., 2022).

In this study, multiple indicator measures have been used for the majority of variables, implying that respondents had to answer similar questions for each variable, to ensure internal consistency. This means that potential measurement errors in the survey can cancel each other out (Peter, 1979). Furthermore, as distinctions can be made between participants, reliability tends to also increase. Cronbach Alpha has been used as an internal reliability indicator for the multi-question measures. According to Bell et al. (2022), the lowest accepted reliability level is $\alpha = .70$, which all the variables in the study obtain (see section 3.3).

As the survey was written in English, it could potentially increase internal validity as it becomes more inclusive for those who do not speak Swedish. However, as we focused on the Swedish population, the survey may have been difficult for those whose mother tongue is not English. To avoid this, we tried to formulate the questions as clearly as possible, and grouped the questions in a logical order, making it easier to follow the survey. Furthermore, by implementing attention checks, giving a timeframe for the survey, and promising to donate to charity, we aimed to engage the participants and increase their attention span, also leading to higher internal validity (Meade & Craig, 2012).

Our pre-studies also helped us to create realistic advertisements, with appropriate endorsers and products. Together, this can be considered to increase external validity as the advertisement in the survey reflects reality more. The more authentic the advertisement is perceived to be, the more valid and applicable the results are (Bell et al., 2022).

Finally, the measures for the variables in the survey are measures frequently used in research on credibility, attractiveness, match-up, purchase intention, brand recall, and brand attitude. This increases the face validity of the study, as these measures are considered more generalizable within the field of endorser marketing compared with less common measures.

4. Results

After conducting the statistical methods above, it resulted in the following means and standard deviations for the variables. For brand recall, the percentage of correct brand recalls for the group is displayed. The table shown below showcases each endorser grouped by fit. Table 4 below showcases the correlations between the variables, where it can be observed that purchase intention and brand attitude ($r = .71, p < .001$), trustworthiness and expertise ($r = .67, p < .001$) are relatively highly correlated.

Table 3: Means and standard deviations for all variables in the main study grouped by endorser type and product-endorser fit

Variable	Celebrity Bad-fit mean (SD) n = 62	Celebrity Good-fit mean (SD) n = 61	Influencer Bad-fit mean (SD) n = 61	Influencer Good-fit mean (SD) n = 61	Mascot Bad-fit mean (SD) n = 61	Mascot Good-fit mean (SD) n = 60
Purchase Intention	3.46 (1.59)	3.37 (1.51)	2.97 (1.42)	2.53 (1.49)	3.24 (1.35)	3.48 (1.85)
Brand Attitude	3.68 (1.56)	4.17 (1.16)	3.51 (1.25)	3.30 (1.47)	3.87 (1.38)	4.22 (1.68)
Brand Recall	68.2%	85.2%	67.2%	83.6%	57.4%	73.9%
Perceived Similarity	2.79 (1.23)	2.64 (1.25)	2.32 (1.40)	2.30 (1.45)	2.91 (1.32)	2.98 (1.42)
Likeability	4.98 (1.26)	5.14 (1.36)	4.45 (1.12)	4.03 (1.33)	4.70 (1.45)	4.94 (1.32)
Familiarity	3.94 (2.25)	3.81 (2.21)	3.55 (2.22)	3.59 (2.23)	3.51 (2.03)	3.75 (1.93)
Expertise	3.31 (1.44)	4.12 (1.30)	3.14 (1.46)	3.88 (1.51)	3.20 (1.42)	3.86 (1.59)
Trustworthiness	4.24 (1.36)	4.36 (1.18)	3.55 (1.31)	3.52 (1.28)	3.68 (1.33)	3.97 (1.42)
Product-Endorser Fit	3.46 (1.68)	4.52 (1.63)	3.17 (1.69)	4.60 (1.77)	3.14 (1.61)	4.85 (1.74)

1 being very low, 7 being very high

Brand recall: % of the group that answered the brand recall question correctly

4.1. Effects of endorser type on consumer behavior

H1 stated that influencer endorsers will lead to a higher purchase intention, brand attitude, and brand recall compared to the celebrity and mascot endorsers. However, there was no empirical support for this after conducting an ANOVA as well as a Chi-Square test.

Starting with purchase intention, it was noted that there is a significant difference, $F(2, 360) = 7.06, p < .05$, for the three different endorsers. After computing for mean values, the results in Table 3 show that purchase intention for influencers was actually the lowest of the three endorsers. The results from the Tukey multi comparison analysis also indicate that purchase intention is significantly lower for influencers compared to the other endorsers. However, the difference between mascots and celebrities was not significant, $p > .05$. Thus, it can be concluded that there is no empirical support for the hypothesis of influencers leading to the highest purchase intention in H1.

For brand attitude, there is a significant difference, $F(2, 360) = 6.87, p < .05$, for the three different endorsers. After controlling for mean values, and the Tukey multi comparison analysis, we can observe that brand attitude was also significantly lower for influencers compared to celebrities and mascots. However, the difference in means between mascots and celebrities is not significant, $p > .05$. Thus, we find no empirical support for the hypothesis that influencers lead to the highest brand attitude in H1.

Finally for brand recall, the results from the Chi-Square test indicate that the brand recall is not significantly different between endorsers, $\chi^2(2, N = 366) = 4.52, p = .104$. Thus, there is no empirical support for the hypothesis that influencers will lead to a higher brand recall compared to celebrities and mascots in H1.

Table 4: Correlation Matrix for all variables in the main study

	Brand Attitud e	Purchase Intention	Famili arity	Likeabil ity	Simila rity	Expertise	Trust worthi ness	Product-Endor ser Fit
Brand Attitud e								
Purch ase Intenti on	0.71***							
Famili arity	0.17**	0.08						
Likea bility	0.50***	0.39***	0.39***					
Simila rity	0.34***	0.45***	0.05	0.36***				
Expert ise	0.47***	0.38***	0.10	0.45***	0.36***			
Trust worthi ness	0.52***	0.41***	0.16**	0.59***	0.38***	0.67***		
Produ ct-End orser Fit	0.39***	0.37***	0.09	0.31***	0.25***	0.58***	0.39***	

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$

4.2. Effects of endorser type on perceived similarity, likeability, familiarity, expertise, trustworthiness

H2a stated that influencers will lead to a higher perceived similarity compared to the other endorsers. We discovered that there was a significant difference, $F(2, 360) = 6.95$, $p < .05$, in perceived similarity between the three groups. After controlling for mean values and the post-hoc test, the results indicate that perceived similarity is significantly lower for influencer endorsers compared to the other two endorsers, thus giving no empirical support for H2a. However, the difference between mascots and celebrities is not significant, $p > .05$.

H2b stated that mascots have the highest likeability compared to celebrities and influencers. We discovered that there was a significant difference, $F(2, 360) = 12.73$, $p < .05$, in likeability among the three endorser groups. After investigating the mean values and with the results from the Tukey multi comparison analysis, we saw that the likeability for mascots and celebrities is significantly higher than influencers. However,

the difference between mascots and celebrities cannot be deemed significant, $p > .05$. Thus, there is no empirical support for H2b.

H2c stated that celebrity endorsers will lead to a higher familiarity compared to the other endorsers. However, we observed that there are no significant differences between the three groups regarding familiarity, $F(2, 360) = 0.71, p > .05$. Thus, there is no empirical support for H2c, stating that celebrity endorsers will lead to the highest familiarity.

H3a stated that influencers will have the highest level of perceived expertise compared to the other endorsers. However, we observe that there is no significant difference, $F(2, 360) = 0.66, p > .05$, in perceived expertise between the three groups. Thus, we can state that there is no empirical support for H3a.

Finally, H3b states that mascots will have higher trustworthiness compared to the other endorsers. We observe that there is a significant difference in trustworthiness between the three endorsers, $F(2, 360) = 10.41, p < .05$. After controlling for the mean values and the post-hoc test, our results indicate that celebrities actually lead to the highest level of trustworthiness. However, the difference in means between mascots and influencers is not significant, $p > .05$. Thus, there is no empirical support for H3b.

4.3. Product-Endorser Fit Moderation Analysis on expertise and trustworthiness

H4 states that product-endorser fit will moderate the relationship between endorser and expertise or trustworthiness. We observed that the interaction term was not significant in either case, $p > .05$, and can conclude that product-endorser fit does not moderate the relationship between endorser type and expertise or trustworthiness. Thus, there is no empirical support for H4.

4.4. Mediation Analysis

H2d and H3c state that similarity, likeability, familiarity, trustworthiness, and expertise mediate the relationship between the endorser type and purchase intention, brand recall, and brand attitude respectively. For purchase intention, we observe that there is no significant direct effect between endorser and purchase intention, $p > .05$. Furthermore, neither familiarity, similarity, likeability, or expertise mediated the relationship between endorser type and purchase intention, $p > .05$. However, we noticed that trustworthiness mediated the relationship between endorser type and purchase intention, $\beta = -.11, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.20, -.03], p < .05$. Thus, we can state that there is no empirical support for H2d regarding purchase intention, but there is empirical support for H3c, for purchase intention regarding trustworthiness.

For brand attitude, we observe that there is no significant direct effect between endorser type and brand attitude, $p > .05$. However, we noticed that trustworthiness mediated the

relationship between endorser type and brand attitude, $\beta = -.13$, 95% CI [-.24, -.04], $p < .05$, whereas familiarity, similarity, likeability, and expertise showed no significant results, $p > .05$. Thus, we can state that there is also no empirical support for H2d regarding brand attitude, however, there is empirical support for H3c, for brand attitude regarding trustworthiness.

For brand recall, we observe that the relationship between the endorser and brand recall is not statistically significant, $p > .05$. Furthermore, neither familiarity, similarity, likeability, trustworthiness, or expertise mediated the relationship between endorser type and brand recall, $p > .05$. Thus, there is no empirical support for H2d and H3c regarding brand recall.

5. Discussions and Conclusions

In this section, we discuss our findings from our data analysis, and suggest implications for brands, managers, and researchers on how to apply and make use of our findings.

5.1. Discussion

The goal of the study was to understand how the choice of endorser affects different consumer behavior in B2C marketing. Our study suggests that influencers might not be as favorable as previous studies might suggest (Schouten et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2019; Erz & Heeris Christensen, 2018; Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Zhu & Tan, 2007). Instead, mascots and celebrities had higher purchase intention and brand attitude. They were also perceived to be more similar and likable to the participants. We also saw that celebrities led to the highest trustworthiness, and that trustworthiness mediated the relationship between endorsers and consumer behavior (purchase intention and brand attitude).

There was no empirical support for Hypothesis 1, for purchase intention and brand attitude. One explanation might be that the market for influencers has become quite saturated, as social media has become a prominent part of our daily lives (especially during the pandemic), and that participants may have developed “influencer fatigue” from its repetitiveness (Chan, 2018). Another explanation might be that as the market for influencers has grown (Geyser, 2021), the distinction between celebrities, influencers, and mascots might not be so clear-cut in certain ways. This may be supported by the fact that hypothesis 2c was not significant, and that there are no differences between the groups in terms of familiarity. Celebrities and some mascots nowadays also have their own social media pages, and some influencers have developed such a big following that they may act as celebrities in many ways (e.g. becoming models and talk-show hosts). Furthermore, Gräve (2017), mentions that influencers who are not as famous may engage more with their audience, seem more relatable, trustworthy, and knowledgeable compared with a popular influencer, such as Bianca Ingrosso in this study.

This relates to hypothesis 2a, that compared perceived similarity between endorsers, which there was no empirical support for. As we chose a famous influencer who lives a relatively luxurious life (e.g., living in a wealthy part of Stockholm and often going to luxurious restaurants), it may make Bianca Ingrosso's lifestyle hard to relate to. The same can be said about many influencers as they grow in popularity, leading to more wealth and more extravagant lifestyles. Even though influencers may seem relatable in certain aspects (e.g. wear the same clothes as the general population), there may also be other aspects that overshadow them, making influencers to be perceived less similar (Chavez, 2021). As influencers become famous, they may also seem less approachable, as their following may be too big to convey closeness. Another explanation for our results may be that influencers may be too specialized within a specific area, which can make it harder for people to relate to, compared with an actress or mascot that may appear more versatile (McQuail, 2005).

For hypothesis 2b, no differences in likeability were found between celebrities and mascots, however both were favorable compared to influencers. As likeability is measured on both personality and physical attractiveness, it may explain why mascots and celebrities do equally as good. Malik & Guptha, (2014) also mentions how some of the key features of mascots are their emotional touch, humor, uniqueness and friendliness. Furthermore, celebrities and mascots tend to have a longer longevity compared to influencers, as they are usually known for more than just their social media pages. This means that people may have feelings associated with celebrities and mascots that go beyond the endorser itself. For example, Barbie has been around since the 60s, which can create a feeling of nostalgia (Reinke, 2022). Furthermore, the reasons for likeability may differ based on personal opinions on the endorser. Certain celebrities and mascots may have more dedicated fan bases than influencers, and in this study, Margot Robbie has a positive one from her humbleness (Starkey, 2022) and her perceived beauty, whereas Bianca Ingrosso has always been quite straight-forward with less of a filter, and has also been in scandals such as the Gina Tricot incident where she modeled for the brand even though she had an eating disorder, and these may lead to varying opinions on Bianca Ingrosso (Westberg, 2022).

There was no empirical support for Hypothesis 3b, as the celebrity had the highest level of trustworthiness. Even though a study by Malik & Guptha, (2014) claims that one of mascots' strengths is their trustworthiness, they are still fictional characters created by companies, which can possibly cause skepticism as the mascots would be dependent on the company's image (in this study, a fake company). Mascots are also not meant for all types of companies (Atanasova, 2021), for example, personal care products, as they cannot accurately present the effects of that product. Furthermore, mascots' humoristic touch can also make the brand appear less serious, and this may also lead to distrust in the mascot. On the other hand, influencers can also lead to low trustworthiness, as they may not always be perceived to be genuine. Many consumers realize that influencers' content can be sponsored (Friestad & Wright, 1994), which lowers the authenticity and

trustworthiness of the endorsements. Finally, as celebrities are more financially demanding (Heine, 2016), they may also need a more rigorous vetting process for endorsements, to make sure that a company has spent their resources efficiently on an endorser with a good track record. Consumers may be aware of this, and therefore, the perception of trustworthiness also increases, as more effort has been put in the selection process by the company. Furthermore, participants may also have preconceived opinions about the endorsers chosen, and in this case, Margot Robbie may seem more dependable, compared to the other endorsers.

On top of that, we also observed that trustworthiness mediated the relationship between endorser type and brand attitude and purchase intention in consumer communication, giving empirical support for parts of H3c. This is congruent with studies mentioned in the background that emphasizes the role of trust and authenticity in marketing (Zovitsky, 2022). A majority of people need to be able to trust a brand first, and then make a purchase decision or create a positive brand attitude (Edelman, 2019). Endorsers can claim a lot of different things, but without trust, the facts stated cannot be perceived to be authentic, and therefore, it may be difficult to know how the endorsed product actually will perform.

Additionally, there was no empirical support regarding brand recall, as there were no significant differences between groups. One explanation is that the question assessing brand recall came too early in the survey for significant differences to occur. Another reason could be the advertisement format, which may be perceived as plain and not memorable. In real life, there is more integration of a product into a storyline, which makes the brand more memorable (Russell, 1998).

There was also no empirical support for Hypothesis 3a, as there were no significant differences in expertise between groups, which can be due to the endorsers all being quite well-known in the field of beauty. Margot Robbie is often associated with the concept of beauty (Haslett, 2020), which creates a perception of expertise in the area. Bianca Ingrosso has her own cosmetics company, and found her success through her blog that was heavily centered around beauty (Modette, 2022). Finally, Barbie has been associated with the typical girly aesthetic, for their dolls and the franchise (Szmigin, 2016), and has through collaborations led different cosmetics brands to create products inspired by the franchise (Saclao, 2020). Therefore, through the associations the endorsers above have with beauty, it may create a more equal perception of expertise for all of them in a B2C marketing context. Another explanation for this result is that a subscale assessing generic expertise was adopted, and not specific expertise related to the endorsed products, which is something that future researchers could use to gain more insights.

We also found no empirical support for familiarity, similarity, likeability, and expertise mediating the relationship between endorser and purchase intention/brand recall/brand attitude. This could be that these variables are simply not enough on their own to cause

a certain consumer behavior in consumer communication, and that there may be other theoretical models that may mediate the relationship between endorser type and consumer behavior.

Furthermore, there was no empirical support for hypothesis 4. An explanation could be that a beauty endorser endorsing a fitness product may actually not have been considered as a remarkably bad fit. Therefore, by choosing more niche endorsers or even more specific products, the result could perhaps have been different.

5.2. Research limitations and further research

A limitation for this study may potentially be the scales used in the survey, where they may have been unclear as not every number on the scale was not anchored with a specific response. This may potentially cause some confusion with the respondents, and therefore answer towards the middle of the scale (around 3-4) to avoid uncertainty. As mentioned in the section above regarding procedure and methods, the brands used in the study are also fictitious. Even though this may reduce any bias of the participant knowing the brand already, it may also create other types of bias towards fictitious or fake brands. Furthermore, as seen in the correlation matrix (Table 4), there are certain variables that are moderately correlated with each other, which potentially indicates multicollinearity.

The study was also limited to investigating two product categories, i.e., a fitness product (protein powder) and beauty product (lip gloss). These were the most popular when it comes to endorsements according to our pre-experiments, indicating that these are the most relevant product segments. However, future studies could investigate other product categories, as these might favor certain endorsers. For example, search goods are in contrast to experience goods suggested to be more effectively endorsed by celebrities than by non-celebrities (Wei & Lu, 2013). Malik & Guptha (2014) also mentions how the fit of mascots are situational. They are promising in fast-moving consumer goods, especially in the food segment. But in a segment like personal care, customers would need a more realistic factor to convince them. For example, an actress with luscious hair, confirming that she uses a particular shampoo, builds the customer's confidence in the brand, which may be difficult to accomplish with brand mascots in this case.

Another limitation is that we only used one endorser for each endorser type. The results may then show the participants' preconceived opinions about each endorser, resulting in bias. This was attempted to be mitigated by conducting pre-tests to evaluate which endorser is the most prevalent and has the highest fit for endorser marketing. Endorsers were also chosen based on similar characteristics (gender, attractiveness, age, etc.) to keep as many attributes possible constant, and that the only thing varying is the type of endorser. However, the risk of preconceptions can not be completely outweighed. For further research, more endorsers from each type can be used, especially with mascots, as there are mascots that resemble humans more, but also mascots that resemble objects. It

is also possible to do the same study but for male endorsers. Furthermore, product-endorser fit was only tested as a moderator for expertise and trustworthiness, and therefore, for future research, it can be interesting to look into how good-fit and bad-fit affects the other mediators, such as perceived similarity, likeability, etc. It could also be interesting by investigating variables early in the consumer journey, such as awareness and consumer interest, where a bad-fit could prove to be beneficial in B2C marketing (Törn, 2012; Dahmén et al., 2008; Lee & Thorson 2008; Dahmén et al., 2005).

Our study also only investigated the source attractiveness and source credibility model, and when it comes to endorser marketing research, there are also other models, such as the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989) and balance theory (Heider, 1958).

5.3. Implications

Our results give insights for researchers and marketers interested in endorser marketing, and we have shown that influencers might not be as favorable as recent studies have suggested, at least in a wider and more traditional context of B2C marketing. Even though influencer marketing has grown significantly in the last couple of years (Baines et al., 2019), we found that influencers led to less purchase intention and brand attitude compared to the more traditional types of endorsers: celebrities and mascots. Therefore, the first implication of this study is that companies should consider not transitioning completely into using influencers for their consumer communication, but should consider perhaps balancing the use of influencers with other types of endorsers. Selecting an endorser for B2C marketing is not an easy task, and there are other aspects that may interfere with this decision. There may be other advantages to using influencers, such as the actual financial expenses associated with the use of different endorsers, as these may vary significantly depending on the endorser type. For instance, the music artist Selena Gomez who has posted pictures of herself with Pantene, Louis Vuitton, and Coca-Cola on Twitter, reportedly charges up to \$550,000 per social media post (Heine, 2016). Geyser (2022) reports that an influencer would charge significantly less, around \$2,000 or more for a similar post on Twitter. Collaborations with certain mascots can also be expensive (e.g. licensing fees), and designing them can cost up to \$100,000 (Atanasova, 2021). Furthermore, influencers can also reach a more niche audience (Viral Access, 2019), and this may be more preferable to certain companies.

A second implication of this study is the importance of investigating the aspect of trustworthiness in endorser marketing, as we show that trustworthiness mediates the relationship between endorser type and purchase intention and brand attitude. Therefore, in endorser marketing, companies should focus on the aspect of trust and looking for endorsers that maximize trust. This can be done with thorough vetting processes of endorsers so that they: have a good reputation, have not been involved in any major scandals, and in general have been associated with products that have been of high quality. Furthermore, it is also important to identify authentic endorsers, such as looking for endorsers that may already have passion for your brand in the past, which may also

increase trustworthiness, as authentic endorsers are more believable. Overall, our results indicate that celebrities result in the highest level of trustworthiness, so a third implication of this study is that companies should consider using celebrities for their consumer communication, as according to our study, this should lead to the highest levels of purchase intention and brand attitude, if this is the main goal.

5.4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we found that influencer endorsements in B2C marketing were not as effective in increasing purchase intention and brand attitude compared to more traditional types of endorsers. Even though there is an increasing trend in social media and using influencers to boost purchase intention and brand attitude, we found that this movement may not be empirically supported. This could be the reason why large brands such as Gucci and McDonald's still choose to collaborate with celebrities such as Harry Styles and Travis Scott. We also found out that the trustworthiness of the endorser is the most important aspect when it comes to increasing purchase intention and brand attitude. Many companies often look at KPIs such as their reach to decide on which endorser to choose (Michaeloudis, 2022), however, we find that trustworthiness is also an important aspect to consider. Even if an endorser has an extensive reach, without a perceived trustworthiness in the endorser, it can damage a brand's reputation, which can explain why several brands chose to end their partnership with Swedish YouTuber, Margaux Dietz when she documented her reaction of an unconscious man lying outside her door (Winberg, 2022). Finally, we also found that celebrities led to the highest level of trustworthiness, and hence, we can state that celebrities are the most favorable when it comes to endorser marketing in regards to purchase intention and brand attitude, which may be due to the more intense vetting processes associated with choosing celebrity endorsers, ensuring that they are dependable and have a good track record. With all of the above being said, there may still be many factors that support the use of influencers in endorser marketing, such as the financial resources required and their niche audience, which may have led to more and more companies to consider influencer marketing. However, to maximize the potential regarding purchase intention and brand attitude, we can conclude from our findings that newer is not always better, and that traditional endorsers such as celebrities should still be considered for B2C marketing efforts.

6. References

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7. Appendix

Appendix A: Advertisement Stimuli used in study

Good Product-Endorser Fit	Bad Product-Endorser Fit
 <p>Endorser: Margot Robbie, Actress</p>	 <p>Endorser: Margot Robbie, Actress</p>
 <p>Endorser: Bianca Ingresso, YouTuber/Influencer</p>	 <p>Endorser: Bianca Ingresso, YouTuber/Influencer</p>
 <p>Endorser: Barbie, Fashion Doll & Cartoon Character</p>	 <p>Endorser: Barbie, Fashion Doll & Cartoon Character</p>

Appendix B: Survey used for the main study

Q1. What did you think of the brand?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Bad – Good	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Dislikable – Likeable	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Not Desirable – Desirable	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Not Interesting – Interesting	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q2. Please indicate your intention.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
How likely would it be for you to purchase the product in the advertisement? (Extremely Unlikely - Extremely Likely)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The next time I need the type of product shown in the advertisement, I will choose the brand shown in the advertisement I just saw. (Strongly disagree - Strongly agree)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If I needed the type of product shown in the advertisement during the past year, I would have purchased from the brand shown in the advertisement I just saw. (Strongly disagree - Strongly agree)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
In the next year, if I need the type of product shown in the advertisement, I will choose the brand shown in the advertisement I just saw. (Strongly disagree - Strongly agree)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q3. What was the brand in the advertisement?

- ☐ Aliss
☐ Brittany's
☐ Cindi
☐ Deux

Q4. Please answer these questions regarding the endorser shown.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
How familiar are you with the endorser? (Unfamiliar - Familiar)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I know the endorser. (Totally disagree - Totally agree)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am familiar with the endorser shown. (Strongly disagree - Strongly agree)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
This endorser is familiar to me. (Strongly disagree - Strongly agree)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q5. Please answer these questions regarding your opinion on the endorser shown.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The endorser shown seems friendly. (Strongly disagree - Strongly agree)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The endorser shown seems likeable. (Strongly disagree - Strongly agree)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The endorser shown seems approachable. (Strongly disagree - Strongly agree)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
How physically attractive do you consider the endorser to be? (Ugly - Beautiful)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q6. Please compare the endorser shown to yourself, and answer the following questions.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The endorser thinks like me. (Totally disagree - Totally agree)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The endorser behaves like me. (Totally disagree - Totally agree)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The endorser is like me. (Totally disagree - Totally agree)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The endorser is similar to me. (Totally disagree - Totally agree)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

ATTENTION CHECK: Grass is usually _ _ _ _ _

- ☐ Black
☐ Green

Q7. Please indicate how you perceive the endorser.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not Expert - Expert	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Inexperienced - Experienced	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Unknowledgeable - Knowledgeable	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Unqualified - Qualified	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q8. Please indicate how you perceive the endorser.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Untrustworthy - Trustworthy	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Undependable - Dependable	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Dishonest - Honest	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Unreliable - Reliable	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q9. Please describe how you perceive the fit between the endorser and the product.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Bad - Good	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Not appropriate at all - Very appropriate	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Not natural at all - Very natural	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Not at all logical - Very logical	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Participant Information

Please answer the following questions.

How old are you?

Age

I identify as

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary / third gender
- ☐ Prefer not to say

I currently live in Sweden

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

How many hours per day do you spend on social media? (for decimal, use ".") (e.g. Instagram, TikTok, FaceBook, YouTube)

Hours per day

Appendix C: Pre-test 1 results showing ranking of exposure to endorsers, and ranking of top product segments for endorsements

Endorser	n	%
Celebrities	61	29.90
Influencers	60	29.41
Mascots	43	21.08
Ordinary people	17	8.33
Experts	13	6.37
Employees	8	3.92
Other	2	0.98

Product Segment	n	%
Beauty	45	33.09
Fitness	40	29.41
Fashion	31	22.79
Food & Beverage	8	5.88
Travel	1	0.74
Gaming	1	0.74
Technology	4	2.94
Restaurants	1	0.74
Home furnishing	2	1.47
Toys & Hobby	0	0
Health	2	1.47
Automobile	0	0
App	1	0.74
Other	0	0

Appendix D: Pre-test 2 results showing the perceived fit for each endorser in the beauty segment, as well as the fit of products to its respective segment

Endorser	Fit (mean)	SD
<i>Celebrity</i>		
Rihanna	5.74	1.55
Margot Robbie	6.40	0.89
Bella Hadid	6.08	1.38
<i>Influencer</i>		
Bianca Ingrosso	6.12	1.18
NikkieTutorials	5.80	1.60
Ida Warg	5.72	1.00
<i>Mascot</i>		
Barbie	4.48	1.04
Minnie Mouse	3.12	1.73
Hello Kitty	3.48	1.50

Product	Fit (mean)	SD
<i>Beauty</i>		
Face Serum	6.20	0.75
Lip Gloss	6.56	0.46
Eye Shadow	6.01	0.45
Perfume	6.10	0.34
<i>Fitness</i>		
Protein Powder	6.43	0.79
Yoga Mat	5.78	0.88
Leggings	6.03	0.72
Fitness tracker	5.89	0.45