

Research Article

## **Exploring celebrity endorsements beyond vanilla marketing**

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Semi-celebrity, celebrity endorsement, brand ambassador, In-film advertising, vanilla marketing, testimonials, brand mascots

### **Abstract:**

Advertising is all about creativity. Some think of it as a science as well. However, more often it is perceived to be more of an art than science. It is about reaching the target audience and meeting intended objectives. There is no fixed or right way to do it. Marketers keep on using different advertising strategies to make it more creative and appealing. Use of celebrity endorser is one of them. Celebrity endorsement is a technique where a well-known face, public figure or respected individual from the specific field or even a subject expert speaks on behalf of the brand. Celebrity endorses a product or brand or company or even a cause and may be some of them or all of them. For years, such celebrity inclusion in the advertisements are helping the consumers to feel safe or assured and connected with the brand. This age-old practice is going stronger even today. However, the way celebrities get associated with the brand has undergone significant changes in the recent years. Appearance of celebrity in the brand campaigns is very common. However to get the most out of this celebrity association, marketers should use it in a more innovative and integrative manner. Hence, many marketers are expanding the celebrity association beyond plain vanilla brand endorsements.

This review paper discusses broader concept of celebrity endorsement and some innovative ideas of going beyond mere inclusion of celebrities in the advertisements.

### **Introduction:**

It is simply impossible to remain unaffected by the social media influence in the present era. Especially young generation is completely in awe of social media when it comes to their buying preferences and choices. Almost everyone to some extent is influenced not only by various social media platforms but also by the overall promotion gamut used by the brands.

Marketers expect customers to recall their brands and specifically ask for them whenever some need arises and also result in certain repeat purchase in future. Rope-in of a celebrity in advertisements can certainly help the marketers in a big way to achieve this objective. Influencing power of advertisements is known to all. Several research studies reveal that advertising has a key role in a way customers experience and live their lives. And that is one of the major motives behind demand and eventually purchasing specific products by the customers.

Most often they seek adequate information about the quality and performance of the product prior to the purchase. Much of this information comes from advertising. To make the most of it, advertisers try to make it effective, impactful in all possible ways. As a result advertisements (ads) can be extremely hard-hitting, influential, creative, interesting and powerful. Or it may turned out to be simply boring, stale and ineffective or even annoying too. Real world advertising lies somewhere between these two extremes. Therefore, it has become imperative to study the factors that make ads interesting, appealing or annoying in various situations.

Especially with the increasing number of social media platforms easily available, customers are literally bombarded with the information and commercial messages through various media. They may come from outdoor ads, newspaper ads, TV commercials, coupons, sales contest, publicity, event sponsorships, telemarketing calls, emails, and of course through various social media platforms. All these tools can be included in the scope of advertising. However, the right term for these tools is 'Marketing Communication'. For a communication to be classified as advertising, it must be paid for, it must be delivered to the audience via mass media and it must be attempting persuasion. Being advertising as first and foremost communication tool, advertisers cannot afford to take this communication process for granted.

### **Celebrity Advertising - A Preamble:**

Advertising is all about creativity. Some think of it as a science as well. However, more often it is perceived to be more of an art than science. It is about reaching to the target audience and meeting intended objectives of the advertisers. There is no fixed or right way to do it. Hence, marketers keep on using different advertising strategies to make it more creative and appealing. Use of celebrity endorser is one of them.

Advertising uses 'celebrities' whom most of the people follow or admire, or respect. Sometimes these celebrities are not the popular faces or public figures. Rather they are "just like us" such as satisfied/ dissatisfied customers whose opinion, advice and first-hand experience help others forming their perception about the product before its actual purchase. Every individual is surrounded with a group of people who form a reference group for him. Knowingly or unknowingly, the person tries to imitate that reference personality. Many people believe that they can identify

themselves with the celebrities they idolize by using the same products as them. It is widely accepted fact across a globe that strong impact of celebrities influences customers' purchase decisions.

Although, there is no legal or universal definition of 'celebrity', celebrity is a state or quality of being famous or being much publicized figure. Lack of any standard definition of celebrity, resulted in developing different thoughts on the concept of celebrity advertising.

Celebrity endorsements have helped the consumers to feel safe or assured and connected with the product and brand since a long time. This age-old practice is going stronger even today. Researchers found that this marketing practice has a distinguished history. Celebrity endorsements, its impact on society and consumers, is a topic of interest even today for many researchers across the world.

According to Knott and James (2003), use of celebrity endorsers in advertising is aimed at increasing message persuasiveness and the practice dates back to the 1800s. Another study by Segrave (2005), reveals that the celebrity endorsement is quite an 'old' issue in marketing. Seno and Lukas (2007) trace back history of celebrity endorsement and comment that Josiah Wedgwood, the famous eighteenth century potter was a pioneer of this concept. Once Queen Charlotte began to use his products, Wedgwood capitalized on his new status by referring to himself as "Potter to Her Majesty." Thus, started using this concept for his professional benefits.

From the accidental inclusion of a baseball card with cigarettes to the recent successes of product placements in film and in-film/ in-show advertisements, advertisers have focused on the triumph of the celebrity endorsers.

### **Strategies for the celebrities presence in brand promotion:**

The strategies to use celebrity in the advertisements have undergone significant changes in the recent years. Advertisers prefer to use celebrities when they want their brands to jump and reach the height which otherwise takes a lot of time and calls for the great efforts in a traditional way. Advertisers paying huge endorsement fees and perhaps tolerating all tantrums of celebrities also take great care to maximize their opportunities to en-cash the popularity of that celebrity. Therefore we can see that celebrities are engaged in a range of paid activities when working with products and brands. Brand ambassador, spokesperson and celebrity endorser, these terms are used interchangeably and are considered to be synonym by most of the marketers. However, the role of all three differs slightly.

According to Kamen *et al.*, (1975), celebrities can play four roles while promoting the brands. These roles may not be mutually exclusive. For the brand, celebrity can be give **Testimonial** or act as - **endorser, actor, and spokesman**.

These researchers explain the difference in these roles. They state that in the 'testimonial', the individual attests to the superiority or excellence of a product or service on the basis of personal experience with it. Generally endorsement occurs when an individual is associated with a brand.

When performing the role of an 'actor', the individual is merely a character in a dramatic presentation. It has nothing to do with his/her on-screen or off-screen image. He/she just enacts the character articulated in the advertisements. Endorsement is implicit, but no testimonials are ordinarily rendered. A celebrity may be asked to present a product

as a part of character enactment rather than personal testimonial or endorsement. In endorsements, celebrities may or may not be the experts in the product or service endorsed by them. In fact many time mismatch is observed in the image/ personality of the celebrity and the products endorsed by them as they are neither the experts nor the users of the brands they endorse in their real life. They merely lend their faces or names to the advertisements. ‘Spokesman’ is characterized as the individual representing the company or brand (much like a salesperson), where the role is more official in nature since the spokesperson is authorized to express the position of their sponsor. Therefore celebrities are expected to have experience or at least some knowledge of the product/service and the brand house for which they act as spokesperson. However, in any category the celebrity is associated with the brand in some or the other form.

Study by Schiffman and Kanuk (1997), reveals that when the celebrity represents a brand or the company over a longer period in all media i.e. print advertisements, television commercial as well as personal appearances, he becomes that company’s spokesperson and he is referred as ‘**brand ambassador**’. In this category, popular faces from glam world or sports field may not be the only choices, but brands can also explore more authentic figures for the long term impact of their brand ambassadors. A term ‘brand ambassador’ is made up of two separate terms ‘brand’ and ‘ambassador’ which have definite meaning and a wide scope. According to Macmillan dictionary, brand is a product or group of products that has its own name and is manufactured by a particular company. According to Webster’s dictionary, ambassador is a diplomatic agent of a country to a foreign country or an authorized representative.

With this logic, brand ambassador represents the brand, thereby transfers his personality traits to the brand. Brand ambassador is supposed to popularize a particular brand with the backing of his own popularity at the cost of endorsement fees he receives from the advertiser. This also means endorsement of a product by the celebrity. Brand ambassador can be a diplomat; a representative of an organization, institution or corporation who portrays the product or service. Brand ambassadors are hired by companies to promote their products and services. According to Schiffman, *et al.*, celebrity endorser usually endorses a brand over the media and a brand ambassador represents a brand both in advertising media and public relations function.

Celebrity association with the brand can take several forms.

Advertisers try to capture celebrities’ presence in all possible manners to en-cash their popularity. Celebrities appear in public in different ways. They can also appear by attending special events such as awards function, product launches, outlets/ new showroom inauguration, etc. In addition they are in news, fashion magazines, tabloids and social media platforms which provide information on the events as well as private life of celebrities.

Celebrities are used in number of ways such as giving testimonials where they have personally used the product or service. Celebrity lends his face, personality, voice and even signature to a wide range of products and services. Elite and niche brands often use signature of their celebrity endorser.

Study by Mittal (2008), also supports earlier research studies on the forms of celebrity association with the brands. Researcher states that rather than simply providing information, if celebrity or spokesperson or brand ambassador champions the brand in the advertisement, it becomes more authentic and acts as the ‘testimonial’. Testimonial is more serious business than being mere endorser. In testimonial, celebrity is expected to be an actual user of the

product or service which he or she is endorsing. Celebrity attests the quality and then gives a testimonial citing its benefits. Therefore, the value of the testimonial lies in the authoritative presentation of a brand's attributes and benefits by the spokesperson.

Clow and Baack (2006) further extend this research. They suggest three variants of celebrity endorsements: **Unpaid**

**spokesperson, celebrity voice-over and dead person endorsement.**

Unpaid spokespersons are generally celebrities who support a charity or a social cause by appearing in the advertisement. These types of endorsements are highly credible and can entice significant contribution to a cause. Politicians, actors, musicians, etc. appear in such social campaigns. Celebrity voice-overs are also common these days. Many celebrities also provide voice-overs for TV, Radio advertisements without being shown or identified. Listeners often respond to the advertisements and try to figure out who is reading the copy. This adds interest to the advertisement but may also serve as a distraction, when the individual does not hear the message while trying to identify the speaker. Famous Bollywood actor, Amitabh Bachhan is known for his special tone of voice, therefore many advertisers who cannot afford to sign him prefer his voice-over. Dead person endorsement is not very common and preferred mainly by conglomerates. A dead person endorsement occurs when a sponsor uses an image, or past video or film, featuring an actor or personality who has died. If the dead person featured in the advertisement has high credibility and respect in the society, such advertisement can have emotional impact on the audience. The intension of such advertisement is not to make immediate sale but to create or enhance goodwill of the brand or the company. Dead person endorsement is widely used as corporate branding strategies. Big Indian Corporate houses like Tatas, Reliance, Aditya Birla, etc. use this type of endorsement wherein there is a storytelling about the dreams of their founders and tough challenges they faced to bring their dreams in a reality.

**Exploring wide spectrum for celebrity selection:**

The endorser in the advertisement can be any common man, satisfied customer of the product, or a famous celebrity, spokesman, announcer and so on who endorses and/or demonstrates the product. Choice of celebrity depends on several factors and may vary in the different countries considering their consumers inclination. Indian marketers heavily rely on film stars and cricketers, yet in other countries endorsements are done by celebrities from a variety of fields. They can be authors, chefs, musicians, athletes, directors, anchor persons, models, comedians, business personalities, politicians, consumer advocates, etc. Impact of each category of these celebrity may vary in different contexts and according to the target audience.

Friedman and Friedman (1979) quote that 'celebrities' are more effective than other types of endorsers, such as the professional expert, the company manager, or the typical consumer. Endorsements are generally done by

**Celebrities, Semi-celebrities, Experts, Satisfied Customers, and Imaginary Characters.**

Celebrities can be any famous, popular public figure or respected personality in the society from any field. Mostly celebrities are from glamour world of movies, modeling, television or sports. Considering the hefty endorsement fees offered to the main stream superstars and their availability, some brands especially with the limited budget can

think of semi-celebrities as a better option for their products endorsements. Semi celebrities can take form of Radio/TV anchors, cricket commemorators, event managers, comedians, TV actors, etc. Though they are not superstars in a real sense but they have their own fan following and so can be figured in the semi-celebrity league. This technique of using semi-celebrities is more effective for the local brands as they can easily relate to the specific culture, language, etc.

Customers are at the focal point of today's organizations. By purchasing same brand repeatedly, satisfied customers provide the revenue needed for the company to stay alive and gain more market share. Perhaps a genuine feedback or a testimonial from the satisfied customer is potentially more effective than the largest advertising budget in the world. Such endorsements feature actual users of the product or service being sold. This type of endorsement is more effective in case of services. Being intangible, it is difficult to convince about the services, hence satisfied customers who have used or are using it can be the evident for that service quality.

Advertisers keep on challenging their creative minds and come with the innovative ideas for the effective brand endorsement and try to go beyond plain vanilla branding even with the celebrity advertising. Some marketers instead of bearing heavy cost and tantrums of star celebrities, create their own imaginary characters. They are also known as 'brand mascots'. For many years brand mascots had a prominent place in the endorsement world. For example, McDonald's mascot, Micky Mouse are very popular amongst kids even today. Kids love him and through him the brand. These mascots have played a vital role in making the brand popular. A quick brand recall is possible by seeing that imagery character as it stays in the mind of the viewers. It is widely used as differentiation and positioning strategy. In India, Vodafone Zootoo, Amul utterly butterfly girl, Nirma Girl, Maharaja of Air India, Asian Paint's Gattoo, etc are famous brand mascots. Micky Mouse of Walt Dsiney, McDonald's mascot, KFC, Pillsbury's dough boy, HUL's Captain Cook, etc. are some of the worldwide popular mascots. This type of endorsement works well especially while targeting children at comparatively lesser price. Advertisers use these characters at their discretion and there is no fear of dropping performance, controversial behavior which otherwise are common threats with the real celebrities. Overtly these are not living characters. However, today the era of mascots is almost seemed to be over as they have been withdrawn by many companies. It is now felt that consumers identify better celebrities than brand mascots. Marketers also feel that 'brand ambassador' seems to be having better impact on the consumer than a 'brand mascot'. However, brand mascots created specifically for some mega events are still in use though they have limited life.

Most celebrities are not experts though they endorse high involvement products. While buying such products, customers need to be reassured that the product is safe and worth to consume. Only an expert can allay fears in the audience. Therefore doctors, engineers, lawyers, dentists and other kinds of experts in their respective fields can be chosen as a brand face and they are considerably less costly than a celebrities. Many researchers have commented in the favor of the using experts over the celebrities. According to Tedeschi (1972), expert endorsements are effective because communications attributed to an expert endorser produce greater agreement with the subject than the same communications attributed to a non-expert. Celebrities are not considered experts although they can be experts in some situations. Assael (2005) states that celebrities are best used as experts when consumers see them as being knowledgeable about the product category and conveying legitimacy in their message. However, expert

spokespersons need not always endorse products associated with their professions. Not the celebrities, but the experts are likely to be more appropriate for more rational and high involvement purchase decisions. On the contrary, it has been found that celebrities are often more effective in situations where the product has a high element of psychological and social risks. For example, costume jewelry, designer wear, etc. Some companies use CEO as the spokesperson or source instead of celebrities. For many years, Lee Iacocca was the spokesperson for Chrysler Motors. Michael Eisner too served as the main voice for Disney for quiet long time. Many local brands and small set ups get noticed because their owners are out front in small market television commercials. Then they begin to take the status of local celebrities. In a way, some celebrity endorsers could be considered experts in their own fields, since sometimes one has to be the best in his or her career to become a celebrity (Kahle and Homer 1985; Ohanian 1990).

While dealing with endorsements from the marketing perspective, the logical concern is which type of endorser should be used by the advertiser – celebrity, consumer or expert. Not many studies deal specifically with this issue, though some researchers suggest that celebrities may not be the best endorser type for a brand. Scholarly studies offer mixed results. Friedman *et al.*,(1977), Atkin and Block (1983) and Freiden (1984) find celebrities to be more likeable (although not always effective), whereas some researchers such as Martin *et al.*,(2008) report that consumer or actual users' testimonials work best so typically small players prefer them over expensive celebrities.

#### **Going beyond Vanilla endorsements:**

Use of celebrity advertisements has become a common phenomenon. To get the most out of it, advertisers should use this technique in a more innovative manner. Over the years, some brands have used celebrities more innovatively than others and thus gained the advantage over others in the overly crowded celebrity endorsed brand campaigns. An interesting development is the extended use of celebrities beyond plain vanilla brand endorsements through advertising.

In-film advertising and product placements also in a way are forms of the endorsement. Of late in-film brand placements are also explored by many organizations. Though its use is much limited as of now, brands can definitely reach to the potential consumers through this technique in more entertaining way when the consumers are exhausted by the bombardment of information through traditional brand communication media. Special games are developed around celebrities, events are planned using celebrities, live show appearances and even speaker engagements are actively being explored. Apart from mere appearance of celebrity in advertisement, marketers are exploring various possibilities of making most of the huge amounts paid for celebrity association. For example, some companies design the games, toys; comic books based on the theme of hit film and launch them in hands of celebrities featured in the original movie. Some brands use celebrities for special appearances in movie product placements or in consumer outreach projects through participation in sports camps or in meet-and-greet events that serve as prizes for the winners of public contests. Launching celebrity brand line of outfits is also one of creative ways to associate celebrity.

### **Concluding Comments:**

Since its inception, celebrity advertising is used in some or the other forms and gaining a wide acceptance amongst the advertisers. Advertisers hope that some of the magic of celebrities will rub off on the brand. Instant appeal, transfer of personality traits to the brands, ability to lend credibility and trust and adding life and zest to the brands are some of the reasons why marketers are lured by the celebrity association. No wonder celebrities are seen endorsing a host of products, for that matter any product. With huge investment and some inherent risks associated with the celebrity endorsements, advertisers are seen employing different tactics and continuously exploring innovative ways to maximize the benefits. They are searching for different types of celebrities as well as trying different forms of endorsements. As this practice is widely used for almost all kinds of products and services, media clutter is also very high. Therefore, exploring innovative ways of celebrity association and going beyond plain vanilla brand endorsements, is a need of the hour.

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