The Impact of Celebrity Endorsements on Brand Equity in the Bulawayo Supermarket Sector: Evidence from OK Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of celebrity endorsements on brand equity in Bulawayo supermarkets, framed within a positivist philosophy and a deductive approach. A quantitative survey design was employed, using a structured questionnaire administered to a convenience sample of 222 consumers. Reliability was confirmed with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70, ensuring internal consistency. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, correlation tests, and multiple regression modelling. Empirical results from the study revealed significant positive associations, with credibility as the strongest predictor, followed by familiarity, while message effectiveness played a modest role. The regression model explained 62 percent of the variance in brand equity, highlighting the centrality of endorsement cues in competitive retail contexts. It is concluded that Zimbabwean consumers prefer credibility and cultural familiarity over message strength, consistent with heuristic processing. The study recommends marketers to prioritise credible, locally resonant celebrities to strengthen consumer trust and loyalty.

Keywords: Celebrity endorsements, brand equity, consumer behaviour

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In recent years, the application of celebrity endorsements has become a cornerstone strategy in marketing, reflecting a shift towards leveraging public personas to create emotional resonance with consumers (Freberg et al., 2021; Erdogan, 2020). Such endorsements have demonstrated the capacity to enhance brand equity by influencing consumer perceptions, driving loyalty, and amplifying brand visibility (Till & Shimp, 1998; Mavhiki et al., 2020). The potency of celebrity endorsements lies not only in their ability to add instant credibility and glamour but also in their potential to forge authentic connections with target audiences (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995; Chae et al., 2021). Current research indicates that the relationship between celebrity endorsements and brand equity is multifaceted, driven by factors including the credibility and familiarity of the endorsed figure, as well as the nature of the endorsement message (Ohanian, 1990; Kamins, 1990). Credibility is defined by the perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness of the celebrity, which significantly enhances consumers' preferences and purchase intentions (Erdogan, 1999; Lee & Youn, 2018). Familiarity fosters recognition and comfort, shaping consumers' emotional responses and decision-making processes (Ohanian, 1990; Keller, 2020).

Despite the recognized efficacy of celebrity endorsements, there exists a conspicuous gap in the literature concerning their application in African markets, particularly Zimbabwean contexts (Muthuri et al., 2019; Ndlela, 2022). The complexities and cultural nuances inherent in these markets necessitate a robust examination to comprehend how endorsements function under these specific conditions (Kaira, 2022; Chan et al., 2021). Furthermore, the volatility of celebrities' public images poses significant risks; public controversies can undermine brand equity if a celebrity is found to be misaligned with the brand's core values (Chae et al., 2021; Adebayo et al., 2020). Therefore, exploring the dynamics of celebrity endorsements within the Bulawayo supermarket sector, an arena characterized by unique socio-economic factors and consumer behaviours, becomes especially pertinent. This study aims to contribute vital insights into effective marketing strategies in the Zimbabwean context, where cultural and emotional dimensions significantly shape consumer behaviour, particularly in retail environments.

Statement of the Problem

The effectiveness of celebrity endorsements in Zimbabwe is often undermined by marketing strategies that fail to account for local consumer behaviour, leading to sub-optimal brand equity gains (Mavhiki et al., 2020). Existing research inadequately addresses how celebrity credibility and familiarity translate into tangible consumer perceptions within the unique Zimbabwean socio-cultural context (Kaira, 2022). The potential for negative brand associations due to celebrity scandals further complicates the landscape (Chae et al., 2021; Adebayo et al., 2022). Without this study, marketers risk misallocating resources on ineffective campaigns, potentially damaging brand reputation and hindering sustainable growth in an increasingly competitive market (Nguyen et al., 2023). This research is, therefore, crucial for developing culturally resonant and effective endorsement strategies that drive brand success ().

Objectives

1. To assess the impact of celebrity endorsements on brand equity among consumers in the Bulawayo supermarket sector.

2. To determine the impact of celebrity familiarity on brand equity among consumers in the Bulawayo supermarket sector.

3. To assess the effect of celebrity credibility on brand equity among Bulawayo supermarket sector customers.

4. To evaluate the importance of the endorsement message on brand equity in the Bulawayo supermarket sector.

Hypotheses

H1: Celebrity credibility is positively related to brand equity in the Bulawayo supermarket sector.

H2: Celebrity familiarity is positively related to brand equity among consumers in the Bulawayo supermarket sector.

H3: The endorsement message is positively related to brand equity in the Bulawayo supermarket sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The body of literature on celebrity endorsements and brand equity intricately weaves theoretical foundations with empirical studies, revealing the dynamics at play in this marketing domain. This section outlines the key theoretical perspectives before delving into extensive empirical findings, ultimately leading to the proposed conceptual framework.

The Concept of Celebrity Endorsement

The concept of celebrity endorsements speaks to a multifaceted marketing strategy that harnesses the appeal of well-known figures to bolster brand equity. According to Kamga (2017), celebrity endorsement is not merely about promoting products; it signifies a powerful mechanism for influencing consumer behaviour and enhancing brand visibility. Mpinganjira (2017) describes this strategy as a form of recommendation advertising, emphasizing the importance of personal connections that celebrities foster with their audiences. Anazodo et al. (2017) expand on this by asserting that celebrity endorsements not only create brand awareness but also cultivate brand affinity, which is particularly vital in markets where cultural ties and personal identification play essential roles.

Differentiating celebrity endorsements from expert or user-generated endorsements is crucial. Erdogan (1999) argues that the unique nature of celebrity endorsement lies in leveraging the celebrity's reputation rather than their expertise, suggesting that emotional resonance often outweighs rational appeal. This distinction resonates with the African context, where local celebrities frequently engender stronger consumer trust and relatability

(Mabote, 2017; Anazodo et al., 2017). However, the rise of social media and influencers complicates this landscape, as these new types of endorsements can either complement or detract from traditional celebrity endorsements, especially if influencers fail to engage authentically with their audiences (Freberg et al., 2011).

When examining dimensions of celebrity endorsements, familiarity and credibility emerge as critical factors. Kamga (2017) posits that familiarity increases consumer trust in endorsed brands, aligning with the concept of cognitive fluency, which asserts that consumers more readily process information associated with familiar figures (Kahneman, 2011). This correlation between familiarity and enhanced brand equity is further supported by studies that indicate familiarity can dramatically boost brand recall and purchase intentions (Spry et al., 2011). Conversely, credibility, defined as the perceived trustworthiness and expertise of an endorser (Ohanian, 1990), is pivotal for influencing consumer attitudes and fostering brand loyalty (Erdogan, 1999).

While the endorsement message's quality is salient, recent debates suggest it is overshadowed by the characteristics of the celebrity endorser themselves. The robust connection between celebrity credibility and brand equity emphasizes a need for marketers to focus on selecting endorsers who not only align with brand values but also resonate with consumers' perceptions. With risks such as negative publicity holding the potential to undermine brand equity, as noted by Anazodo et al. (2017), careful consideration of celebrity engagement becomes imperative, particularly in African contexts where cultural factors significantly impact consumer behaviour. This scholarly view appreciates the complexity and dynamics of celebrity endorsement strategies, highlighting a path forward for more specific, culturally relevant marketing approaches that can effectively elevate brand equity in diverse contexts.

Theoretical Framework

The effectiveness of celebrity endorsements can be explained through several theoretical lenses, notably the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), Source Credibility Theory (SCT), and Aaker's Brand Equity Model. The ELM posits that persuasion can occur through two primary routes: the central route, involving thoughtful consideration of message content, and the peripheral route, where superficial cues, such as celebrity endorsements, influence attitudes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Research suggests that consumers primarily engage in central processing when they have high involvement with a product, while the peripheral cues become salient in low-involvement scenarios (Kamins, 1990; Spry et al., 2011; Mhaka, 2025). This differentiation pronounces the need for careful selection of endorsers to maximize persuasive efficacy, particularly in cultural contexts where celebrity status holds significant sway.

The SCT emphasizes that communication effectiveness is contingent on the perceived credibility of the source, comprising expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Hovland et al., 1953). When consumers view a celebrity as credible, their attitudes toward the endorsed brand improve, thus enhancing brand equity (Ohanian, 1990). Research highlights that consumers are more likely to favour brands endorsed by trustworthy and expert celebrities, leading to stronger brand associations and increased loyalty (Erdogan, 2020; Adebayo et al., 2022; Mhaka, 2025). Also underpinning the study, Aaker's Brand Equity model identifies five dimensions of brand equity, namely; brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations (Aaker, 1991). This framework provides essential insights into how celebrity endorsements can positively influence these elements. Favourable endorsements, as asserted by Atilgan et al., (2016), enhance brand loyalty and awareness by fostering positive associations between the celebrity and the brand.

Empirical Literature

The empirical literature on celebrity endorsements and brand equity offers significant insights while revealing critical gaps that this study seeks to address. Spry et al. (2011) explored the impact of celebrity endorsements in Australia, concluding that such endorsements positively influence brand equity when the celebrity is viewed as credible and trustworthy. Despite these findings, the focus on an Australian demographic restricts applicability to different cultural settings, calling for broader investigations across various Western contexts. Building on, Ndlela (2012) found that celebrity endorsements can enhance consumer loyalty and purchase intentions in South

Africa, particularly when the endorser is perceived as attractive and relevant. However, this study's context-specific findings limit generalizability to other African markets, such as Zimbabwe.

Mpinganjira (2017) further emphasized the role of celebrity endorsements in Malawi, highlighting that credibility enhances brand awareness and loyalty among consumers. However, the parallels to Zimbabwean consumer behaviour remain underexplored, indicating a need for more localized research. Elsewhere, Lee and Youn (2018) investigated the effects of celebrity endorsements on brand equity in South Korea and established credibility as a significant predictor. Nonetheless, the cultural specificity of their study may limit its relevance in diverse African markets, including Zimbabwe. Similarly, Koernig and Boyd (2018) assessed endorsements in the USA, showing enhanced brand image and perceived quality with appropriate celebrity-brand fit. However, their experimental design may not mimic real-world contexts, suggesting the necessity for studies that utilize naturalistic settings.

Most recently, Mavhiki et al. (2023) examined celebrity endorsements among Zimbabwean consumers, demonstrating positive impacts on brand equity through increased brand awareness and trust. However, their findings did not consider the variability of effects based on demographic factors, underscoring the importance of this current study in addressing those nuances. Cumulatively, these studies highlight the urgent need for comprehensive, culturally resonant strategies to effectively leverage celebrity endorsements in Zimbabwe. They also pinpoint the gaps in empirical research that this study aims to fill, particularly focusing on consumer dynamics, demographic influences, and the evolving landscape of marketing within the Bulawayo supermarket sector.

Conceptual Framework

The proposed conceptual framework (see, Figure 2.1), captures the interrelationships among celebrity endorsements and brand equity. Celebrity credibility is posited to positively influence brand awareness and brand loyalty. Endorsers perceived as trustworthy and expert enhance consumer recognition and commitment to the brand. Celebrity familiarity is expected to enhance Brand associations and perceived quality. The recognition and relatability of the endorser foster deeper emotional connections with the brand, resulting in increased consumer trust and favourable evaluations of quality. The endorsement message significantly impacts overall brand equity. A crafted message that resonates with consumers reinforces the effects of both credibility and familiarity.
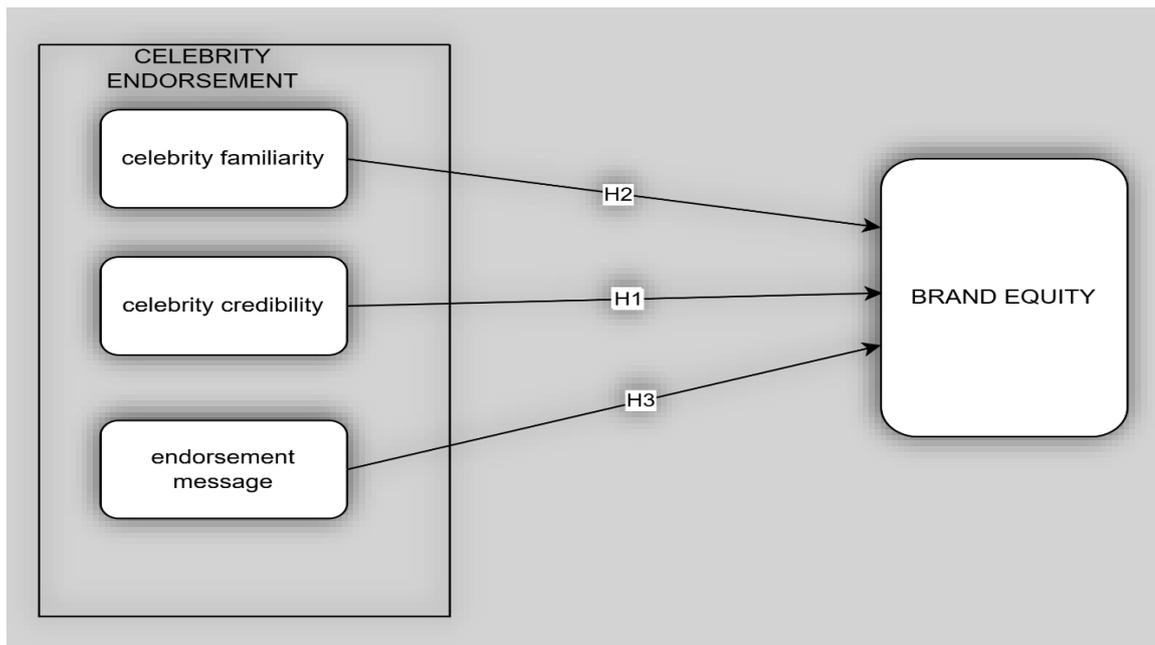

Figure 2.1: Conceptual framework   Source: Literature Study (2025)

The interplay among the dimensions outlined in the conceptual framework is critical for understanding how celebrity endorsements function to enhance brand equity. The significant relationships posited argue that credibility amplifies the effectiveness of familiarity (Erdogan, 2020; Mavhiki et al., 2023). When consumers recognize and trust an endorser, they are more likely to engage positively with the promoted brand, forming favourable associations and increasing their likelihood of purchasing those products (Owusu et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023). The content of the endorsement message plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer perceptions and brand equity. Supported by the findings of Till and Shimp (1998) and Adebayo et al. (2022), it is evident that messages must align with the endorser's perceived credibility and the brand's core values to resonate effectively with target audiences. This underlines the importance of selecting credible and familiar endorsers but further crafting engaging, relevant endorsement messages that evoke positive emotional responses.

METHODOLOGY

The study is anchored in a positivist research philosophy, which emphasizes the use of objective, scientific methods to generate quantifiable data (Bryman, 2016). This orientation was appropriate for examining the relationship between celebrity endorsements and brand equity, as it facilitated statistical testing and causal inference (Creswell, 2014). A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed to capture consumer attitudes at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of endorsement effects within the Bulawayo supermarket sector. The target population comprised supermarket consumers, with OK Zimbabwe selected as the focal case due to its market prominence.

A stratified random sampling technique was applied to ensure representation across demographic categories such as age, gender, and income, thereby minimizing bias and enhancing generalizability (Cochran, 1977). The sample size of 222 respondents was determined using Yamane's formula (1967), ensuring statistical adequacy. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of closed-ended and Likert-scale items designed to measure perceptions of celebrity credibility, familiarity, and endorsement message effectiveness. Instrument refinement was achieved through a pilot test, which confirmed clarity, reliability, and contextual relevance. Ethical safeguards were rigorously observed, with informed consent obtained and anonymity assured throughout the process (Creswell, 2016).

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 30.0, following a structured sequence of procedures to ensure rigour and validity. Reliability was assessed through Cronbach's alpha coefficients, confirming internal consistency across constructs. Descriptive statistics were first employed to profile respondent demographics, followed by correlation analysis to examine associations among the key variables. Finally, multiple regression analysis was applied to determine the relative predictive strength of endorsement dimensions in relation to brand equity. All tests were executed at the 95% confidence level, ensuring robustness and replicability.

RESULTS

A total of 222 valid responses were analysed. The demographic profile showed that 42% of respondents were aged 26–35 years, 36% were aged 18–25, while the remaining 22% were above 35 years. Females constituted 54% of the sample, compared to 46% males. In terms of income, 48% reported monthly earnings between US$200–500, 32% below US$200, and 20% above US$500. Educational attainment was dominated by diploma and degree holders, accounting for 67% of respondents.

Instrument reliability was confirmed, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70: celebrity credibility ($\alpha = 0.81$), familiarity ($\alpha = 0.78$), message effectiveness ($\alpha = 0.74$), and brand equity ($\alpha = 0.83$). These values established strong internal consistency across constructs.

Descriptive statistics revealed mean scores above the midpoint of the Likert scale for credibility (M = 3.98, SD = 0.72) and familiarity (M = 3.85, SD = 0.76), while message effectiveness recorded a lower mean (M = 3.42, SD = 0.81). Brand equity was rated relatively high (M = 4.01, SD = 0.69).

Hypothesis Testing

H1: Celebrity credibility positively influences brand equity. Decision: Accepted.

Correlation analysis revealed a strong positive association (r = 0.62, p < 0.001). Regression confirmed credibility as the most influential predictor (β = 0.41, p < 0.001).

H2: Celebrity familiarity positively influences brand equity. Decision: Accepted

Familiarity correlated significantly with brand equity (r = 0.55, p < 0.001) and emerged as the second strongest predictor in regression (β = 0.33, p < 0.01).

H3: Endorsement Message Effectiveness positively influences brand equity. Decision: Partially supported.

Although message effectiveness correlated positively (r = 0.41, p < 0.01), its regression coefficient was weaker (β = 0.18, p < 0.05), indicating modest predictive power.

Consequently, the overall regression model was statistically significant (F(3,218) = 118.4, p < 0.001), explaining 62% of the variance in brand equity (R^2 = 0.62).

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis tests confirm that celebrity credibility and familiarity are decisive drivers of brand equity, while message effectiveness plays a comparatively modest role. The regression model's explanatory power (R^2 = 0.62) underscores that endorsement variables are central to equity formation in Zimbabwe's supermarket sector, where commoditized offerings and intense competition heighten the importance of differentiation through endorsements.

Interpretation of Hypotheses

H1 (Credibility → Brand Equity): The dominance of credibility aligns with the Source Credibility Model (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), which emphasizes trustworthiness and expertise as the foundation of persuasive communication. Erdogan (2020) similarly argues that credible endorsers enhance consumer loyalty more effectively than message content, a claim substantiated here by the strong beta coefficient (β = 0.41, p < 0.001).

H2 (Familiarity → Brand Equity): Familiarity's predictive strength (β = 0.33, p < 0.01) resonates with Muthuri et al. (2017), who found that African consumers trust brands endorsed by culturally proximate celebrities. In Zimbabwe, endorsements by Jah Prayzah and Winky D have historically amplified brand acceptance across diverse demographics (Muzondo, 2021), mirroring Ghanaian findings where locally endorsed brands were perceived as more authentic (Owusu et al., 2018).

H3 (Endorsement Message Effectiveness → Brand Equity): The weaker role of endorsement message effectiveness (β = 0.18, p < 0.05) diverges from Lee & Watkins (2017), who reported that message strength was critical in Western contexts. This contradiction highlights the contextual nature of endorsement effectiveness. Zimbabwean consumers, operating in a price-sensitive supermarket environment, appear to rely more on heuristic cues than on elaborated argument quality. This reliance is consistent with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which posits that under conditions of low involvement, peripheral cues such as endorser identity dominate persuasion.

Comparisons across African markets reinforce these insights. In Nigeria, Wizkid's endorsement of Pepsi enhanced youth loyalty through cultural resonance (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010), while in South Africa, Nomzamo Mbatha's partnership with Puma strengthened brand authenticity (Moyo et al., 2017). Zimbabwe's supermarket sector reflects similar dynamics, but with heightened emphasis on local celebrities whose cultural familiarity fosters trust. Unlike global endorsements (e.g., Messi for MTN), which transcend cultural boundaries,

Zimbabwean consumers demonstrate stronger attachment to locally embedded figures, highlighting the salience of cultural proximity in endorsement effectiveness.

Essentially, the results show strong agreement with African and regional studies emphasizing credibility and familiarity, while contradicting Western literature that privileges message strength. This divergence contributes to theory by extending the Customer Based Brand Equity framework (Keller, 1993) into an African retail setting, demonstrating that brand equity formation is contingent upon endorser authenticity and cultural alignment rather than message primacy. The study thus advances endorsement scholarship by situating global models within Zimbabwe's unique consumer culture, revealing both convergence with regional evidence and divergence from Western assumptions.

CONCLUSIONS

This study assesses the impact of celebrity endorsements on brand equity in the Bulawayo supermarket sector, with specific focus on OK Zimbabwe. The objectives were to determine the influence of celebrity familiarity, credibility, and endorsement message on brand equity, and to provide evidence-based recommendations for practice. The results conclusively demonstrate that celebrity credibility ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$) and familiarity ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$) are the strongest predictors of brand equity, while endorsement message effectiveness ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$) plays a comparatively modest role. The regression model explained 62% of the variance in brand equity, confirming the centrality of endorsement variables in shaping consumer perceptions.

Practical implications are clear. Zimbabwean supermarkets must prioritize credible and culturally proximate celebrities whose reputations are stable and whose identities resonate with local consumers. Long-term partnerships, coupled with continuous monitoring of brand-endorser alignment, are essential to mitigate reputational risks. Age segmentation should be considered, as younger consumers demonstrated heightened responsiveness to endorsements, and integration with social media platforms can amplify familiarity and reach. From a theoretical perspective, the study entrenches the Customer-Based Brand Equity framework (Keller, 1993) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) into an African retail context. The findings confirm that peripheral cues such as credibility and familiarity dominate equity formation in Zimbabwe, challenging Western literature (Lee & Watkins, 2017) that privileges message strength. This divergence reiterates the contextual nature of endorsement effectiveness and enriches global marketing theory by situating endorsement dynamics within emerging economies.

Socially, the reliance on culturally proximate celebrities highlights the role of endorsements in reinforcing local identity and consumer trust. Endorsements by Zimbabwean iconic figures such as Jah Prayzah or Winky D effectively strengthen brand equity while contributing to cultural pride and social cohesion. However, the risks of misalignment or reputational volatility stress the need for ethical and socially responsible endorsement practices that safeguard consumer trust. Key recommendations from the researchers include; prioritizing credible, authentic, and culturally resonant endorsers; adopting long-term endorsement strategies integrated with social media; segmenting endorsement campaigns by age demographics; and institutionalizing monitoring mechanisms to ensure sustained brand-endorser fit.

Limitations

The study is subject to several limitations. For a start, the geographical scope was confined to Bulawayo, limiting generalizability to other regions of Zimbabwe or beyond. Reliance on self-reported data also introduces potential biases such as social desirability and respondent dishonesty. In addition, the cross-sectional design captures consumer perceptions at a single point in time, excluding longitudinal effects of endorsements. Critically, the focus on OK Zimbabwe alone may not fully represent endorsement dynamics across other supermarket chains. Finally, external factors such as economic fluctuations, competitor activity, and broader cultural shifts were not incorporated into the model, potentially influencing endorsement effectiveness.

Suggestions for Further Research

Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to capture the sustained impact of endorsements on brand equity over time. Comparative research across multiple supermarket chains and regions would enhance generalizability and reveal sectoral differences. Incorporating mixed-methods approaches, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, could provide deeper insights into consumer perceptions of authenticity and trust. Further empirical attention should also explore the role of non-traditional influencers, such as social media personalities, in shaping brand equity, particularly among younger demographics. Importantly, cross-cultural comparative studies between Zimbabwe and other African markets (e.g., Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa) would illuminate the extent to which endorsement effectiveness is moderated by cultural proximity versus global celebrity appeal.

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