

CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PURCHASING DECISIONS IN SOUTH- SOUTH, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Celebrity endorsement has become a widely used marketing approach in the digital age, especially on social media platforms. This study examined how celebrity endorsements on social media influence the purchasing decisions of university students in South-South Nigeria. The study investigated how students respond to celebrity endorsements, the platforms they prefer for interaction, and the elements that affect their purchasing choices. The research used a survey approach and focused on a population of 396,327 undergraduate students at public universities in the South-South region of Nigeria. A total of 383 respondents were chosen using Meyer's sample size determination formula and a multistage sampling method, leading to 370 valid responses that were analyzed. Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire and analyzed with frequency distribution, percentages, mean scores, standard deviation, chi-square tests, and simple regression analysis. The research was based on Source Credibility Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model. The results showed that while students often see celebrity endorsements, their purchasing decisions are mainly influenced by the quality of the product, their personal preferences, and how credible and authentic they believe the celebrities to be. The analysis indicated that celebrity endorsements have a noticeable yet moderate effect on buying choices. The study finds that while celebrity endorsements increase awareness, they do not exclusively influence purchasing decisions. It suggests that marketers focus on authenticity, credibility, and a good fit between the brand and the celebrity to improve the success of endorsement campaigns.

Keywords: Celebrity endorsement, social media, purchasing decisions, university students, South-South Nigeria.

JEL Classification: M31, M37, D91.

Introduction

The rapid growth of digital technologies and social media has transformed marketing communication, making celebrity endorsement one of the most widely used promotional strategies. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube enable celebrities and influencers to engage directly with audiences, increasing brand visibility and influence. Unlike traditional advertising, social media facilitates continuous interaction, making celebrity endorsements particularly persuasive among younger consumers. In Nigeria, increased smartphone penetration and internet access have intensified social media use among university students, a highly active segment of digital consumers. This trend is especially evident in South-

South Nigeria, where a youthful population, a vibrant entertainment industry, and numerous tertiary institutions create a favourable environment for celebrity-driven marketing.

Source Credibility Theory posits that consumers are more likely to be persuaded by endorsers perceived as trustworthy, knowledgeable, and authentic. Similarly, the Elaboration Likelihood Model explains that persuasive communication operates through the central route, involving careful evaluation of product attributes, and the peripheral route, where cues such as celebrity attractiveness and popularity influence attitudes and behaviour (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Together, these theories suggest that while celebrity endorsements attract attention, purchasing decisions also depend on product quality and endorser credibility.

Recent empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement in influencing consumer behaviour. International studies show that celebrity credibility, authenticity, transparency, and audience engagement enhance brand trust, consumer engagement, purchase intention, and brand loyalty. Likewise, Nigerian studies report similar findings. Ezeanya et al. (2023) found positive relationships between celebrity expertise, attractiveness, trustworthiness, and impulse buying behaviour among university undergraduates. Nwankiti et al. (2025) reported that Genevieve Nnaji's endorsement of Luna Milk significantly influenced students' product evaluation and consumer behaviour, while Olubodun, Olojede, and Abidoye (2025) found that celebrity similarity and attractiveness significantly predicted purchasing behaviour. Hudders et al. (2021) and Vrontis et al. (2021) similarly concluded that influencer credibility, authenticity, transparency, and audience engagement positively shape consumer attitudes, although product quality, price, perceived value, and personal preferences also influence purchase decisions.

Against this background, this study examines university students' exposure to celebrity endorsements on social media in South-South Nigeria, identifies the major platforms through which such endorsements are encountered, investigates other factors influencing purchasing decisions, and determines the extent to which celebrity endorsements affect buying behaviour. The study contributes to the literature on digital marketing and consumer behaviour while providing practical insights for advertisers, brand managers, and marketing practitioners.

Statement of the Problem

Celebrity endorsements are widely used to enhance brand awareness and influence consumer behaviour. However, evidence of their effect on actual purchasing behaviour in Nigeria remains limited, as most studies have focused on purchase intentions rather than purchasing decisions. Existing research has also given limited attention to university students in South-South Nigeria. This study addresses these gaps by examining how celebrity endorsements on social media influence university students' purchasing decisions in South-South Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

1. Assess students' exposure to celebrity endorsements on social media

2. Identify the primary platforms of exposure
3. Examine other determinants of purchasing decisions
4. Evaluate the influence of celebrity endorsements on purchasing behaviour

Review of Related Literature

Celebrity endorsement involves using well-known individuals to promote products, services, or brands in ways that influence consumer perceptions and behaviour. In the digital era, it has evolved from traditional advertising into an interactive communication process enabled by social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter). These platforms enable celebrities and influencers to engage directly with followers, enhancing brand visibility and audience engagement. The effectiveness of celebrity endorsement depends not only on fame but also on perceived authenticity, relevance, and credibility. Consumers, particularly young adults, have become more discerning and are less influenced by endorsements perceived as overly commercial or inconsistent with a celebrity's public image. Consequently, celebrity endorsement has shifted from attracting attention to building relationships and trust (Hudders et al., 2021).

Recent studies show that younger consumers respond more favourably to celebrities who demonstrate genuine product experience and maintain consistent online identities (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Ki, Cuevas, Chong, & Lim, 2020). Audrezet et al. (2020) argued that influencers who balance commercial sponsorship with authentic self-presentation strengthen followers' trust and endorsement effectiveness. Likewise, Boerman et al. (2021) emphasised that transparent disclosure of sponsored content enhances consumer awareness while preserving credibility. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) and Schouten et al. (2020) found that credibility, authenticity, interactivity, and a strong influencer–brand fit improve consumer trust, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions. Nigerian studies similarly reported that celebrity credibility positively influences consumers' willingness to purchase promoted products, particularly among university students (Ezeanya et al., 2023; Olubodun, Olojede, & Abidoye, 2025).

Source Credibility Theory explains that message effectiveness depends on source expertise and trustworthiness, while the Source Attractiveness Model identifies familiarity, likability, and similarity as key determinants of persuasive communication (McGuire, 1985). Consistent with these perspectives, Silvera and Austad (2004) argued that consumers transfer celebrities' positive attributes to endorsed brands, enhancing brand perceptions and purchase likelihood.

Purchasing Decisions and Consumer Trust

Celebrity endorsement involves using well-known individuals to promote products, services, or brands in ways that influence consumer perceptions and behaviour. In the digital era, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) have transformed celebrity endorsement into an interactive communication strategy that enhances brand visibility and audience engagement. Its effectiveness depends on authenticity, relevance, and

credibility rather than fame alone (Hudders et al., 2021). Recent studies found that authentic, credible, and transparent influencers strengthen consumer trust, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Audrezet et al., 2020; Boerman et al., 2021; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Schouten et al., 2020). Nigerian studies similarly reported that celebrity credibility positively influences university students' purchasing decisions (Ezeanya et al., 2023; Olubodun, Olojede, & Abidoye, 2025). Source Credibility Theory and the Source Attractiveness Model explain that expertise, trustworthiness, familiarity, and likability enhance endorsement effectiveness (McGuire, 1985; Silvera & Austad, 2004).

Para-social Interaction and Influencer Effectiveness

A significant advancement in the study of influencer marketing is the idea of parasocial interaction. Social media platforms allow users to form perceived friendships and emotional ties with celebrities and influencers, even though they do not have a direct personal relationship with them. These unbalanced relationships lead to a sense of familiarity and emotional connection that affect consumers' attitudes and intentions to act. Parasocial Interaction Theory describes how frequent exposure to media figures creates a sense of familiarity and emotional connection with them, as noted by Horton and Wohl in 1956. These relationships enhance the audience's openness to persuasive messages and product suggestions. Research indicates that stronger emotional ties with influencers increase trust and have a favorable impact on purchasing intentions and brand assessments.

Authenticity, Transparency, and Ethical Considerations

As influencer marketing grows, ethical issues and transparency have become increasingly significant. A major criticism of social media endorsements is that some influencers fail to clearly disclose sponsored content, making it difficult for audiences to distinguish genuine recommendations from paid promotions. Studies indicate that transparency and accurate information enhance consumer trust and support ethical communication practices. Clearly identifying sponsored content enables audiences to evaluate promotional messages more effectively and strengthens trust in both influencers and brands (Hudders et al., 2021). Consumers also value authenticity, responding more positively to endorsements perceived as genuine and based on personal experience rather than commercial interests (Vrontis et al., 2021).

Empirical Review

Studies on celebrity endorsement and consumer buying behaviour have produced mixed findings, although international and Nigerian studies generally report a positive relationship between celebrity endorsements and consumer behaviour. Hudders et al. (2021) found that influencer credibility, authenticity, and audience engagement significantly improved consumers' attitudes towards endorsed brands. Similarly, Vrontis et al. (2021) reported that trust and authenticity enhanced the persuasive effectiveness of social media influencers. Lou and Yuan (2019), Ki et al. (2020), and Osei-Frimpong, Donkor, and Owusu-Frimpong (2019) likewise found that authenticity,

transparency, and celebrity credibility strengthened consumer trust, favourable brand attitudes, and purchase intentions.

Within Nigeria, Idigo et al. (2021), Ezeanya et al. (2023), Nwaoboli (2022), Olubodun, Olojede, and Abidoye (2025), and Nwankiti et al. (2025) similarly reported that credible celebrity endorsements enhanced brand attitudes, brand awareness, product perceptions, and purchasing behaviour among consumers and university students. Inwulu and Milford (2015) also found that celebrity credibility positively influenced consumer attitudes towards brands. However, endorsement effectiveness also depends on credibility, authenticity, product quality, brand relevance, and consumer trust.

Despite growing scholarship, limited empirical evidence focuses on university students in South-South Nigeria. Most studies have examined purchase intentions rather than actual purchasing decisions, with few integrating celebrity endorsement, social media platforms, credibility, and purchasing decisions within a single framework. This gap justifies the present study.

Conceptual Framework

Although there is an increasing amount of research, there is still a lack of empirical evidence that specifically addresses university students in South-South Nigeria. Previous research has mostly focused on brand awareness, consumer attitudes, and intentions to buy, while actual purchasing decisions have received less emphasis. Additionally, there have been limited studies that investigate the relationship between celebrity endorsements, social media platforms, credibility, and purchasing decisions within one cohesive framework. This gap serves as the reason for conducting the current study.

Theoretical Framework

Source Credibility Theory

The Source Credibility Theory, developed by Hovland and Weiss (1951), posits that the effectiveness of a persuasive message depends on the perceived credibility of its source. It identifies trustworthiness and expertise as the key dimensions of credibility. Trustworthiness reflects the communicator's honesty and reliability, while expertise refers to their knowledge and competence. In social media contexts, credibility also includes authenticity and transparency. The theory is relevant to this study because it explains how the perceived credibility of celebrity endorsers influences university students' purchasing decisions.

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), explains that persuasive messages influence attitudes through two routes: the central and peripheral routes. The central route involves careful evaluation of product information, while the peripheral route relies on cues such as celebrity attractiveness and popularity. Celebrity endorsements often function as peripheral cues that shape consumer attitudes and purchasing decisions. The model is relevant because it explains how celebrity endorsements influence university students through both emotional appeal and rational evaluation. Together with Source Credibility Theory, ELM provides a framework for understanding purchasing decisions.

Methodology

Celebrity endorsement involves using well-known individuals to promote products, services, or brands in ways that influence consumer perceptions and behaviour. In the digital era, it has evolved into an interactive communication strategy enabled by social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter). These platforms enable celebrities and influencers to engage directly with followers, enhancing brand visibility and audience engagement. The effectiveness of celebrity endorsement depends not only on fame but also on perceived authenticity, relevance, and credibility. Consequently, consumers, particularly young adults, have become more discerning and are less influenced by endorsements perceived as overly commercial or inconsistent with a celebrity's public image, shifting celebrity endorsement from attracting attention to building relationships and trust (Hudders et al., 2021).

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Data Presentation and Analysis

A total of 383 questionnaires were distributed to respondents at the chosen universities, and 370 were filled out correctly and returned. This results in a response rate of 96.6%. The strong response rate offered enough data for analysis and improved the reliability of the results.

Research Question One

What is the level of students' exposure to celebrity endorsements on social media?

Table 1

Level of Exposure to Celebrity Endorsements on Social Media (N = 370)

Exposure Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High	150	40.5
Moderate	90	24.3
Low	60	16.2
Very Low	30	8.1
None	40	10.9
Total	370	100.0

The results indicate that social media is the primary source of celebrity endorsement exposure, highlighting its importance in reaching and influencing university students.

Research Question Two

Through which platforms are students primarily exposed to celebrity endorsements?

Table 2*Primary Platforms of Exposure to Celebrity Endorsements (N = 370)*

Platform	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Social Media Platforms	320	86.5
Sponsored Posts	30	8.1
Influencer Collaborations	20	5.4
Total	370	100.0

The results show that social media is the primary source of celebrity endorsement exposure, underscoring its importance in celebrity marketing among university students.

Research Question Three

What factors influence students' purchasing decisions?

Table 3*Factors Influencing Purchasing Decisions among University Students (N = 370)*

Factor	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Personal Preference	130	35.1
Product Quality	120	32.4
Price	60	16.2
Brand Reputation	50	13.5
Social Influence	10	2.8
Total	370	100.0

The results show that personal preference and product quality are the primary drivers of purchasing decisions, outweighing the influence of celebrity endorsements.

Research Question Four

To what extent do celebrity endorsements influence students' purchasing decisions?

Table 4*Extent of Influence of Celebrity Endorsements on Purchasing Decisions (N = 370)*

Influence Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strong Influence	50	13.5
Moderate Influence	120	32.4

Slight Influence	110	29.7
No Influence	70	18.9
Undecided	20	5.4
Total	370	100.0

The results indicate that celebrity endorsements moderately influence purchasing decisions, supporting awareness while consumers rely primarily on independent evaluations before making purchase choices.

Inferential Analysis

Test of Hypothesis One

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between exposure to celebrity endorsements on social media and students' purchasing decisions.

Table 5

Chi-Square Analysis of Exposure to Celebrity Endorsements and Purchasing Decisions

Variable	χ^2	df	p-value	Decision
Exposure to Celebrity Endorsements × Purchasing Decisions	15.872	4	.003	Reject H ₀

Since the p-value (.003) is below the 0.05 significance level, the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating a significant relationship between exposure to celebrity endorsements and students' purchasing decisions.

Test of Hypothesis Two

H₀₂: Celebrity endorsements do not significantly influence purchasing decisions among university students.

Table 6

Regression Analysis Showing the Influence of Celebrity Endorsements on Purchasing Decisions

Variable	Beta	t-value	p-value
Celebrity Endorsement	.412	5.643	.001

$R^2 = .170$

$F = 31.842$

$p < .05$

The regression results indicate that celebrity endorsements significantly influence purchasing decisions, explaining 17% of the variation in buying behaviour, while other factors account for the remainder.

Figure 1. Level of Students' Exposure to Celebrity Endorsements on Social Media

- Type: Bar chart
- Data source: Table 1



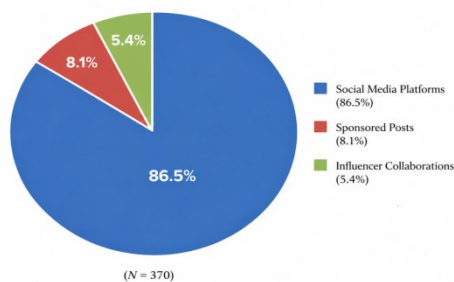
This figure shows that most students have high or moderate exposure.

Figure 2. Primary Platforms of Exposure to Celebrity Endorsements

- Type: Pie chart
- Data source: Table 2

Figure 2

Primary Platforms of Exposure to Celebrity Endorsements



- Social Media Platforms – 86.5%
- Sponsored Posts – 8.1%
- Influencer Collaborations – 5.4%

This figure visually emphasizes that social media platforms overwhelmingly dominate as the source of exposure.

Discussion of Findings

The study found that university students in South-South Nigeria have substantial exposure to celebrity endorsements, confirming that social media is a major platform through which young consumers encounter promotional content. This finding agrees with Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman (2021), who observed that social media has transformed celebrities into influential brand communicators through regular interaction with followers. Similarly, Nigerian studies (Ezeanya et al., 2023; Nwankiti et al., 2025) reported that university students frequently encounter celebrity-endorsed advertisements on social media, highlighting these platforms as important channels for brand communication.

The findings further revealed that individual preferences and product quality are the primary determinants of purchasing decisions. Although celebrity endorsements increase product awareness and visibility, they are not the dominant factor influencing students' buying decisions. Instead, students evaluate products based on their quality, value, and relevance, consistent with studies emphasising the importance of product value, trust, and brand characteristics in consumer choice.

The study also found that celebrity endorsements exert a moderate influence on purchasing decisions. While some respondents reported a strong influence, most indicated only moderate or limited effects, suggesting that endorsements alone do not determine consumer behaviour. This finding supports the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which posits that consumers process persuasive messages through both central and peripheral routes. Celebrity endorsements may attract attention and raise awareness, but purchasing decisions are ultimately shaped by consumers' evaluation of product quality, usefulness, and personal needs.

The findings further support Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), which argues that message effectiveness depends on source credibility. The moderate influence observed suggests that students respond not merely to celebrity popularity but also to perceived trustworthiness, authenticity, and expertise. Consequently, endorsement effectiveness depends largely on the credibility and believability of the endorser.

Compared with previous studies reporting stronger endorsement effects, this study indicates that effectiveness is moderated by individual preferences, product quality, and trust. These differences may reflect variations in study populations, geographical settings, product categories, and the distinction between purchase intentions and actual purchasing behaviour. Overall, the findings demonstrate that celebrity endorsements remain valuable in contemporary marketing by enhancing brand awareness and shaping consumer attitudes. However, their influence operates alongside product quality, consumer preferences, trust, and source credibility. Marketers should therefore prioritise authenticity, credibility, and congruence between the celebrity and the brand while ensuring that endorsed products deliver genuine value to consumers.

Conclusion

Celebrity endorsement remains an important marketing strategy in the digital era, particularly on social media, where it enhances brand awareness and visibility among university students. However, the findings indicate that purchasing decisions are influenced more by product quality, personal preferences, price, brand reputation, and the perceived credibility and authenticity of the endorser than by celebrity popularity alone.

The study demonstrates that celebrity endorsements have a moderate influence on purchasing behaviour and provides empirical evidence from South-South Nigeria, highlighting the importance of aligning credible celebrities with high-quality products and well-matched brands to achieve effective marketing outcomes.

Recommendations

This study offers the following recommendations:

1. Marketing organisations, advertising agencies, and brand managers should collaborate with celebrities who are perceived as credible, trustworthy, and relatable, as these qualities significantly influence university students' purchasing decisions on social media.
2. Brand managers should ensure a strong fit between the celebrity endorser and the brand or product, recognising that product quality, brand credibility, and endorsement effectiveness jointly influence consumer purchasing decisions.
3. Organisations using celebrity endorsers should continuously monitor their public image and reputation, since negative publicity can erode consumer trust and reduce endorsement effectiveness.
4. Marketing professionals should maximise the use of social media by developing engaging and informative endorsement campaigns, given students' high exposure to celebrity-promoted content on these platforms.
5. Celebrity endorsers, advertising agencies, and regulatory bodies should ensure sponsored content is authentic, transparent, and clearly disclosed to strengthen consumer trust and maintain confidence in endorsement campaigns.

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