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Influence of Micro-Celebrities on the

Formulation of Social Media Marketing Strategies

Benjamin Mole
Northumbria University, United Kingdom

Paul Cook
Northumbria University, United Kingdom

Ruth M Crabtree
Northumbria University, United Kingdom

Abstract

Whilst celebrity endorsements and the use of them within marketing strategies has seen a wealth

of research in recent years, there is limited understanding regarding the development of micro-

celebrity endorsements. This paper discusses the increase in the use of social media and how

organisations across the globe use this medium as part of their marketing tactics to promote their

products and services. Incorporating celebrity endorsement models, an explanation of a micro-

celebrity is provided, and the associated endorsement characteristics are applied to the fitness

industry. The lack of research with regards this current marketing phenomena is evidenced and

as such, this paper provides a timely overview of some of the key questions that sport marketers

need to address to deliver successful and effective marketing strategies.

Keywords: star power, sport endorsement, fan community, social interaction

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Introduction

Social media can be considered an integral, and deeply embedded part of daily life that is relied upon by those who use it for various needs, for example, for daily news updates, entertainment purposes, sport events, an information source, as part of the user's purchase decision-making process and to communicate with other social media users around the world (Kapoor et al., 2018; Zhu & Chen, 2015). Social media currently has 3.96 billion active users, representing 51% of the world's population, who spend on average 2 hours and 24 minutes on social media everyday (Chaffey, 2020). In the modern era of marketing, social media has become an essential part of marketing strategy, one that is being used by the majority of companies worldwide (Vinerean, 2017). As a result of the huge number of social media users, companies are enticed to exist in such a prosperous online environment (Eroğlu & Bayraktar Köse, 2019; Balliauw et al., 2020). Consequently, companies are investing significantly more resources into developing their social media marketing strategy, not only to increase their customer relations online but to aid in achieving their marketing and business objectives (Zhu & Chen, 2015).

In recent years, one of the social media marketing strategies that companies have expressed an increased interest in are micro-celebrity endorsements (Schouten et al., 2020). Micro-celebrities are not famous in the traditional sense, instead they have strategically used social media to amass a large number of followers, often on a global scale, becoming recognisable both online and beyond the midst of their social media account, granting them a celebrity status (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Eroğlu & Bayraktar Köse, 2019). Companies are showing an increased interest in, and embracing the use of, micro-celebrities to endorse their brand, products and services (Schouten et al., 2020). An appealing factor of using micro-

celebrity endorsements is that micro-celebrities often have a social media following which far exceeds that of the company (Holt, 2016), therefore the social media posts made by a micro-celebrity can reach a larger audience. In addition, micro-celebrities develop a strong and meaningful relationship with their followers and through an endorsement, the company believes that the micro-celebrity can increase their relationship with their targeted consumers (Jun & Yi, 2020; Korontina & Jargalsaikhan, 2016). Although there are numerous industries worldwide that have embraced the use of micro-celebrities as a marketing tool, the fitness industry is arguably using micro-celebrities to the greatest extent (Djafarova & Thompson, 2020).

Worldwide there has been a socio-cultural change with the global population adopting a more active and healthier lifestyle which has resulted in an increased sales of fitness apparel, sport nutrition and supplementation products (Djafarova & Thompson, 2020). Subsequently, the fitness industry has become one of the fastest growing industries in the world, second only to the high technology industry (Chekhovska, 2017). The fitness industry's growth has been so substantial that in 2019, it globally had an estimated value of $100 billion (Biron, 2019). However, this industry is highly fragmented, rich in competition, dynamic and affected by the trends in both fitness and in fashion (Korontina & Jargalsaikhan, 2016). Those who participate in fitness activities have become increasingly more fashion conscious and are willing to spend more money purchasing fitness apparel that is both fashionable and practical (Djafarova & Thompson, 2020; Mintel, 2019).

The merging of fitness and fashion trends has led to the development of fitness apparel known as Athleisure which is clothing that can be worn for social, casual and fitness purposes (Euromonitor International, 2018). The considerable growth of the fitness industry, alongside the increased demand and sales of athleisure clothing has substantially influenced the global

sportswear market, with global sales exceeding $335.5 billion in 2019 (Euromonitor International, 2019). In addition, arising from the demand in athleisure clothing and the growth of the sportswear market, there has been a sudden growth in the number of new brands emerging, alongside existing brands extending their clothing range to include sportswear apparel which has increased the competitiveness of the sportswear market on a domestic and global scale (Euromonitor International, 2018).

Celebrity endorsements have been a prominent marketing strategy that have been extensively used by companies around the world since the late 19th century (Knoll & Matthes, 2017). As such, considerable research has been conducted to investigate the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements, presenting a surplus of evidence that highlights their benefits, and substantiates their use, as a marketing strategy (Von Felbert & Breuer, 2020; Schouten et al., 2020). There has been a noticeable increase in micro-celebrity endorsements during the last decade, yet despite this, research investigating their effectiveness is still within its infancy, thus their marketing value is scarce (Schouten et al., 2020). Due to the lack of research conducted on this topic area, marketers may be apprehensive in integrating micro-celebrity endorsements as part of their marketing strategy. Therefore, it is of importance to further develop the understanding of the marketing value of micro-celebrity endorsements.

Celebrity Endorsement

A celebrity can be defined as a well-known individual who receives a significant amount of media and public attention, for example, actors, models, musicians and athletes (Schouten et al., 2020). Companies in various industries worldwide have incorporated celebrities into their advertising strategy, using them to promote the company, their products and services (Cuomo et al., 2019). One definition that encompasses all aspects of a celebrity endorsement has been

provided by Bergkvist and Zhou (2016), as a "celebrity endorsement is an agreement between an individual who enjoys public recognition (a celebrity) and an entity (e.g., a brand) to use the celebrity for the purpose of promoting the entity" (p. 644).

Celebrity endorsements are not a recent phenomenon, they are a well-established advertising strategy that have been used for over 100 years with one of the earliest examples dating back to 1893 (Louie et al., 2001). However, the use of celebrity endorsements has seen a sharp rise in the last few decades. During the 1950's and 1960's there was a considerable growth of the film industry, alongside an increased household ownership of television sets (Erdogan, 1999). Subsequently, there was a surge in the number of film and televisions roles, which by the 1970's, led to an abundance of celebrities available that companies could select to endorse their products. The increased use of celebrity endorsements was so significant that by the 1980's, one in five televisions advertisements in the United States of America featured a celebrity endorsement (Erdogan, 1999). The persistent and extensive use of celebrity endorsements as an advertising strategy can still be seen in the present day, as celebrity endorsements continue to feature heavily on television advertisements on every continent around the world (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016). In addition, companies invest considerable financial resources into this component of their advertising strategy (Upadhyay & Singh, 2010), for example, Nike, a global sportswear brand, spends over $6 billion per year on athlete endorsements (Enoch, 2020). This implies that despite the financial costs involved, marketers consider celebrity endorsements to be a valuable component of their advertising strategy (Upadhyay & Singh, 2010).

Arising from their extensive use and the financial cost involved, considerable research has been conducted to investigate the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements as a marketing strategy. This is highlighted by the meta-analysis conducted by Knoll and Matthes (2017), as

their search results from three major databases presented over 1,000 research articles relating to celebrity endorsements. However, celebrity endorsement research is highly fragmented due to the conflicting results from individual studies (Knoll & Matthes, 2017). This variation in research findings can potentially be explained, as individual research studies often explore the research phenomenon from a different perspective or using a different research approach, data collection or analysis method or a population demographic. Although the research findings are fragmented and conflicting, there has been a number of literature reviews and meta-analyses that have concluded that celebrity endorsements can be an effective marketing strategy, as they have shown to increase the consumers' purchase intention, increase brand and product awareness and can improve brand loyalty, brand recall and brand image (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Knoll & Matthes, 2017). In addition, Erdogan (1999) declares that celebrity endorsements are extremely beneficial when entering foreign markets, as the barriers of entering the foreign market of choice, such as language, culture and time-zones can be broken down due to the celebrity's world-wide popularity.

Despite the aforementioned benefits, celebrity endorsements pose a number of potential risks. For instance, the endorsed celebrity may be associated with controversy, ill-behaviour or have accusations made against them, which not only negatively impacts their image but also the image of the company and the product they endorse (Upadhyay & Singh, 2010). The celebrity may sign an endorsement deal with a number of companies and therefore their image is associated with an array of companies and products (Erdogan, 1999). This can tarnish the credibility of the celebrity as consumers perceive them as only being motivated by money (O'Mahony & Meenaghan, 1997). Furthermore, the popularity of the celebrity may increase to such an extent that they overshadow the product they endorse, or their popularity may decrease

which results in the consumer having no interest in the celebrity and therefore, no interest in the endorsed product (Erdogan, 1999). Finally, celebrity endorsements incur substantial financial costs with no guarantee on the return of investment (Upadhyay & Singh, 2010). Such concerns signify that companies must take care when selecting a celebrity to endorse their products. Fortunately, a number of models and theories have been developed to aid in the celebrity selection process that can potentially increase the marketing effectiveness of the celebrity endorsement. Namely, the Source Credibility Model, the Source Attractiveness Model, the Match-Up Theory, the Meaning Transfer Model and the Brand Alliance Concept.

Celebrity Endorsement Models and Theories

The Source Credibility Model implies that the effectiveness of the delivered message depends on the credibility of the source, for example, the celebrity. Credibility is a construct of two characteristics, expertise and trustworthiness, which the source must possess in order to be perceived as credible (Hovland et al., 1953). Erdogan (1999) suggests that a credible source can influence the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of the message's recipient hence, when selecting a celebrity, credibility is of high importance. The Source Attractive Model contends that the effectiveness of the message in fact depends on the familiarity (awareness of the source), likability (affection of the source's physical appearance and behaviour) and similarity (resemblance between the source and the receiver) of the source (McGuire, 1985; McCracken, 1989). Sources that are familiar, likeable and similar to the consumer are perceived as being attractive (McCracken, 1989). The source's attractiveness not only encompasses any physical attractiveness but any characteristic that the consumer perceives as attractive such as intellect, personality, athletic prowess and lifestyle. Erdogan (1999) concluded that attractive endorsers can enhance the consumers' attitudes towards both product advertising and the brand. Yet,

research findings are equivocal regarding their influence over consumers' purchase intention, as mixed findings have been reported (Erdogan, 1999; Kahle & Homer, 1985). The Source Credibility Model and Source Attractiveness Model have been validated through several research articles however, McCracken (1989) has criticised these models, as they imply the endorsement process is solely dependent on the celebrity and places no consideration on either the endorsed product or the brand. This criticism may potentially be rectified through the Match-Up Theory.

The Match-Up Theory suggests that the effectiveness of the endorsement depends on the level of congruence between the endorser and the endorsed product (Till & Busler, 2000). Multiple studies support this theory, whereby a high level of congruence between the celebrity and the endorsed product leads to a more effective endorsement, signified by consumers demonstrating an improved perception, recall and believability of a product advertisement alongside an increase brand attitude and purchase intention (Schouten et al., 2020; Till & Busler, 2000). In comparison, when the congruence between the celebrity and the endorsed product is low, the celebrity is seen as a less credible source and the endorsement is considerably less effective (Schouten et al., 2020). Therefore, companies should select a celebrity that has a high level of congruence with their products and services, as this will increase the likelihood of an effective endorsement. Unfortunately, according to McCracken (1989), the Source Credibility Model, the Source Attractiveness Model and the Match-Up Theory fail to incorporate the entirety of the endorsement process, thus leading to the development of his own model that explains his view of the endorsement process.

McCracken's (1989) Meaning Transfer Model (MTM) consists of three stages that describes his view of the celebrity endorsement process (Figure 1). Stage one involves the creation of the image and personified meaning of the celebrity through the roles they have

portrayed throughout their career. In stage two, the celebrity enters an endorsement deal and their image and personified meaning is then transferred onto the product they endorse. Stage three, the consumer will purchase and consume the product with the expectation that the celebrity's image and personified meaning will be transferred unto them.

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

Though the MTM is one of the least researched models in the celebrity endorsement context (Roy & Jain, 2017), previous studies have supported its premise. For example, Langmeyer and Walker's (1991) research findings showed that symbolic meaning of the celebrity endorser, Cher, was transferred onto the endorsed product, Scandinavian Health Spas. The sample, consisting of 51 undergraduate students, associated Cher with physical fitness, sexiness and with an attractive physical appearance and by training at Scandinavian Health Spas, they could obtain similar characteristics (Langmeyer & Walker, 1991). Thus, supporting the premise of the MTM, as the meaning of the celebrity was transferred onto the product and by purchasing and consuming the product, the consumer expects a similar meaning to be achieved. However, the MTM model has also faced criticism as this model implies that the transfer of meaning only occurs in one direction (Halonen-Knight & Hurmerinta, 2010). Till's (2001) findings support this criticism, as the image of the celebrity was tarnished due to their endorsement of a negatively perceived product. Therefore, this signifies that the transfer of meaning can occur in the opposite direction, thus there is a two-way transfer of meaning, from the celebrity to the endorsed product and vice versa. This resulted in the authors proposing the celebrity endorsement process should be considered as a Brand Alliance, whereby the transfer of meaning exists on a pathway that incorporates the celebrity endorser, the brand and the endorsement action (Halonen-Knight & Hurmerinta, 2010).

The models and theories that relate to celebrity endorsements highlight the complexities involved within its process. Regardless, the use of celebrity endorsements as an advertising strategy remains highly prevalent. Though celebrity endorsements extensively feature on television advertisements in China and South Korea, the extent in which they feature on television and print media advertising across Europe and the USA is considerably lower than it was in the late nineteenth century (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016). Instead, in this modern era of advertising, companies and celebrities are increasingly using the internet and social media as an advertising platform (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016).

Social Media

Social media is a collective term for software based technologies, such as an application or website, that provides the user with a digital environment where they can send and receive information or personal content, and to interact with other users worldwide (Appel et al., 2020). In the last decade, social media has grown considerably, in 2010, there was an estimated 940 million social media users (Moerdyck, 2010) which has since increased to approximately 3.96 billion in 2020 (Chaffey, 2020), equating to a 321% increase in the number of social media users during this period. This growth is perhaps attributable to the rapid developments in handheld technologies (Meng et al., 2015), as users have been provided with a quick and easy access to the increased number of social media platforms that have also emerged during this time period (Chaffey, 2020). Social media encompasses a wide range of platforms, not only are the most popular platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook classed as social media, weblogs, vlogging and online forums are just some examples that also constitute as social media. Appel et al. (2020) have a unique perspective of social media, as in their view social media has become less about the platform's features and more about how people are spending their time on social

media, which thus far, has primarily been the extensive sharing of information (Appel et al., 2020).

Traditionally, marketers have relied upon the 4 P's Marketing Mix framework (product, place, price and promotion), developed by McCarthy and Perreault (1964), whereby careful consideration and optimal decisions of each of the 4 P's would result in the creation and execution of an effective marketing strategy (Johnson, 2015). Social media's emergence disrupted this reliance, as it introduced several new influences which subsequently increased the complexity of the marketer's role, the marketing environment and thus, the creation and execution of an effective marketing strategy (Johnson, 2015). However, Mangold and Faulds (2009) argued that social media should be considered as a hybrid element of the promotion mix (one of the 4 P's of marketing), as this medium facilitates the combination of traditional marketing communication tools (a direct engagement from the company to the consumer) with an amplified form of word of mouth (consumers talking to one another). In addition, to develop and implement an effective marketing strategy, social media should be integrated alongside the traditional promotion mix which consists of advertising, personal selling, public relations, direct marketing and sales promotion (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). This implies that the 4 P's marketing mix framework is still applicable in the modern era of marketing, marketers merely need to adapt and integrate social media in order to develop an effective marketing strategy.

The initial interest that companies had in social media stemmed from several developments, for instance the declined response rate of e-mail, rapid technological developments, the declining use of traditional media, the increased time consumers spend on social media and the low cost of implementing a social media marketing campaign (Gillin, 2007). In addition, research suggests that marketing managers reported that the online presence

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of their competitors and social media's growth, popularity, cost-effective and viral nature are motivational factors which have led to the integration of social media into their marketing strategy (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014).

Social media has presented companies with a remarkable marketing opportunity, one that is being used by over 90% of companies worldwide (Bennet, 2013) and according to Vinerean (2017) is essential to any business strategy. Social media provides companies with a marketing medium that can efficiently disseminate information worldwide which can reach customers regardless of geographic, demographic, social or political boundary, while facilitating a two-way communication channel between the company and customer in an accurate and timely manner, all of which is incapable of traditional marketing communications. (Zahoor et al., 2016). As such, companies are increasing their resources, financial or otherwise, towards developing their social media strategy (Neti, 2011; Machado et al., 2020). According to Ebrahim, (2019), in the forthcoming years, up to 71% of a company's marketing budget will be allocated towards their social media strategy in an attempt to enhance their social media presence. As social media is being discussed within a marketing context, it is important to address this term. Dahnil et al., (2014) define social media marketing as "using the social media platforms and its related technologies and features to help achieve marketing objectives in conjunction with other marketing communication tools" (p.120).

Many companies are integrating social media into their marketing strategy to coincide with their marketing objectives. For example, marketing directors and general directors of business-to-business companies in the United Kingdom reported that they are using social media to attract new customers, increase customer relations online, increase brand awareness and to communicate their brand online (Michaelidou et al., 2011). In comparison, Turner and Shah,

(2014) alluded that business-to-consumer companies can leverage social media to acquire new customers and increase their sales revenue, which is the primary goal of the majority of business-to-consumer companies (Palumbo & Herbig, 2000).

Social media is regarded as one of the marketing phenomena of recent years and as such, there has been a growing body of research that has aimed to address various aspects, and to understand the effectiveness, of social media marketing. Alalwan et al., (2017) reviewed 144 articles relating to social media marketing and upon their analysis, highlighted that social media marketing can enhance the company's promotional marketing activity, improve customer loyalty and can increase brand awareness and the consumers' purchase intention. Research articles that were not included in this review have presented similar findings, as improvements to the consumers' brand loyalty and engagement were also reported as a result of social media marketing efforts (Jibril et al., 2019). Despite the abundance of supporting evidence and overwhelming popularity, Zhu and Chen (2015) argue that social media is an ineffective marketing strategy, as the nature of social media is incompatible with the nature of marketing. They suggest that companies are using social media to promote their products and services to aid in achieving their business objectives, whereas people are using social media to connect with other social media users, as a creative outlet and as a source of entertainment. Thus, people are not using social media to be subjected to advertising messages, supporting their argument. However, 93% of social media users think that a company should have a social media presence and 85% believe that the company should directly engage with them through social media (Michaelidou et al., 2011). This signifies that regardless of whether social media marketing is effective or not, it is important that a company establishes a social media presence, as consumers have this expectation.

Social media, once primarily used to interact and share personal content with other users online, is becoming more frequently used as an information source and is being incorporated into the consumers purchase decision-making process (Appel et al., 2020). Social media users can search for, and read, the reviews of a brand, product or service created by other social media users, thus obtaining pre-purchase information (Paquette, 2013). Research suggests that consumers have shown to trust online reviews created by unknown social media users to a greater extent than traditional media advertisements created by the company (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Hence, social media can be considered as an appealing information source, as the user has easy access to countless reviews online. Subsequently, as social media users are increasingly using this medium to search for, and read reviews, this has led to the development of what is known as electronic word of mouth (Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

Word of mouth (WOM) is one of the oldest, and most influential, means of information transmission (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004) with a sizeable body of marketing literature providing evidence that WOM is an effective marketing tool (Zamil, 2011). Advances in technology, the emergence of the internet and social media has changed the way in which information is transferred, thus providing an environment for electronic word of mouth (eWOM) communications (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Similar to WOM, eWOM communication has shown to influence brand image, the consumers' purchase intention and to increase product interest and awareness (Paquette, 2013). Although WOM and eWOM involves the same theoretical processes (i.e. the transmission and exchange of information), numerous aspects make eWOM unique. Electronic word of mouth involves a multi-exchange of information that can be disseminated at unprecedented speeds around the world with this information remaining accessible until deleted (Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

In comparison, in traditional WOM communication, information is usually exchanged in a private conversation amongst a small group of people, making it difficult to replicate the accurate transferring of the same information to parties absent from the initial conversation (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Although eWOM is a powerful marketing force, companies have shown concern to eWOM, as the company is unable to control the dissemination of information in an online environment, and the power of shaping their brand image is no longer with the marketing department, instead the power lies with the consumers' online content and connections (Huete-Alcocer, 2017). For example, a negative review created about the company's product can be shared and made visible to millions of potential customers, possibly impacting the consumers' purchase intention and their perceived image of the company. As such, companies must find a solution to increase their control of the consumers' eWOM, reducing the risk of negative information being visible to millions of users online. The emergence of social media disrupted the reliance placed upon traditional marketing strategies and has provided companies with a new avenue to promote their products and services. However, resulting from the significant integration, the market is now saturated with competitors using social media as a marketing medium. Therefore, marketers need to find new means of promoting their company, products or services in the online environment. One potential solution for a company to differentiate themselves from the competition and to increase their control of the consumer's eWOM, is by using micro-celebrities.

Micro-Celebrities Overview

Social media's substantial growth resulted in the creation of a new form of celebrity, known as a micro-celebrity (Khamis et al., 2017). Traditionally, a celebrity status was achieved by receiving significant public and media attention, often as a result for professional talent or a

considerable accomplishment (Schouten et al., 2020). Whereas, micro-celebrities have strategically used social media to amass a large number of followers, often on a global scale, thus becoming well-known and recognisable both online and beyond the midst of social media, granting them a celebrity status (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Eroğlu & Bayraktar Köse, 2019).

Albeit traditional celebrities have also amounted a considerable social media following, micro-celebrities have built their entire careers online and without social media they would not be known to the public, nor would their celebrity status exist (Schouten et al., 2020). Micro-celebrities exist in different fields, for example fashion, beauty, food and fitness and they consider their followers as fans and strategically share self-generated content on their social media accounts in an attempt to increase their awareness, popularity and their number of followers (Djafarova & Thompson, 2020; Schouten et al., 2020). The content that micro-celebrities share on their social media accounts primarily relates to the field in which they operate in (e.g. fitness) and often consists of product reviews that have no marketing intention, leading to social media users perceiving micro-celebrities as a credible source of information (Lima de Carvalho, 2017). Consequently, micro-celebrities are able to build a highly regarded online reputation, allowing them to be recognised as experts in their respective fields, which has permitted certain micro-celebrities to turn their social media presence into a profession (Schouten et al., 2020).

In comparison to traditional celebrities, social media users consider micro-celebrities as more authentic and relatable, as micro-celebrities are seen as normal people who have found fame online as opposed to being subject to the star making system (Neal, 2017). Furthermore, social media users can engage directly with the micro-celebrity through social media and via

face-to-face meets (Su, 2017). Although traditional celebrities can also provide a similar level of interaction with their followers, this interaction is pivotal for increasing and maintaining the micro-celebrity's popularity (Schouten et al., 2020). The interaction that the micro-celebrity has with their followers, through replying to messages or comments, has shown to increase the followers' emotional attachment with the micro-celebrity (Jun & Yi, 2020). Micro-celebrities also share intimate details of their personal lives to a much greater extent than traditional celebrities which presents a persona that is less controlled and managed (Marwick, 2015). A combination of the aforementioned has enabled micro-celebrities to develop a strong and meaningful relationship with their followers (Jun & Yi, 2020).

The rise of micro-celebrities has led to companies showing an increased interest in, and use of, micro-celebrities to endorse their products (Schouten et al., 2020). The more followers a micro-celebrity has, the greater their perceived influence and thus, the greater their commercial value for a company (Djafarova & Thompson, 2020). Companies select a micro-celebrity who exists in a similar field and pay them to promote their products on their social media account and to create content that highlights the product's benefits while encouraging their followers to purchase (Eroğlu & Bayraktar Köse, 2019). Micro-celebrities can create viral content that can relay the company's message, or advertise and promote the company's products directly in the view of thousands or millions of their followers that include the company's target audience (Eroğlu & Bayraktar Köse, 2019). Through the micro-celebrity endorsement deal, the company aims to transfer the strong and meaningful relationship between the micro-celebrity and their followers, onto the company (Djafarova & Thompson, 2020). Lima de Carvalho's (2017) findings support this expectation, as through a micro-celebrity endorsement deal, the perceived credibility of the micro-celebrity was transferred onto the company and vice versa. Thus,

providing evidence that the MTM and the Brand Alliance Concept apply to micro-celebrity endorsements.

Researchers suggest (Bruns & Jacobs, 2006; Neal, 2017) that micro-celebrity endorsements are one of the hottest marketing trends that have the potential to be a highly profitable marketing strategy. Despite these claims, micro-celebrity endorsements are primarily used by small-to-medium sized companies, or companies exclusive to an online environment (Lim et al., 2017). Micro-celebrity endorsements are an emerging marketing strategy, while there has been an increased use of this strategy, their marketing value is not fully understood (Schouten et al., 2020), perhaps defending the apprehension of large companies implementing such a strategy.

Micro - Celebrities and the Fitness Industry

Micro-celebrity endorsements are being increasingly used in numerous industries; however, the fitness industry is arguably using micro-celebrities to the greatest extent and effect (Djafarova & Thompson, 2020). As mentioned, the fitness industry is in a state of considerable growth resulting from a worldwide socio-cultural change whereby the global population are adopting a healthier and fitter lifestyle (Djafarova & Thompson, 2020). This lifestyle change is perhaps attributable to the substantial fitness related content on social media (Djafarova & Thompson, 2020).

Social media has provided fitness focused users with an outlet to share their personal progress and to find information and guidance on workouts and nutrition (Neal, 2017). As such, those with a lean and / or a muscular physique can become an inspirational figurehead, amassing a large number of social media followers and thus becoming a fitness micro-celebrity (Djafarova & Thompson, 2020). Fitness focused users often follow the workouts and diets of fitness micro-

celebrities and purchase products based upon their recommendations with the expectation that doing so will result in attaining a similar physique (Djafarova & Thompson, 2020). Companies within the fitness industry were quick to recognise this commercial opportunity and incorporated fitness micro-celebrity endorsements into their marketing strategy (Djafarova & Thompson, 2020). These companies pay fitness micro-celebrities considerable sums, via one-off payments or sponsorships, to create content that features their products (Neal, 2017).

Lima de Carvalho (2017) claims that social media users recognise fitness micro-celebrities as a profession and have no negative attitudes towards their use as a marketing strategy. Opposing these findings, Djafarova & Thompson (2020) and Korontina & Jargalsaikhan (2016) reported that social media users can develop negative attitudes and feelings towards the fitness micro-celebrity when they excessively upload product advertising content. Comparable findings have also been reported in other industries, whereby overexposure to product advertisement negatively impacted the micro-celebrity's credibility (Elli, 2017). Korontina and Jargalsaikhan (2016) discovered that consumers developed a negative attitude towards the micro-celebrity as they felt the micro-celebrity was simply relaying the company's message in exchange for payment. Hence, micro-celebrities who excessively upload product advertising content might be perceived as being motivated by money and only relay the company's message as opposed to giving their honest review. A similar notion was reported by O'Mahony and Meenaghan (1997) with celebrity endorsements, therefore, micro-celebrities must find an appropriate balance between uploading personal and advertising content on their social media accounts to maintain their authenticity and credibility while continuing their online profession.

Micro - Celebrity Endorsement and Purchase Intention

Calvo-Porral and Lévy-Mangin (2017) interpret purchase intention as the probability of the consumer purchasing a certain product or service in the present, or near future. The consumer purchase decision-making process (Figure 2) consists of five stages that the consumer moves through once they realise they want purchase a product: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase decision (Solomon et al., 2019). The time the consumer spends in each stage depends upon various factors such as, their level of interest, involved risk and their previous purchasing experience (Stankevich, 2017).

<Insert Figure 2 about here>

Although this model is widely used, it has however faced criticism (Stankevich, 2017). This model relies upon the consumer behaving rationally and moving through each stage once they realise they want to purchase a product, however this is an inaccurate depiction of consumer's purchase behaviour which can often be irrational, acting on impulsive without planning nor thought (Solomon et al., 2019). Therefore, it can be assumed that this model only applies to specific scenarios, when the consumer has identified and realised, they have a need for a particular product or service. Korontina and Jargalsaikhan (2016) reported that micro-celebrities influence the first four stages of the consumer's purchase decision-making process. In addition, Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019) also highlighted that micro-celebrities can cause the consumer to search for information about the advertised product. However, Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019) also argued that micro-celebrities rarely influence the purchase decision of the consumer, as they are perceived as not a credible source of information.

Contradicting Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019), several research findings have shown that micro-celebrities can increase the consumers' purchase intention for an array of products in

numerous industries (Chapple & Cownie, 2017; Schouten et al., 2020; Trivedi & Sama, 2020). Many of these studies signified the importance of the Match-Up Theory, whereby a high congruence between the micro-celebrity and the product plays a key role in influencing the consumers' purchase intention. Therefore, it can be theorised that due to the high congruence between a fitness micro-celebrity and fitness related products, consumers should demonstrate an increased intent to purchase.

Research investigating the influence that micro-celebrities have on the consumers' purchase intention has primarily been conducted on youthful populations, as they account for the majority of social media users and are deemed as being most influenced by micro-celebrity product advertising (Chun et al., 2018; Djafarova & Thompson, 2020). However, there has been an increased use of social media by those in an older age bracket, for instance those over the age of 50 (Pew Research Center, 2019), yet despite this, a finite number of studies have investigated whether the micro-celebrity's influence on the consumers' purchase intention differs between age groups. One such study that investigated whether there was a relationship between age and an increased purchase intention was conducted by Chun et al. (2018). Their findings reported that there was an insignificant relationship between age and an increased purchase intention of a fashion item advertised by a micro-celebrity on Instagram.

Micro - Celebrity Endorsement Characteristics

Albeit emerging, there is limited research that has investigated whether the widely accepted endorsement theories apply to micro-celebrity endorsements in the online environment (Djafarova & Thompson, 2020; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Håkansson et al. (2020) discovered, upon review of the available literature relating to micro-celebrities, research has primarily been based around four characteristics: trustworthiness, attractiveness, similarity and

authenticity. Their research findings claimed that micro-celebrities should possess the aforementioned characteristics in order to influence the consumers' purchase intention. Lim et al. (2017) investigated the influence that micro-celebrities have over the consumers' attitude and purchase intention by using the Source Credibility Model, the Source Attractiveness Model, the Match-Up Theory and the MTM. They highlighted that the Source Attractiveness Model, the Match-Up Theory and the MTM had a positive relationship and / or correlation with the consumers' attitude and purchase intention. No relationship was found between the Source Credibility Model and consumers' purchase intention and attitude, indicating that the Source Credibility Model does not increase the effectiveness of micro-celebrity endorsements.

Specific to the fitness industry, Djafarova and Thompson (2020) investigated whether the Source Credibility Model, the Source Attractiveness Model and the Match-Up Theory applied to fitness micro-celebrity endorsements in an online environment. Their study conducted a content analysis on five Instagram posts from ten popular fitness micro-celebrities, equalling 50 posts in total. By using an analytic statistical software package, they discovered that fitness micro-celebrities with a higher number of followers receive a higher level of engagement (i.e. likes and comments), also a high quality of posted content influences the fitness micro-celebrity's perceived credibility. Respondents were also required to state whether the characteristics included in the Source Credibility Model and Source Attractiveness Model would increase the fitness micro-celebrity's perceived credibility. They were required to identify whether the characteristics identified from the content analysis (high engagement, number of followers and quality of content) and whether experience, uniqueness and charisma would increase the fitness micro-celebrity's perceived credibility. From these results, Djafarova and Thompson (2020)

constructed a model that identifies characteristics that will increase the effectiveness of a micro-celebrity endorsement.

Trustworthiness, expertise and the congruence between the product and endorser was identified as being applicable to endorsement in both the online and offline environment, whereas, expertise, number of followers, high quality of content, uniqueness and the number of likes and comments are newly identified characteristics that are only applicable to endorsements in the online environment. This research has provided marketers with a model, enabling them to select a micro-celebrity that possesses the identified characteristics in order to make the endorsement deal more effective. Furthermore, within this research, the respondents were also required to state whether fitness micro-celebrities have increased their purchase intention of fitness related products. Those who stated that fitness micro-celebrities have influenced their purchase intention were asked to highlight which characteristics they perceived as influencing their intention to the greatest extent. Knowledge, expertise, lean and / or muscular physique, experience and similarity to the respondent's ideal self-image were identified as the characteristics of a fitness micro-celebrity that had the greatest effect over the respondents' purchase intention. Although not included in the developed model, these characteristics of a fitness micro-celebrity are of importance to companies competing in the fitness industry, as they provide additional characteristics that should theoretically lead to an effectiveness micro-celebrity endorser (Figure 3).

<Insert Figure 3 about here>

Summary

In summary, celebrity endorsements are a well-established and extensively used marketing strategy. Consistent with their popularity, considerable research has been conducted

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that has subsequently generated a sizeable body of literature that not only substantiates their use as a marketing strategy, but also helps marketers to select the most appropriate, and potentially most effective, celebrity endorser. The advent and development of the internet and social media changed the traditional marketing era and provided companies with a new communication medium to promote their products and services, one that has since been integrated into majority of companies worldwide. Social media has also altered the way in which consumers search for and receive information, whilst supplying users with an online environment where they can engage with one another. An unforeseen result of social media's growth was the creation of micro-celebrities. Although a growing body of literature is emerging, micro-celebrity endorsement literature is still within its infancy, especially in comparison to the abundance of research conducted on celebrity endorsements. While the findings from the existing research is promising, more research is required to gain a greater understanding of the effectiveness of micro-celebrity endorsements, in order to investigate their use and effectiveness as a marketing strategy.

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Figure 1. Meaning Transfer Model (Adapted from McCracken, 1989)
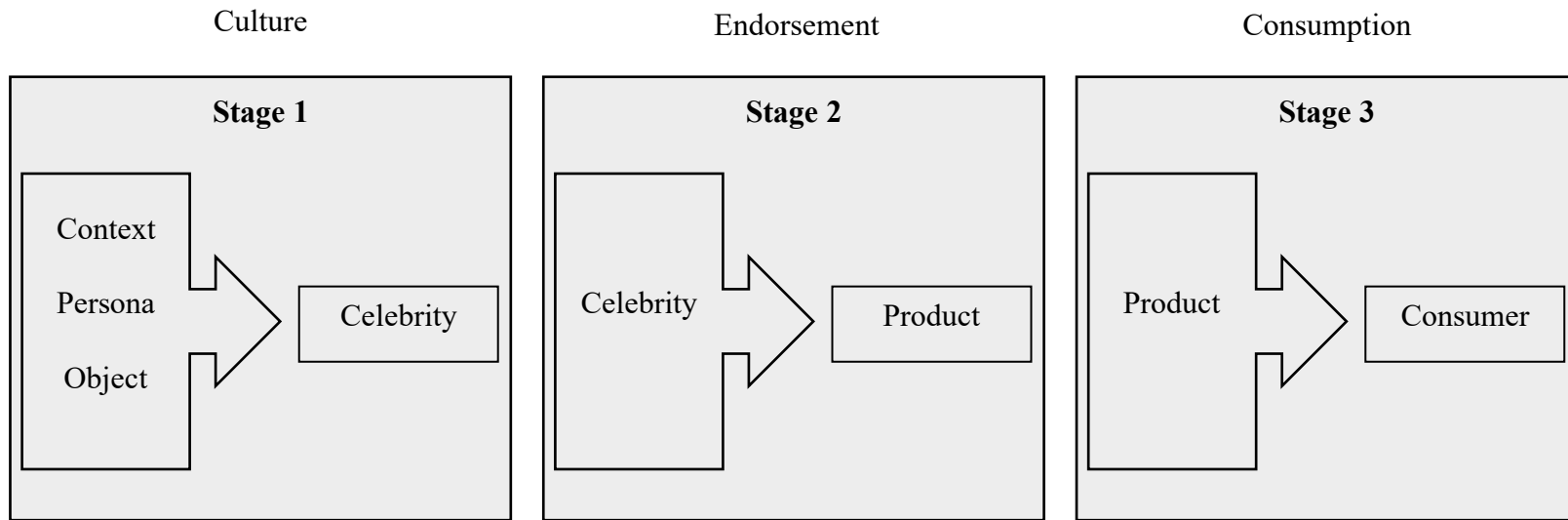
Alt Text: 3 boxes from left to right. Box 1 is entitled culture and is stage 1. Within this box it is suggested that context, persona and object influence the celebrity. Box 2 is entitled endorsement and is stage 2. Within this box celebrity influences the product. Box 3 is entitled consumption and is stage 3. Within this box product influences the consumer.

Figure 2. Consumer Purchase Decision-Making Process (Adapted from Solomon et al., 2019)

Need Recognition	→	Information Search	→	Evaluation of Alternatives	→	Purchase Decision	→	Post-purchase Decision
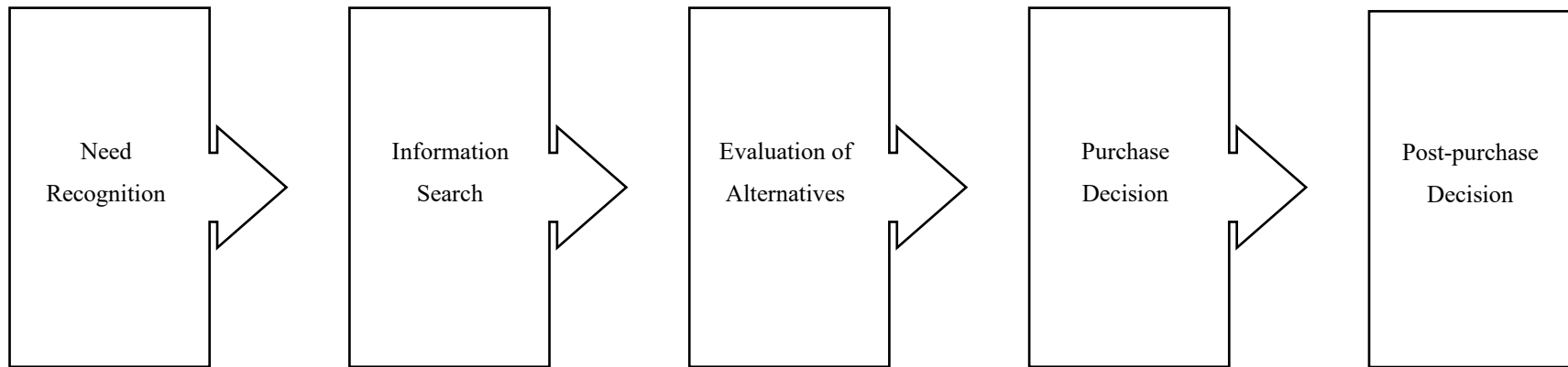
Alt Text: 5 boxes with arrows flowing out of the first four boxes from left to right. Box 1 states 'need recognition' that flows to the next box entitled 'information search', that flows to the next box entitled 'evaluation of alternatives', that flows to the next box entitled 'purchase decision' that flows to the final box entitled 'post-purchase decision'.

Figure 3. Characteristics that Increase the Effectiveness of an Endorser in an Online Environment (Adapted from Djafarova and Thompson, 2020)