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BEYOND ATTRACTIVENESS: THE POWER OF CREDIBILITY

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Abstract:

Celebrity endorsement is one of the marketing strategies that are often used to shape consumer attitudes and drive purchase intentions. The rapid development of communication technology and social media has expanded the influence of celebrities, especially among Gen Z who actively use digital technology and are always exposed to information, news and trends from local and international celebrities. In Malaysia, most university students in their 20s belong to Gen Z. Therefore, this group is an important consumer segment in digital marketing today and in the future. This study aims to examine the relationship between celebrity endorsement and purchase intention among Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) students based on the TEARS Model. This model includes five main attributes, which are trustworthiness, expertise, attraction, respect and similarity. The study used a cross-sectional survey design with a quantitative approach involving 281 undergraduate and postgraduate students from various demographic backgrounds. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire based on the TEARS Model instrument and analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation. The results show that similarity has the strongest positive relationship with purchase intention ($r = 0.465$, $p < 0.001$), followed by trustworthiness ($r = 0.451$, $p < 0.001$), respect ($r = 0.336$, $p < 0.001$) and expertise ($r = 0.184$, $p = 0.002$). On the other hand, attractiveness did not show a significant relationship with purchase intention ($r = 0.073$, $p = 0.222$). This finding shows that Gen Z students

are more likely to have purchase intentions when celebrities who endorse a product are seen as authentic, trustworthy and have values and characteristics close to themselves. Physical attractiveness alone is not necessarily related to purchase intention. This study expands the understanding of the importance of credibility and similarity in celebrity endorsement, particularly in the context of students of higher education institutions in Malaysia.

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Credibility, Celebrity Endorsement, Generation Z, Purchase Intention, TEARS Model



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Introduction

Celebrity endorsement continues to be one of the most widely used marketing strategies to enhance brand image, strengthen credibility and influence consumer purchase intentions. Through this strategy, organizations take advantage of the popularity and influence of famous figures to form a positive perception of the product or service being promoted (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2023). Celebrities not only function as brand spokespersons, but also bring with them symbolic values such as prestige, trust and lifestyle which are then transferred to the brand they represent (Hess et al., 2022). However, the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement depends on the extent to which the celebrity's image, value and credibility are in line with the brand identity as well as target consumer expectations (Zniva et al., 2023; Chaihanchai et al., 2026).

However, the rapid development of digital media and social media has changed the way consumers interact with marketing content. Today's consumers, especially Generation Z (Gen Z), are increasingly critical and selective in evaluating advertising messages (Purohit & Arora, 2022; Lee et al., 2022). These changes raise important questions about which celebrity attributes really influence consumer purchase intentions in an increasingly competitive digital marketing environment.

To explain the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement, Shimp (2003) introduced the TEARS Model which includes five main attributes, namely trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, respect and similarity. This model has been widely used in marketing studies to evaluate the characteristics that make a celebrity suitable and effective as an endorser of a product or brand. Previous studies often emphasize the importance of physical attractiveness in attracting consumer attention. However, recent studies show that credibility attributes, such as trustworthiness, expertise and similarity, may have a stronger relationship with purchase

intention (Chetioui et al., 2021; Jun et al., 2023). In the era of social media, users value more celebrities who are seen as genuine, honest and have similar values to themselves than celebrities who only have an attractive appearance (Zniva et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2024).

The importance of credibility in digital endorsement is also supported by the current study. For example, Wang, Abdullah and Abdul Adziz (2022) found that the credibility of internet celebrities in China has a significant relationship with electronic word of mouth communication eWOM and purchase intention through social media. The findings show that consumers are more likely to trust and consider products promoted by individuals who are seen as trustworthy, authentic and close to their lives.

In Malaysia, celebrity endorsement remains a popular marketing strategy, particularly in the fashion, beauty, lifestyle, and health industries (Zarith Delaila et al., 2020). Local celebrities such as Neelofa, Mira Filzah, and Alif Satar are frequently selected as brand ambassadors to strengthen brand credibility and consumer confidence (Azmi et al., 2022). However, although the TEARS Model has been widely applied in celebrity endorsement research, limited empirical attention has been given to the simultaneous examination of its five attributes among Gen Z students in Malaysian higher education institutions. It remains unclear whether physical attractiveness continues to play a central role or whether credibility attributes, such as trustworthiness and similarity, are more strongly associated with purchase intention among this consumer group. Addressing this gap is important because university students represent a substantial segment of Gen Z, characterised by high digital literacy and active social media use (Lina et al., 2022). Therefore, examining this group can provide a clearer understanding of the celebrity attributes associated with their purchase intentions.

Accordingly, this study examines the relationships between celebrity endorsement attributes and purchase intention among students at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), using the TEARS Model as its theoretical framework. Specifically, it examines the relationships between trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, respect, similarity, and purchase intention. The findings are expected to contribute to the celebrity endorsement literature by providing evidence on whether credibility attributes are more strongly associated with purchase intention than physical attractiveness among the UUM students surveyed. The findings may also assist marketers in selecting celebrity endorsers whose characteristics correspond with those valued by their target audiences.

Literature Review

Celebrity endorsement is a marketing strategy that is often used to enhance brand image, build consumer trust and encourage them to buy a product. Through this strategy, organizations use the popularity and influence of celebrities to create a positive view of the product or service being promoted (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2023). Celebrities are not only brand spokespersons, but also bring images such as prestige, trust and lifestyle to the brand (Hess et al., 2022). However, the effectiveness of this strategy depends on the compatibility of the celebrity's image, values and credibility with the brand identity and the needs of target consumers (Zniva et al., 2023; Chaihanchai et al., 2026).

Shimp (2003) introduced the TEARS Model which includes five main attributes, namely trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, respect, and similarity to explain the factors that determine the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement. The first two attributes, namely

trustworthiness and expertise, represent the credibility dimension that reflects the level of honesty, integrity and competence of the celebrity perceived by consumers. While the remaining three attributes are attractiveness, respect and similarity which represent the affective and relational dimensions that affect the level of self-identification, emotional connection and consumer attachment to celebrities and brands being promoted (Chetioui et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022).

The current study shows that trustworthiness and expertise are important characteristics in determining the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement. Consumers more easily form a positive view of a brand and show higher purchase intentions when the celebrity is seen as honest, genuine, knowledgeable and ethical (Purohit & Arora, 2022; Azmi et al., 2022). Celebrity expertise can also increase consumer confidence in product quality and reduce doubts when making purchase decisions (Chetioui et al., 2021).

For Gen Z, authenticity, credibility and transparency are more important than mere appearance (Jun et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2024). When consumers feel that a celebrity has similar values, experiences or personality to themselves, they are more likely to recognize and trust the celebrity. This similarity can also help build a closer relationship between consumers and the brand as well as increase their tendency to buy products endorsed by the celebrity (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Lina et al., 2022).

In the Malaysian context, celebrity endorsement continues to play a vital role in lifestyle, beauty, and consumer goods marketing. Local celebrities such as Neelofa, Mira Filzah, and Alif Satar have been featured in numerous high-profile brand collaborations, reflecting marketers' confidence in celebrity influence (Zarith Delaila et al., 2020). However, as Gen Z consumers, Malaysian students are characterized by their social media literacy, critical thinking, and preference for genuine and value-driven brand communication (Zniva et al., 2023; Yapp et al., 2024). Therefore, this study applies the TEARS Model to examine which celebrity endorsement attributes have the strongest relationships with purchase intention among UUM students.

Methodology

Research Design and Participants

This study uses a quantitative method through a cross-sectional survey. This method was used to study the relationship between the characteristics of celebrities who endorse a product and purchase intention among students at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). The study respondents consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students studying at UUM.

Respondents were selected using convenience sampling based on their willingness and convenience to participate in this study. The online questionnaire was distributed via WhatsApp, Telegram and Facebook. A total of 281 students completed the questionnaire, and all their answers were used in the analysis. Respondents have different backgrounds in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, level of study, college and semester of study.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire developed in Google Forms, adapted from validated measurement scales based on the TEARS model (Shimp, 2003). The instrument consisted of three sections:

- Section A: Demographic information (gender, age, ethnicity, education level, college, semester)
- Section B: Celebrity endorsement attributes — trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, respect, and similarity (adopted from Ha & Lam, 2016; Freeman & Chen, 2015)
- Section C: Purchase intention (adopted from Freeman & Chen, 2015)

All items in the section B and section C were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). A pilot test was conducted on 32 respondents to ensure the reliability of the research instrument. Cronbach's alpha values obtained range from 0.825 to 0.935. This value shows that the items in the questionnaire have a high level of reliability.

The research data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the background of the respondents. Next, Pearson's correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between the five characteristics of celebrity endorsement and purchase intention.

Results And Discussion

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents involved in this study. With a total of 281 respondents, demographics were analysed with three main aspects, namely gender, age, and ethnicity.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 281)

Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	117
	Female	164
Age	18-21	61
	22-25	118
	25-28	84
	28 and above	18
Ethnicity	Malay	128
	Chinese	80
	Indian	60
	Others	13

In terms of gender, the majority of respondents were female, with 164 respondents (58.4%), while 117 respondents (41.6%) were male. In addition, Table 1 shows that the largest group of respondents was between 22 to 25 years old, consisting of 118 respondents (42.0%). This was followed by respondents aged 25 to 28 years old, with 84 respondents (29.9%), while 61 respondents (21.7%) were between 18 and 21 years old. The smallest age group was 28 years and above, consisting of 18 respondents (6.4%). This finding shows that the majority of respondents were young adults aged between 22 and 25 years old.

Regarding ethnicity, Table 1 also shows that Malay respondents represented the largest group, with 128 respondents (45.6%), followed by Chinese respondents with 80 respondents (28.5%), Indian respondents with 60 respondents (21.4%), and respondents from other ethnic groups with 13 respondents (4.6%). This distribution indicates that the study involved participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds, although Malays constituted the largest proportion of the sample.

Overall, the sample was predominantly female, aged between 22 to 25 years, and Malay. Nevertheless, respondents from different gender, age, and ethnic groups participated in the study. As convenience sampling was used, the demographic diversity of the sample should not be interpreted as statistical representativeness of the entire UUM student population or the broader Malaysian Gen Z population.

Table 2: Trustworthiness (n=281)

I believe in the		
No	Item	Mean
1	celebrity's brand choice	3.59
2	celebrity is a trustworthy person.	3.57
3	celebrity provides reliable source of information.	3.54
4	celebrity is a sincere person.	3.48
5	celebrity is an honest person.	3.47

Table 2 shows the respondents' perception of the reliability aspects of celebrity endorsers. All five items recorded mean scores ranging from 3.47 to 3.59. This shows that the respondent's level of trustworthiness towards celebrities is at a moderately high level. The item "I believe in celebrity brand choice" recorded the highest mean score, which was 3.59. This item was followed by "I believe that the celebrity is a trustworthy person" (mean = 3.57), "I believe that the celebrity provides a reliable source of information" (mean = 3.54) and "I believe that the celebrity is a sincere person" (mean = 3.48). The item related to celebrity honesty recorded the lowest mean score, which was 3.47. Overall, respondents have a moderately high level of trust in celebrities who endorse a brand.

Table 3: Expertise (n=281)

I think that the celebrity		
No	Item	Mean
1	is an expert in the field that he/she represents.	3.35
2	has experience in using the product.	3.33
3	possesses extensive knowledge about the product.	3.29

4	has got high professional qualification.	3.25
5	has skilled the product.	3.25

Table 3 shows the respondents' perception of the celebrity endorser's expertise. The item "I think that the celebrity is an expert in the field he represents" recorded the highest mean score, which was 3.35. Next is the item "I think that the celebrity has experience using the product" (mean = 3.33), followed by "I think that the celebrity has extensive knowledge about the product" (mean = 3.29). Items related to professional qualifications and celebrity skills each recorded the lowest mean score, which was 3.25.

Overall, the findings indicate that respondents appear more likely to believe that celebrities are knowledgeable and experienced with endorsed products than to regard them as highly qualified professionals. These findings suggest that while expertise contributes to the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements, respondents do not necessarily perceive celebrities as true experts solely based on their endorsement activities.

Table 4: Attractiveness (n=281)

I feel that the celebrity		
No	Item	Mean
1.	has a very elegant fashion style	3.72
2.	is very classy	3.70
3.	has a very pretty face	3.70
4.	has got a strong attractiveness.	3.66
5.	has a very professional manner	3.62
6.	has a very persuasive voice	3.59

Table 4 shows the respondents' perception of the attractiveness of celebrity endorsers. All six items recorded mean scores ranging from 3.59 to 3.72. These results show that celebrity attractiveness is rated at a moderately high level. The item "I feel that the celebrity has a very elegant fashion style" recorded the highest mean score, which was 3.72. The items "I feel that the celebrity is very classy" and "I feel that the celebrity has a very beautiful face" each recorded a mean score of 3.70. Then the item "I feel that the celebrity has got a strong attractiveness" with mean = 3.66, "I feel that the celebrity has a very professional manner" with a mean score of 3.62, and the lowest mean score was recorded for "I feel that the celebrity has a very persuasive voice" with mean = 3.59.

Overall, the findings indicate that respondents perceive celebrity attractiveness at a moderately high level. Respondents place greater emphasis on celebrities' physical appearance, style, and overall image than on other personal attributes, indicating that these qualities play an important role in shaping positive consumer perceptions of endorsed brands.

Table 5: Respect (n=281)

No.	Item	Mean
1.	I believe that the celebrity has good values	3.75
2.	I think that the celebrity has a positive image	3.75
3.	I think that the celebrity has a positive behavior	3.65

4. I believe that the celebrity is the person I recognize 3.59
5. I feel that I am highly attached to a celebrity that I admire 3.58

Table 5 presents the respondents' perceptions of the respect dimension of celebrity endorsers. The findings indicate that all five items recorded mean scores ranging from 3.75 to 3.58. Among the five items, "I believe that the celebrity has good values" and "I think that the celebrity has a positive image" recorded the highest mean scores, both mean = 3.75. then the second highest mean score was recorded for "I think that the celebrity has a positive behaviour" with mean = 3.65, followed by the item "I believe that the celebrity is the person I recognize" with mean = 3.59 and the lowest item was "I feel that I am highly attached to a celebrity that I admire" with mean score equal 3.58. Overall, the findings indicate that respondents perceive the respect dimension of celebrity endorsers also have a moderately high level. This indicates that consumers are more likely to respect celebrities based on their public reputation and ethical characteristics.

Table 6 : Similarity (n=281)

I think that the celebrity and me.....		
No.	Item	Mean
1.	share similar perspectives.	3.60
2.	share similar interests.	3.57
3.	share similar likings	3.50
4.	share the same culture.	3.49
5.	share similar lifestyle.	3.47

Table 6 shows the respondents' perception of the dimension of similarity with celebrity endorsers. All five items recorded mean scores ranging from 3.47 to 3.60. These results show that the respondents see themselves as having a moderately high level of similarity with the celebrities they admire. The item "I feel that the celebrity and I have the same views" recorded the highest mean score, which is 3.60. This item is followed by "I think that the celebrity and I have similar interests" with a mean of 3.57. Other items related to similarity recorded a mean score of around 3.49, while the item "I feel that the celebrity and I have a similar lifestyle" recorded the lowest mean score, which was 3.47. Overall, the similarities between respondents and celebrities are seen more in terms of shared views and interests. This similarity can help consumers feel closer and easily associate themselves with the celebrity endorsing a product.

Table 7: Relationship Between Celebrity Trustworthiness, Respect, Similarity, Expertise, Attractiveness Towards Intention To Purchase Among UUM Students

Variable	r Value	P Value	Interpretation
Similarity	.465**	<0.01	Significant positive relationship
Trustworthiness	.451**	<.001	Significant positive relationship
Respect	.336**	<0.01	Significant positive relationship
Expertise	.184**	<0.002	Significant positive relationship

Attractiveness	.073	0.222	Not Significant
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Note: Correlations are statistically significant when $p < 0.01$

Table 7 displays the results of Pearson correlation analysis conducted to assess the relationship between the five dimensions of the TEARS Model, namely similarity, trustworthiness, respect, expertise, and attractiveness with purchase intention among Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) students. Overall, the findings show that four of the five dimensions have a significant positive relationship with purchase intention, while the attractiveness dimension does not show a statistically significant relationship. Among all the dimensions studied, similarity recorded the strongest relationship with purchase intention ($r = 0.465$, $p < 0.001$). Based on the interpretation of the strength of correlation by Akoglu (2018), this value indicates a positive relationship at a moderate level. This finding proves that the higher the level of similarity perceived between consumers and celebrities, the higher their tendency to buy products endorsed by the celebrity. This finding shows that consumers are more easily influenced by celebrities who have values, interests, lifestyles or experiences that are similar to themselves.

The second dimension that showed the strongest relationship was trustworthiness ($r = 0.451$, $p < 0.001$), which also recorded a positive relationship at a moderate level. This result showed that consumers were more likely to have high purchase intentions when they perceived celebrities as honest, trustworthy and integrity-based individuals. In addition, respect also showed a significant positive relationship with purchase intentions ($r = 0.336$, $p < 0.001$). Although the strength of this relationship was lower than that of similarity and trustworthiness, it was still at a meaningful level. This indicates that consumers who respect celebrities based on their reputation, achievements, public image and positive values were more likely to form intentions to purchase products promoted by the celebrity.

For the expertise dimension, the analysis showed a significant but weak positive relationship with purchase intentions ($r = 0.184$, $p = 0.002$). This finding shows that although celebrity knowledge, experience and skills are recognized as factors that influence consumers, their impact on purchase intention is smaller than similarity, trustworthiness and respect. This suggests that in the context of this study, consumers prioritize credibility and personal relationships with celebrities over their professional expertise.

On the other hand, attractiveness did not show a significant relationship with purchase intention ($r = 0.073$, $p = 0.222$). Since the p value exceeded the 0.05 significance level, the relationship was not statistically significant. This finding indicates that factors such as physical appearance, style or visual appeal of celebrities alone are not sufficient to influence UUM students' purchase intention. This finding reflects the changing consumer tendencies, especially among Gen Z, who prioritize authenticity, credibility and shared values over physical appearance alone.

Overall, Pearson correlation analysis showed that similarity, trustworthiness, respect and expertise have a significant positive relationship with purchase intention, while attractiveness does not show a significant relationship. Among all dimensions, similarity emerged as the factor with the strongest relationship with purchase intention, followed by trustworthiness. This finding suggests that consumers are more likely to be influenced by celebrities who share similar values and characteristics to themselves, and are seen as honest, trustworthy and respected individuals.

Based on the findings from the UUM students surveyed, marketers targeting comparable university student segments may consider celebrity endorsers who are perceived as trustworthy, reputable, and similar to their target audiences. However, these recommendations should be applied cautiously because the study was conducted at a single university using convenience sampling.

Conclusion

This study aims to examine the influence of celebrity endorsement attributes on purchase intention among students at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) by using the TEARS Model as a theoretical framework. The five main attributes in the model, that were trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, respect, and similarity, were analysed to assess their relationship with the purchase intention of celebrity endorsed products. The findings showed that four TEARS attributes were significantly and positively related to purchase intention: similarity ($r = 0.465$, $p < 0.001$), trustworthiness ($r = 0.451$, $p < 0.001$), respect ($r = 0.336$, $p < 0.001$), and expertise ($r = 0.184$, $p = 0.002$). Attractiveness was not significantly related to purchase intention ($r = 0.073$, $p = 0.222$). Similarity and trustworthiness demonstrated the strongest relationships, indicating that perceived identification and credibility were more closely associated with purchase intention than physical attractiveness among the UUM students surveyed.

Overall, this study indicates that credibility attributes that are trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, respect, and similarity play an important role in shaping purchase intentions than physical attractiveness. This finding gives the implication that marketers need to give priority to the selection of celebrity endorsers who have a high level of reliability, a positive reputation and are able to create an authentic relationship with the target audience in order to increase the effectiveness of the marketing strategy.

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