



## Trust–commitment as a mediator of the celebrity endorser–brand equity relationship in a service context

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 17 September 2012

Accepted 17 October 2012

Available online 22 November 2012

#### Keywords:

Celebrity endorsements  
Trust  
Commitment  
Relationship continuity  
Brand equity

### ABSTRACT

The current study extends the endorsement literature by examining it in the trust–commitment framework. Specifically, the trust–commitment framework is examined as a mediator of the effect of endorser credibility on consumer perceived brand equity as well as consumer expectations of relationship continuity. The current study is conducted within a pure service (i.e., telecom service) context; adding incremental value to the findings given the pivotal role of the trust–commitment framework. The conceptual model is estimated using a sample of 525 Indian consumers that evaluate some of the major Indian telecom sector brand-and-endorser combinations. The model fits the data adequately, and the analysis supports a fully mediated role of the trust–commitment framework in explaining the hypothesized outcomes. The study complements theoretical perspectives on endorser effects, and suggests a relationship facilitating role of celebrity endorsements.

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### 1. Introduction

Advertisers often use celebrity endorsers in their advertising as a way to influence potential buyers of their product or service. Academic interest in this issue has led to a wide variety of approaches to the examination of the mechanism and effectiveness of the use of celebrity endorsers (see [Tantiseneepong et al. \(2012\)](#), pp. 58–60 for a good brief review). Examination of the influence of celebrity endorsers has spanned a wide range of issues such as the type of celebrity ([Bush et al., 2004](#)), type of media ([Rossiter and Smidts, 2012](#)), and the outcome of the endorsement (e.g., attitude toward the brand – [Silvera and Austad, 2004](#); risk perceptions – [Biswas et al., 2006](#)).

Recently [Spry et al. \(2011\)](#) provide a detailed examination of the relationship between celebrity endorsement, brand credibility and brand equity. They use a field experiment where they manipulate endorser credibility, type of brand and brand name, and they use plasma TVs as the product category. In the current paper, we extend this work in several important ways. First, we use as a context a service (namely telecom services) as opposed to a physical product. Because of this, instead of using brand credibility as a mediator between endorser credibility and brand equity, we use the trust–commitment framework developed by [Morgan and Hunt](#)

(1994) and used by, for example, [Aurier and N'Goala \(2010\)](#) as a mediator of the service evaluation-patronage behavior relationship. Third, we add consumer relationship continuity intentions as an additional outcome given that services marketing entails a relational component ([Grönroos, 2006](#)). Fourth, we conduct a field survey instead of a field experiment, thereby increasing the external validity of our empirical results.

Next we briefly discuss our conceptual model of the celebrity endorser-relationship continuity/brand equity relationship mediated by trust and relationship commitment. This is followed by a section on our research design, and then the analysis of our data. We then present a discussion of our contributions and end with an acknowledgment of the study's limitations.

### 2. Conceptual model

Our conceptual framework is illustrated in [Fig. 1](#). The model is similar to that analyzed by [Spry et al. \(2011\)](#) in that endorser credibility impacts brand equity, mediated by an intermediate construct (in their case brand credibility). Instead of brand credibility, which is appropriate in the case of a physical product, we draw on the trust–commitment framework of [Morgan and Hunt \(1994\)](#) and use brand trust and relationship commitment as mediators. Also along with brand equity, we examine a further outcome construct, namely relationship continuity intentions.

The potential influence of endorser credibility on the trust–commitment framework is understood using the reciprocal action theory ([Li and Dant, 1997](#)). A central tenet of the theory is that con-

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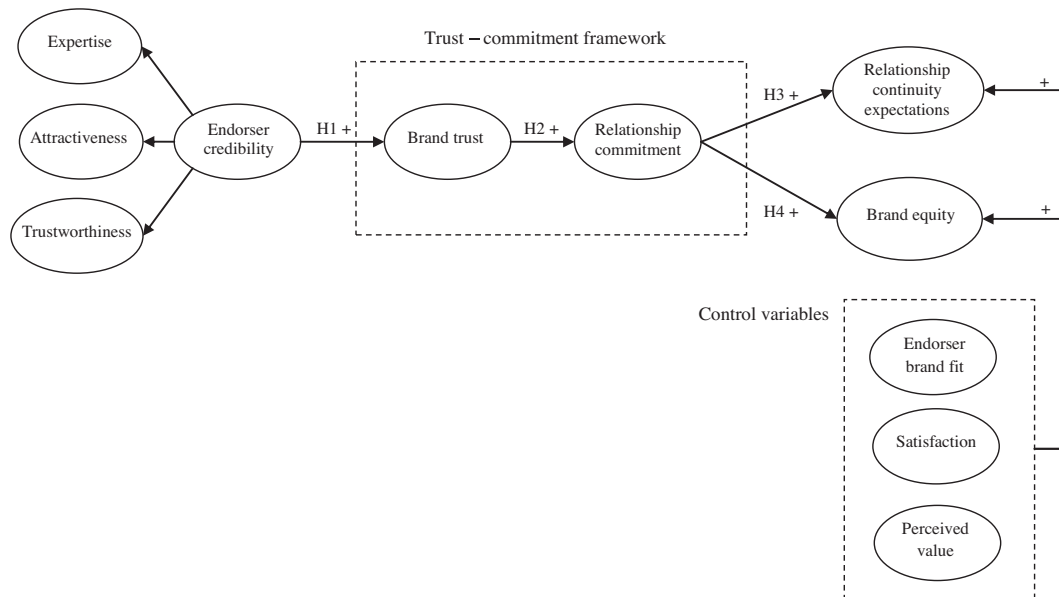


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

sumers often develop a sense of commitment towards a firm (or a brand) in response to its relationship building efforts. The principle of reciprocity can be extended to celebrity endorsements. The literature validates the reciprocity principle in various consumer brand relationship contexts (Kim et al., 2008; Yoon et al., 2008). Celebrities provide consumers with symbolic and aspirational benefits that are critical to development and maintenance of consumer self-identity (Escalas and Bettman, 2003; McCracken, 1989). Consumers are therefore likely to reciprocate by engaging in long term relational behavior with the brands that are endorsed by preferred credible celebrities. They engage in such behavior so that they continue to receive (reinforce) such self-definitional benefits (Dolich, 1969), which in turn is likely to enhance the importance and quality of the relationship for the consumer. Thus, we offer the following hypothesis:

**H1.** Endorser credibility has a direct positive impact on brand trust.

The relationship between brand trust and relationship commitment is well established in the literature. We define trust as a consumer perception of a brand's benevolence and integrity (Aurier and N'Goala, 2010; Doney and Cannon, 1997). Commitment refers to the relative intensity of identification and affiliation with the service provider and the involvement in the relationship (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999). Relationships that are characterized by trust are valued by consumers (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). This leads consumers to develop emotional bonds with brands, thus creating a sense commitment to the relationship so that they continue receiving emotional benefits that arise out of trust (Hess and Story, 2005). The literature specifies a positive relationship between trust and relationship commitment (e.g., Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated:

**H2.** Brand trust has a direct positive impact on relationship commitment.

Given that commitment has a strong emotive element (Aurier and N'Goala, 2010), committed consumers are likely to invest personal resources into maintaining the relationship (Anderson and Weitz, 1989). Such consumers are less prone to switching to competing offerings, thus exhibiting higher future intentions of repeat

purchase (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999) and a tendency towards relationship maintenance (Gounaris, 2005). Hence, we hypothesize as follows:

**H3.** Relationship commitment has a direct positive impact on consumer expectations of relationship continuity.

Consumer–brand relationships are considered critical to consumer brand evaluations (Fournier, 1998) as well as overall brand equity (Blackston, 2000). Such relationships assume a greater importance for service consumers (Grönroos, 1995), especially for consumers of purely intangible (no physical support) service offerings as in the current study. Brand equity evaluations are thus likely to be based heavily on the strength of ongoing relationship with a service provider (Lovelock et al., 2007). Thus, commitment to a relationship is likely to foster favorable, strong and unique associations in consumer memory (Keller, 1993), thus impacting brand equity. Fragmented empirical evidence suggests a positive association between relationship commitment and brand equity (Fournier, 1998; Rego et al., 2009). Thus, we offer the following hypothesis:

**H4.** Relationship commitment has a direct positive impact on brand equity.

Apart from the hypothesized direct effects outlined above, we expect the trust–commitment framework to fully mediate the effect endorser credibility on expectations of relationship continuity as well as brand equity. In case of intangible services, celebrity endorsers add tangibility to the offering to the extent that the endorser becomes the representation of the service (Stafford et al., 2002), potentially anthropomorphizing the brand and endowing it with a personality. Such a process, rooted in meaning transfer theory (McCracken, 1989), facilitates the development of a consumer–brand relationship (Fournier, 1998). Thus, celebrity endorsers that are perceived as credible are likely to foster favorable relational outcomes (i.e., trust and relationship commitment) towards the endorsed brand, thereby evoking feelings of relationship continuity as well as perceptions of enhanced brand equity. We therefore expect trust and relationship commitment to fully mediate the relationship between endorser credibility and relationship continuity expectations/brand equity. The following hypotheses are presented:

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