

Enhancing Brand Loyalty Through Consumer-Celebrity Congruence in the Hospitality Sector

Abstract

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This study aims to investigate how consumer-celebrity match impacts brand engagement and loyalty in the hospitality industry with an effort to understand better consumer-celebrity marketing and its underlying principles the Meaning Transfer Model (MTM) and Customer Brand Engagement (CBE) were applied to assess the direct and indirect impacts of measurement model variables on celebrity marketing. The quantitative methodology was used in this study with data from 490 respondents. The outcome reveals that consumer-celebrity match has a favourable effect on brand engagement and brand engagement also leads to a positive correlation with brand loyalty. The research provides insightful conclusions for managers looking to optimize their marketing strategy based on the result.

Keywords: Consumer - Celebrity Match, Brand loyalty, Brand Engagement, Celebrity endorsement, Hospitality

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Introduction

Celebrities build significant connections with many of their followers (Boon & Lomore, 2001; Banister & Cocker, 2013). Various media figures can serve as relatable and influential role models for individuals, engaging them in meaningful ways. (Rojek, 2012). Several studies suggest that consumer engagement with celebrities significantly impacts their brand associations and product preferences (Thomson, 2006; Banister & Cocker, 2013; Hung et al., 2011; Choi & Rifon, 2012; Hung, 2014; Loroz & Braig, 2015; Kerrigan et al., 2011). Despite the recent surge of interest in Celebrity Brand Engagement (CBE) and extensive research on the influence of celebrities on brand engagement and loyalty, the specific interactions between consumers-celebrities, brand engagement, and brand loyalty remain inadequately explored (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014) and more empirical data is required to clearly illustrate how this relationship affects brand engagement towards brand loyalty. Based on the existing literature, we propose that cognition, affection, and activation play pivotal roles in shaping dimensions of Celebrity Brand Engagement (CBE) (Hollebeek et al., 2011). Our research aims to develop and empirically assess a conceptual framework that illustrates how varying alignments between consumers and celebrities influence brand engagement and, consequently, brand loyalty. We utilized survey data from young individuals in Ho Chi Minh City to evaluate our model focused on customer brand engagement.

The hospitality business is greatly impacted by branding marketing since it shapes consumer impressions and decisions. CBE also contributed that luxury hotel brand coolness responding to spread brand qualities foster satisfaction and love (Khoi & Le, 2022). Effective branding strategies have been scientifically recognized to enhance profitability and competitiveness for hotels and restaurants. Furthermore, with the rapid advancement of digital marketing technologies, hospitality firms are increasingly leveraging digital tools on Internet platforms to emphasize their brand (Yusrini et al., 2024). Through strategic brand positioning and management, establishments can cultivate a distinct identity, inspire trust, and evoke positive emotions among their customers, thereby influencing their decision-making process. In the context of the experience economy, branding in the hospitality industry plays a critical role in shaping customers' overall satisfaction and fostering long-term loyalty (Chihwai & Dube, 2023). This study aims to fill an existing research gap by investigating the relationship between consumer-celebrity congruence, brand engagement, and brand loyalty. Employing rigorous research methodology and data analysis, the study seeks to provide empirical evidence and valuable insights for brand managers and marketers. The findings are expected to assist businesses in making informed decisions regarding celebrity endorsements and in designing effective marketing strategies tailored to their target audience.

Theoretical background

MTM theory of celebrity endorsement

Celebrity endorsement, following the Meaning Transfer Model by McCracken (1989), postulates that famous people serve as cultural intermediaries, lending their personal qualities, beliefs, and authority to endorse goods or companies. This approach emphasizes how strongly celebrity endorsements affect customer views. Celebrities who have established reputations and pictures help the approved entity understand these meanings. It is a major approach in advertising and branding because the endorsement makes use of the celebrity's persona to inspire trust and influence customer behaviors (McCracken, 1989). Therefore, Thomson's (2006) findings are consistent with the idea that a consumer's development of attachment to a celebrity



is more dependent on the elements of autonomy and relatedness within the self-determination framework, rather than on competency. Celebrities and fans have a complicated and symbiotic relationship. Celebrities frequently play key roles in popular culture, setting trends. Brands need to consider carefully in selecting the right celebrity for their promotional strategies (Kumar et al., 2024). Consumers, on the other hand, connect emotionally with their favorite celebrities and look to them for motivation and aspiration. The study construct "Consumer-Celebrity Match" is based on this relationship. The alignment of a consumer's self-identity, values, and lifestyle with those of a celebrity is referred to as this construct. It denotes the degree to which customers believe that a celebrity's image and their personal qualities are similar. Leveraging the influence of celebrity endorsements and brand associations requires an understanding of this concept.

Brand engagement construct

The academic marketing literature increasingly focuses on fostering deeper experiential connections with customers, particularly through brand associations (Dessart et al., 2015). Engagement in the workplace is influenced by factors such as organizational justice and trust (Erdoğan et al., 2022). Hollebeek (2011) defines engagement as the interaction between an individual (the "engagement subject") and a central entity (the "engagement object"), which could be a product offering, organization, or brand, leading to varying levels of intensity and motivation (Brodie et al., 2011). Authors emphasize the multidimensional nature of engagement (Dessart et al., 2015; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Leckie et al., 2016). In the context of hospitality, elements such as knowledge, accomplishment, and stimulation significantly influence intrinsic service experiences for customers. On the other hand, combining social commerce activities with cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement strategies enhances extrinsic service guest experiences with hotel brands (Zhang et al., 2020). The construct of engagement is crucial as it reflects consumers' experiences and plays a vital role in building relationships between brands and consumers (Ntlantsana et al., 2023).

Customer brand engagement represents the dynamic interaction between consumers and brands. This construct highlights the emotional and cognitive connection, showing how much a consumer invests in a brand in terms of beliefs, values, and identity. Brand involvement, according to Algesheimer et al. (2005) and Hollebeek et al. (2014), is a multifaceted term including behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Such participation is essential for promoting brand advocacy and brand loyalty (Brodie et al., 2011). In essence, it serves as an example of the intense and long-lasting connection that customers develop with businesses that goes beyond merely utilitarian interactions. Hollebeek et al. (2014) identify and validate three dimensions of CBE by highlighting brands as active participants in engagement: cognitive processing (cognitive CBE), affection (emotional CBE), and activation (behavioral CBE). The first dimension is Cognitive processing, which pertains to the level of a consumer's thoughtful analysis and profound contemplation regarding a brand. An endorsed product's cognitive impacts include awareness and knowledge. At the outset, individuals intrigued by a particular celebrity are prone to consciously direct their attention toward advertisements featuring that celebrity (Wei and Lu, 2013). Additionally, people tend to naturally direct their attention towards such content by default. When stimuli are related to their goals, people usually react more favorably (Lang, 2000). Furthermore, because celebrities are well-known, it is simpler to access their representations in memory (Erfgen et al., 2015). The study by Bilro et al. (2018) concluded that customers' review endeavors are significantly impacted by the engagement cognitive processing component and hedonic experience. Secondly, Affection denotes the extent of a consumer's positive emotional connection with a brand. Affective effects deal with attitudes toward the marketed product as well as sentiments regarding the advertisement. This influence might be best understood in terms of the balance hypothesis (Heider, 1946). The theoretical guide elucidates why individuals aim to uphold consistency among a set of three interconnected cognitions. People often strive to maintain a harmonious alignment within their cognitive processes, perceiving this state as the most conducive to reducing tension or discomfort. Thirdly, Activation encompasses the time, effort, and energy a consumer invests in interacting with a brand. The aforementioned statement is in reference to the brand's dedication, engagement, and active involvement of customers. Strong brand engagement may emerge from consumers' self-identity being in line with the celebrity-endorsed brand. Making a purchase or using a product (Siemens et al., 2008; Kamins & Gupta, 1994), sharing product information, donating time to a cause, volunteering, or casting a ballot (Myrick & Evans, 2014; Wei & Lu, 2013; Wheeler, 2009; Pease and Brewer, 2008) are a few examples of behavioral effects. Such effects are frequently explained (Ajzen, 1991) by the theory of planned conduct. Based on a recent study by Hao (2020), based on five core ideas, a thorough description of consumer involvement is put out.

Brand loyalty

Brand loyalty in the hospitality industry plays a crucial role in ensuring the long-term sustainability and profitability of businesses amidst intense competition. According to Kim & Cha (2002), fostering brand loyalty not only enhances overall revenue and promotes repeat business but also reduces the costs associated with acquiring new customers. Moreover, loyal customers tend to be more forgiving of occasional service shortcomings, safeguarding the brand's reputation. In hospitality, cultivating brand loyalty transcends mere business strategy (Wani et al., 2023). Research by Vrontis et al. (2021) suggests that strong identification with celebrities can create a sense of belonging among consumers who share similar interests and values. Celebrity endorsements can thus foster emotional connections that enhance brand trust (Zhong et al., 2021). By delivering immersive brand experiences that go beyond transactional moments and establish enduring psychological connections, Celebrity Brand Engagement (CBE) has the potential to increase brand loyalty by cultivating favourable perceptions of the brand (Vivek et al., 2012; Hollebeek, 2011). Customers develop robust relational bonds with brands through loyalty behaviours like repeated patronage and positive endorsements, which are influenced by the interactive and immersive nature of CBE

(Dwivedi, 2015). According to France et al. (2016), this heightened engagement among customers is anticipated to significantly impact their loyalty behavior, indicating that their commitment and connection play a crucial role in fostering brand loyalty. While CBE is expected to forecast Brand Loyalty (BL) (Dessart et al., 2015) and promote enhanced brand retention, existing research remains largely conceptual or qualitative, lacking empirical data regarding the role of CBE in fostering loyalty development (So et al., 2016). Jahn & Kunz (2012), Dessart (2017), Hutter et al. (2013), and Carvalho & Fernandes (2018) collectively suggest that consumers' active involvement has a positive impact on BL with other loyalty-related results in the context of social media. Consumer trust to enhance brand loyalty could influence customers toward purchasing from social media platforms.

Hypotheses and research model

When celebrities endorse a product, consumers tend to show greater interest compared to products that are not endorsed or supported by celebrities. This heightened interest stems from the inherent newsworthiness celebrities possess due to their fame (Corbett and Mori, 1999). Consumers are more inclined to take product recommendations from celebrities seriously because of their widespread popularity. Research suggests that more complex messages, such as those delivered by celebrities, can enhance product recall and recognition (Petty et al., 1983). A research model has been developed to explore the relationships among three key factors: Consumer-celebrity Match, Brand Engagement, and Brand Loyalty (Figure 1). Specifically, the study breaks down Brand Engagement into three dimensions (Hollebeek et al., 2014). The conceptual model proposes six direct relationships (Figure 2), aiming to gather data to assess the alignment of this framework in practice.



Figure 1: The conceptual framework of this study

Consumer-celebrity match and brand engagement

According to Miller & Allen (2012), celebrity endorsements may affect consumers' understanding of the meaning of the endorsed product as well as their opinions of its price, level of taste, purchase risk, and perceived information value (Dean & Biswas, 2001; Friedman et al., 1976). As a result, traits associated with celebrities that emerged as a result of their social standing are applied to similar objects (McCracken, 1989). Last but not least, it has been hypothesized that Celebrity endorsements exert an influence on consumers' perceptions, awareness, and cognitive processes, encompassing their levels of interest and attention. These notions lead to a research hypothesis:

H1a: Consumer-celebrity match is positively associated with cognition

Erdogan (1999) argues that in celebrity endorsements, the cognitive framework involves three elements: the consumer, the celebrity, and the endorsed product or advertisement. Consistency occurs when consumers perceive both the celebrity and the endorsed product or advertisement as possessing similar positive or negative attributes. Ads featuring visually appealing celebrities often reinforce the link between consumer behavior and brand attitudes (Schutte & Chauke, 2022). This phenomenon stems from the widely perceived positive association between celebrities endorsing products and the products or advertisements themselves. It can be hypothesized that celebrity endorsements enhance consumers' perceptions of advertisements and attitudes toward the endorsed products. This hypothesis is grounded in the premise that celebrities, who are generally well-liked, influence consumer sentiments. According to Heider (1946), this alignment occurs when consumers' positive feelings toward the celebrity are transferred to the associated product, resulting in a shared positive valence. Therefore, we propose:

H1b: Consumer-celebrity match has a positive relationship with affection

Ajzen (1991) integrates the fourth construct of perceived behavioral control into the three categories of beliefs, attitudes, and subjective norms. Perceived behavioral control can be considered as a predictor of both behavioral intention and subsequent behavior. It concerns a person's evaluation of how easy or difficult a specific behavior can be performed. This hypothesis states that the stronger one's impression of behavioral control and purpose to engage in the conduct will be, the more favorable one's attitude and subjective standards are toward a particular behavior. This suggests that, in terms of celebrity endorsement, a famous endorser is a crucial determinant of whether a buyer would actually interact with or purchase the products. As a result, we postulate:

H1c: Consumer-celebrity match positively impacts Activation

Consumer brand engagement and brand loyalty

Previous research has established connections between the three dimensions of CBE – cognitive processing, attachment, and activation – and brand loyalty. Specifically, when consumers allocate cognitive resources by actively focusing or deeply engaging with a brand, it enhances the likelihood of fostering loyalty towards that brand (Hollebeek, 2011). According to

Dianawati et al. (2024), these internal factors significantly influence consumers' adoption and implementation of smart hotel technologies, thereby positively impacting loyalty. Additionally, Brand loyalty is stimulated when consumers establish robust emotional affiliations or bonds with the specified brand. If consumers dedicate time, energy, and exertion to the focal brands, their propensity to remain committed to those brands increases (Hollebeek, 2011). Customers actively involved or immersed in the brand are prone to enhancing their connection to the primary brands, developing strong opinions about them, and making repeat purchases, according to studies employing the standard hierarchy-of-effects model of loyalty (Vivek et al., 2012). These are followed by the following three hypotheses:

- H2a: Cognitive processing positively impacts brand loyalty*
- H2b: Affection has a positive relationship with brand loyalty*
- H2c: Activation has a positive effect on brand loyalty*

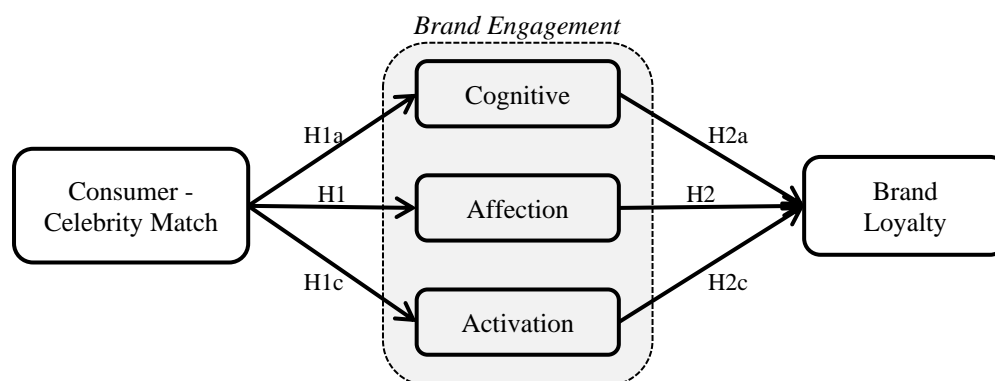


Figure 2: The research model of this study

Methodology

Sampling and data collection

The study also prompted respondents to recall the names of celebrities to contribute to the knowledge of recent celebrity trends. In the second part of the research, the focus was on assessing the correlation of factors using five question groups to gauge the impact of celebrity-consumer alignment on brand loyalty in the hospitality sector through brand engagement. Data collection was carried out via an online survey distributed across three universities: HCMC University of Economics and Finance (UEF), Ho Chi Minh City University of Foreign Languages - Information Technology (HUFLIT), and Da Lat University (DLU). The survey was disseminated at various times throughout the week to ensure diverse participation. Respondents were required to complete the survey independently, and their participation was voluntary and unconditional. The study was positioned as a scientific investigation to attract a higher number of participants. Out of 575 survey responses collected, 490 were deemed usable, resulting in a response rate of 85.2%.

This study utilized a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Totally disagree) to 7 (Totally agree) to measure various constructs. The conceptual model aimed to explore correlations among three latent variables: Consumer-celebrity match, Brand engagement, and Brand loyalty within the realm of Celebrity marketing. Brand loyalty was operationalized based on Yoo & Donthu (2001), Rather et al. (2018), and Khan (2019), using three items that demonstrated adequate reliability in branding marketing. It was segmented into three factors: cognition, affection, and activation (Hollebeek et al., 2016). Brand engagement encompassed three dimensions: Cognitive, Affection, and Activation, consisting of three, four, and three items respectively (Hollebeek et al., 2014). The construct of Consumer-celebrity Match was derived from Holt & Thompson (2004), Boon & Lomore (2001), and Thomson (2006), incorporating three observations. To minimize measurement errors, participants were encouraged to seek clarification on statements. After data collection, descriptive statistics were employed to analyze demographic frequencies and identify preferred celebrity names. Subsequently, reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). Finally, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) were employed to test hypotheses and the structural model. These analytical techniques were utilized to estimate relationships and validate the proposed hypotheses within the study framework.

Data analysis and results

Demographic information

In the descriptive analysis of the data, it was found that 61.4% of the respondents identified as female, while 38.6% identified as male. The majority of respondents fell within the age range of 18 to 25 years old, and most had completed at least a graduate-level education. Regarding the types of celebrities followed by respondents, Singers/Artists had the highest percentage of followers at 47.8%. This was followed by Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) at 17.2%, Fashionistas/Models at 14.5%, and Travel



conditions. Regarding the discriminant validity analysis, the square root of the average variance extracted for each construct was estimated in the correlations of the constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Table 2 specifies that squared correlations of any pair of two constructs lower than the square roots of AVE, thus this discriminant validity of the constructs was supported.

Table 2: CFA data analysis

	CR	AVE	MSV	CCM	COG	AFE	ACT	BLO
CCM	0.77	0.53	0.348	0.728				
COG	0.875	0.7	0.691	0.576	0.837			
AFE	0.934	0.78	0.691	0.44	0.832***	0.883		
ACT	0.901	0.753	0.71	0.531	0.709***	0.758***	0.868	
BLO	0.934	0.78	0.71	0.59	0.761***	0.766***	0.842***	0.883

Note: N = 490; AVE = Average variance extracted, CR = composite reliability; Square roots of AVE: numbers in bold. Model fit indicators: χ^2 (Chi-Square) = 307.712, df = 94, χ^2/df (Chi-square/df) = 3.274, CFI = 0.967, GFI = 0.927, and RMSEA = 0.068. *p < .05; **p < .01.

Structural equation model (SEM)

The structural equation model was shown as a structural analysis in Table 3. This can be seen that a high positive correlation between Consumer - Celebrity Match and Cognitive ($\beta = 0.91$, $p < 0.001$) so Hypothesis H1a is supported. Similarly, the relationship of Consumer - Celebrity Match with Affection and Activation are significant positive with good indicators ($\beta = 0.872$, $p < 0.001$, and $\beta = 0.82$, $p < 0.001$, respectively). Therefore, hypotheses H1b and H1c are accepted. In relation to the outcome, Cognitive has a significant positive relationship with Brand Loyalty ($\beta = 0.247$, $p < 0.001$), hypothesis H2a is supported. The correlation between Affection and Brand Loyalty ($\beta = 0.156$, $p = 0.003 < 0.01$) is also supported (H2b), as is that between Activation and Brand Loyalty ($\beta = 0.551$, $p < 0.001$), supporting hypothesis H2c. Overall, all hypotheses are supported and Consumer-Celebrity Match has highest influence on Cognitive in this model.

Table 3: Results of structural model

Variable	Standardized estimate	p - value	Hypotheses
Consumer - Celebrity match --> Cognitive	0.91	***	H1a: Supported
Consumer - Celebrity match --> Affection	0.872	***	H1b: Supported
Consumer - Celebrity match --> Activation	0.82	***	H1c: Supported
Cognitive --> Brand loyalty	0.247	***	H2a: Supported
Affection --> Brand loyalty	0.156	0.003	H2b: Supported
Activation --> Brand Loyalty	0.551	***	H2c: Supported

Note: Note: R squared values: Activate: 0.673; Affection: 0.761; Cognitive: 0.828; Brand loyalty: 0.776.

***p<0.001

The confirmed conceptual model

Table 3 also shows that Consumer - Celebrity match has a direct and positive influence on Cognitive, Affection, and Activation. And then, three dimensions of customer brand engagement also have a direct and positive influence on hospitality brand loyalty. It agrees that all the hypotheses are supported. Following that, Figure 4 illustrates the confirmation of the conceptual model and grade of impact.

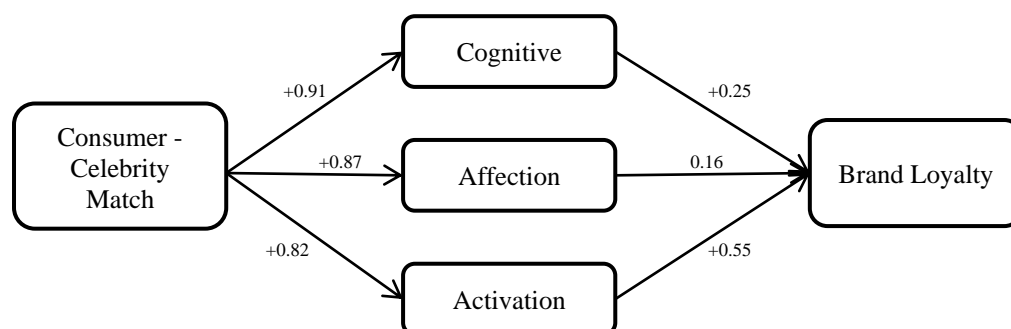


Figure 4: The confirmed conceptual model

Discussion and conclusion

Discussion

The conclusion illustrate the consequence of Consumer - Celebrity Match in Branding management and prove the constructive correlation affiliation with Brand Engagement and Brand Loyalty proposed by CBE theory. Through matching between consumer and celebrity, the firm could enhance the engagement between brands and consumers, and then shapely increase brand loyalty. Firstly, the findings indicate the significant impact of consumer-celebrity match on cognitive, affection, and



activation of these brands the respondents are concerned about, as expected ($H1_{a-c}$). In detail, consumer-celebrity match has the greatest impact on the affection of Brand engagement. In general, the analysis concludes that the match of Consumer and Celebrity has an optimistic outcome on customer brand engagement, including the cognitive, emotional, and behaviour of customer-related engaged brands. Secondly, the study found a constructive influence between Customer Brand Engagement and Brand loyalty ($H2_{a-c}$). The Cognitive that customer recognize via their favourite celebrities, enhances their loyalty to these brands. However, this impact is not as strong as the relationship between Cognitive and Brand loyalty (only 0.247). Similarly, we found the same level of impact of Affection on Brand Loyalty, with the lowest standard estimation of 0.156. Otherwise, a remarkable relationship can be seen between Activation and Brand loyalty (0.551). Finally, Consumer - celebrity Match has a positive impact on Brand Loyalty through the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activity of customer-related brands. Celebrity endorsement enhances the engagement between customers to their purchased brand and partly improves loyalty.

Theoretical implications

A variety of contributions to the literature on consumer-based engagement are figured out, particularly the CBE literature. Primarily, this study adds to the promising but little-studied field of consumer brand engagement overall and the link combination of consumers and celebrities in precise. The study's findings on consumer-celebrity match in the Vietnam context can provide theoretical support for consumer behaviour in the context of hospitality celebrity endorsements. Understanding how hospitality consumers in Vietnam respond to well-matched celebrities can provide insights into the aspects that weigh their brand engagement and loyalty. So, in response to a recent study (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Brodie et al., 2011) that asks for greater empirical verification of the CBE idea. To address this gap, the research aims to empirically test a conceptual framework that elucidates the associations among consumer-celebrity matching, cognition, affection, activation, and the resulting outcome of brand loyalty. The theoretical implications of the effect of consumer-celebrity match on brand engagement and brand loyalty in the background of hospitality encompass a wide range of topics, including cultural relevance, celebrity endorsement effectiveness, consumer identification, brand communication, trust-building, consumer-brand relationship, brand equity, brand image, social media marketing, and cross-cultural marketing. These implications provide valuable theoretical insights that can guide marketers and researchers in effectively leveraging celebrity endorsements to foster brand engagement and loyalty.

Managerial implications

By stipulating a CBE modelling, this performance delivers managers with an improved understanding of the developing 'engagement' concept (Avery, 2011). This effect could be assumed to design a specific CBE- or enhance brand loyalty that focuses on strategies and tactics. In terms of Celebrity endorsement, hotel or service managers need to clarify the appropriate types of Celebs that positively impact their brand, especially customer engagement. Recently, more and more people have become idols in their society which remarkably has several influences on consumers. Choosing the right Celebs plays a crucial role in terms of marketing strategies to enhance the loyalty of brands. Furthermore, the managerial implication of the proposed scale tends to provide an enhancing insight into consumers' specific cognitions, emotions, and behaviours in the site connecting with their favourite celebrities, which could be used for renovating or redesigning the insight of exact consumers' preference for improved effectiveness. These implications offer valuable insights into consumer behaviour, brand-celebrity fit, social media marketing, and communication strategies that can guide marketers in leveraging celebrity endorsements effectively and fostering stronger consumer-brand relationships in the hospitality context. For marketers in Vietnam, the study highlights the importance of carefully selecting celebrities who endorse the value of brands and engage with the potential segmentation. Choosing well-matched celebrities can significantly enhance brand engagement and loyalty, leading to more effective marketing campaigns. Building on the study's findings, managers can focus on strategies that are consistent with the brand and endorsed celebrity.

Limitations and recommendations

The limitations of methodology and theories can be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. Firstly, the behaviour of young customer needs to be more researched to state more strongly in the relationship with their favourite celebrities. Future research could aim to use more rigorous sampling techniques to ensure a more representative sample. The study may not have accounted for all potential factors influencing brand engagement and loyalty. Variables like product quality, price, and competition could play a role in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviour. Secondly, Combining self-report data with objective measures or behavioural data could mitigate this limitation. This study only stops to carry out general advice and implications for the whole hospitality industry. Thirdly, the discrepancies in the consumer and celebrity matching in this research and previous studies permit additional examination. The consequences show the frail influence of celebrities on their consumer in all sectors. Nevertheless, research in the future of this model across more and more contexts could favour researchers and specialists to comprehend the function of celebrities more systematically. The study may not have accounted for all potential factors influencing brand engagement and loyalty. Variables like product quality, price, and competition could play a function in shaping customer attitudes and behaviour.

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