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# Celebrity Endorsement, Customer Attitude and Brand Selection as Determinants of the Fast-Food Industry Performance: The Moderating Role of Customer Age and Perceived Service Quality

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## ABSTRACT

The use of celebrity endorsement as part of the overall marketing communication plan is growing in importance. Similarly, celebrity endorsement helps to advertise offerings and draw customers' attention. Thus, the current study sought to examine celebrity endorsement, customer attitude, and brand selection as determinants of the fast-food industry performance. A cross-sectional survey of 550 fast food customers was conducted in Harare, Zimbabwe between February and March 2023. A purposive sampling method was used to select respondents. The study's findings confirm all direct relationships. A partial mediation effect of brand awareness and customer attitude on the celebrity endorsement and fast food performance relationship was also confirmed. Also, customer age and perceived service quality were found to moderate the relationship between celebrity endorsement and fast food industry performance relationship. Management within the fast food industry were advised not to treat all the study variables in isolation since they complement each other. This is meant to improve the performance of firms within the retail fast food industry. The current study findings are useful as no study has been conducted within emerging markets within the sub-Saharan region to focus on customer attitude and brand selection as mediators between the celebrity endorsement and business performance relationship within the fast food industry. Moreover, little is known about prior studies that included customer's age and perceived service quality as moderators of the effect of celebrity endorsement on retail business performance. Thus, the current study findings narrow this knowledge gap in the literature.

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Brand selection; celebrity endorsement; customer attitude; Fast-Food Industry performance; perceived service quality

## 1. Introduction

Globally, the use of celebrity endorsement as part of an overall marketing communication plan is growing in importance (Nyagadza et al., 2023). The most obvious benefit of using a well-known celebrity as an endorser has increased the visibility of the advertised products (Erdogan, 2019). Celebrities with a global fan base assist businesses to break into foreign markets by helping them to transcend linguistic and cultural obstacles (Chan et al., 2021; Min et al., 2019). While many people would claim that they are not influenced by celebrity endorsements, some marketing professionals dismiss them as ineffectual as data suggests otherwise. The implementation of a celebrity endorsement campaign has proved to enhance sales for many brands (Osei-Frimpong et al., 2019). Celebrity endorsement helps to advertise goods and draw customers' attention. The influence of celebrity endorsement on customer purchasing decisions and favorable opinions toward the product is direct (Mustapha et al., 2021). Celebrities' endorsement and promotion of firms' goods can also raise customer awareness and familiarity (Min et al., 2019).

In Zimbabwe, the use of well-known celebrities to promote products and services is not fully practised (Nyagadza et al., 2023). This is noticeable within fast food companies like Chicken Inn, Eat'Lick, Nandos, KFC, Chicken Slice and Pizza Inn among others where little is done to market offerings using celebrities. These companies continue to lose business due to the absence of celebrities in their marketing activities. Moreover, the fast food industry is paying little attention to issues to do with improved service quality which influences customer satisfaction and business performance (Chikazhe & Makanyeza, 2022; Chikazhe et al., 2023a). Likewise, retailers in Zimbabwe's fast food industry seem to equally target all customer ages, hence the contribution to business by different age groups is diverse. Management is not considering the importance of recognizing the need for diverse customers' age preferences, superior service quality, positive customer attitude, improved brand selection as well as the need for celebrity marketers within the fast food industry and this has resulted in a loss of business (Chikazhe, Chingosho, et al., 2023; Gaura et al., 2021; Nyagadza et al., 2023). In trying to address related problems, several studies have been conducted worldwide but more attention has been paid to direct relationships among celebrity endorsement, brand attitude, service quality, and business performance (Calvo-Porrall et al., 2021; Enaph et al., 2017; Mustapha et al., 2021; Osei-Frimpong et al., 2019). Little is known about prior studies that have included customer age and perceived service quality as moderators of the effect of celebrity endorsement on retail business performance.

If customer age and perceived service quality are considered within the Zimbabwean fast food industry, it can positively influence customers' attitude toward advertised products. Customers' views and emotions toward a business are important since they make up customer attitudes (Abdaziz et al., 2019). These attitudes can form based on a variety of elements like selection, acquisition, use, and disposal of goods and services on offer (Munyimi & Chikazhe, 2024). Customer attitude being the sentiment of favorability that a person feels toward an item can result in improved performance among retailers (Baniya, 2017). Also, customers with a positive attitude are more likely to purchase a product, which increases the likelihood that they will enjoy it (Mashapure et al., 2024; H. J. Park & Lin, 2020). Likewise, a brand's chances of success can also be increased by creating awareness to influence its selection (Arora et al., 2019). Brand selection provides

retailers with additional prestige and limited competition in specific markets (Abdaziz et al., 2019).

Celebrity endorsement can also be used to influence brand selection within the fast food industry, especially where the customers are of different age groups. If this is coupled with superior service quality provision, the business is likely to excel. Thus, businesses ought to pay much attention to superior service quality as it plays a critical role within the fast food industry (Erdogan, 2019; Mutaurwa et al., 2024). Failure to pay attention to service quality calls can result in customers switching suppliers (Arora et al., 2019) and this negatively affects business performance (Chikazhe, Chingosho, et al., 2023; H. J. Park & Lin, 2020). Likewise, retailers should pay attention to the right customer demography supporting their business, especially within the fast food industry where different age groups have diverse preferences. The majority of customers for the fast food industry comprise of younger age (below 30 years) that also have passion for celebrities. Hence, the current study was conducted to investigate whether customers' age and perceived service quality support customer attitude and brand selection in influencing the effect of celebrity endorsement on the performance of fast food industry. The objectives of the study were to establish: i) the effect of celebrity endorsement on the performance of the fast food industry, ii) how celebrity endorsement influences customer attitude and brand selection, and iii) the moderating role of customer's age and perceived service quality on the celebrity endorsement–retail fast food industry performance relationship.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1 Theories underpinning the study

The Meaning Transfer Model (MTM) and the Elaboration Likelihood model served as theories underpinning the study. This model was inspired by sociological ideas that emphasize the importance of human agency in giving things meaning. This indicates that the meaning a society assigns to various individuals, things, and modes of behavior is based on the meanings assigned to those things by its members (Till & Shimp, 2018). Pre-endorsement (meanings), endorsement (transfer), and post-endorsement (reaction) are the three sequential stages of celebrity endorsement effects that are explained by the Meaning Transfer Model (McCracken, 1989). Hence, the current study sought to understand how firms can influence brand selection and customer attitude through the use of celebrities so as enhance the Fast-Food industry performance. The MTM overlooked customers' age and perceived service quality as variables influencing the performance of the Fast-Food industry. Thus, this study incorporated the two variables as moderators on the relationship between celebrity endorsement and the performance of the Fast-Food industry.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which also anchors the current study, is a theory that explains how a persuasive message affects its target audience (Blackwell, 2018). The way that people can be convinced to alter their opinions is explained by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Blackwell, 2018). People are more likely to be convinced via the central route when they are immersed in the subject and have the time and energy to consider the arguments (Baniya, 2017). The ELM model does not include the

importance of the message carrier to inform the target audience. Therefore, the current study sought to have the performance of the Fast-Food Industry improved through introducing a celebrity to carry the message to customers through advertisements.

## **2.2 Celebrity endorsement**

A celebrity is a person who is widely recognized by a substantial portion of a particular population (Chan et al., 2021). According to Corina (2016), a celebrity is defined not just by their fame, but also by the admiration and respect of the general population. Consequently, the things that set celebrities apart from the rest of the people include skill, creative ability, expert knowledge, and an uncommon way of living (Enaph et al., 2017). According to Vien et al. (2017), celebrities are set apart from the general public by a number of factors, including their attractive looks, their high-class lives, and their specialized abilities. They are the center of attention because of their prominence in society. Dean (2019) adds that the public recognizes a celebrity because of their unique qualities and traits, making them stand out from the crowd. When competing with other businesses selling comparable items, one of the most frequent audience-targeting strategies is to use celebrity endorsement to stand out from the crowd. According to Singh (2018), hiring a celebrity endorser improves brand awareness, positively affects the company's reputation, and lends more credibility to the message being conveyed.

## **2.3 Customer attitude**

The term "attitude" is used to describe a person's inside assessment of any given thing, topic, person, or behavior (Erdogan, 2019). Attitude is a lasting and general appraisal of people or objects and it tends to exhibit consistency over time; it is not always permanent because it may be influenced by marketing activities such as television advertising and celebrity endorsement (Osei-Frimpong et al., 2019). Raza et al. (2019) posit that a person's attitude may be influenced by both internal and external circumstances. Advertising that is consistent with the brand's values and attitude may have a significant impact on how people feel about the company being advertised (Dean & Biswas, 2019). By associating a well-known person with a product, companies attempt to boost the endorsed product's popularity among customers (Tian et al., 2022). The majority of studies (Chikazhe et al., 2023b; Calvo-Porrall et al., 2021) have shown that studying customers' attitudes toward a product or attitude is crucial to understanding how they respond to that brand or service.

## **2.4 Organizational performance**

Organizational performance is an expression of the extent to which an organization realizes its stated objectives within a given time frame (Ncube et al., 2021). Ncube et al. (2021) describes organizational performance as being the degree to which an organization realizes its financial and non-financial returns in relation to the objectives that would have been outlined in that regard. Organizational performance measures the collective output of an organization against the targeted output to determine the degree to which the actual outcomes deviate from the desired outcomes (Abdallah et al., 2022; Chikazhe

& Makanyeza, 2022). Increased sales after celebrity endorsement was one of the ways for performance measurement considered by retailers (Kaondera et al., 2023). The current study understands the fast food industry as the preparation of food that is typically served to customers quickly and cheaply in a take-out, disposable container from a restaurant, shop, food truck, or street vendor. Also, the study understands fast food industry performance as the revealing of how specific fast food restaurants stack up against their rivals in terms of sales and customer service.

### **2.5 Brand selection**

The process of choosing a brand name that will increase a product's chances of success usually starts with a review of the benefits, target market, and intended marketing strategies (Li et al., 2018). It also takes into account factors like how likely it is to infringe on already-existing brand names, how simple it is to translate it into other languages, and how much it can be legally protected (Baniya, 2017). The brand name should include attributes like uniqueness, product advantages, and, most crucially, ease of pronouncing, remembering, and recalling (Makri et al., 2019). Moreover, customers intuitively attach value with their purchase when brand names are connected to the goods (Srivastava et al., 2020). Brand identification and awareness are greatly influenced by the name's pronunciation and sound. A company or product name ought to sound excellent when spoken and be easy to understand and pronounce (Nguyen Viet & Nguyen Anh, 2021). This study views brand selection as a methodical procedure for creating a brand name that will maximize the likelihood that a product will succeed and in this study celebrities are used to improve brand awareness.

### **2.6 Customer age**

Businesses utilize demographic information to better understand the traits of the customers who consume their goods and services. One may use demographics to identify the people to whom the brand attracts most based on age, geography, gender, employment status, income, and a myriad of other factors (Altangerel & Munkhnasan, 2019). Compared to younger adults, older adults often have lower caloric needs but equivalent or even higher nutritional needs (Ghattas & Al-Abdallah, 2020). This is frequently brought on by decreased exercise, modifications in metabolism, or age-related loss of bone and muscle mass. People's capacity for cognitive processing decreases with age, which has an impact on how they make decisions about what goods and services to buy (Cha & Seo, 2019). Compared to younger customers (below 30 years), older customers (above 30 years) typically have different product preferences (Kaushal & Ali, 2020). The less likely the number of food products affected customers' purchasing choices, the older they are. The majority of customers who are around 30 years are likely to have a positive impact on fast food buying decisions (Cha & Seo, 2019).

### **2.7 Perceived service quality**

Perceived service quality is the perception of a company's overall distinctiveness or dominance by customers (Mharidzo et al., 2022). Chikazhe et al. (2023b) described

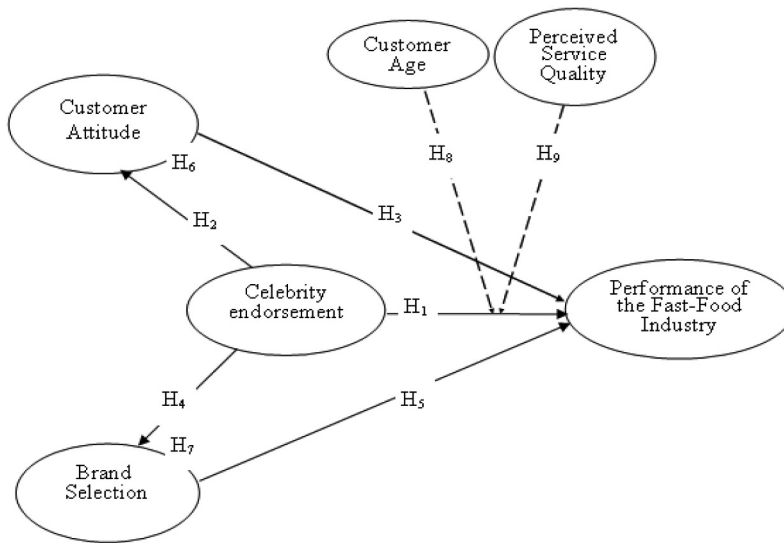
perceived service quality as the customer's assessment of the performance of the services they received and how it compares to what they had anticipated. Gaura et al. (2021) added that perceived service quality is considered as the customer's evaluation of the overall excellence or superiority of the service. The four characteristics – dependability, reliability, superiority, and consistency – are used to gauge perceived quality as they can gauge customers' overall perception of a good or service (Denhere et al., 2023). Quality is one of the most crucial elements that has a big impact on customer decisions (Kaondera et al., 2023). A successful brand is one that consistently provides excellent client contentment (Jacobson et al., 2023), which is only achievable if it upholds the caliber of its goods and services (Mwandifura et al., 2022). The current study defines perceived service quality as it's own evaluation of the service level offered by fast food retailers.

## 2.8 Research gap

According to literature, it can be noted that there are many benefits and drawbacks to celebrity endorsement. For celebrity endorsements to have an impact on customer attitudes, the celebrity must be attractive, credible, and trustworthy and fit with the brand being advertised (Chan et al., 2021; Enaph et al., 2017; Vien et al. (2017). While, in most studies (Calvo-Porrall et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2021, Erdogan, 2019; H. J. Park & Lin, 2020; Singh & Banerjee, 2018) reviewed celebrity endorsements were found to lead to positive customer attitude toward the brand, as well as purchasing intentions, it should be noted that such studies were conducted in countries where their celebrities are “hero worshipped” and have much influence on their followers. However, Zimbabwe, has not yet achieved such a status where celebrities' impact almost every aspect of people's life, and thus their influence may be limited. In this context it becomes imperative to understand the extent to which celebrities in the local context can have an influence in creating positive customer attitude toward the brand. Furthermore, prior studies (Nguyen Viet & Nguyen Anh, 2021; Wuisan et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020) largely focused on sporting and luxury products which have higher brand-celebrity congruence than fast food products. Also, local celebrities' endorsement is known in domains that are not related to fast foods. It thus becomes imperative to examine the extent to which other product categories like fast foods can produce similar results of celebrity marketing like those in sporting and luxury products where brand match-up is more visible. Additionally, no literature in the marketing domain has shown the incorporation of customer and perceived service quality as moderators between celebrity endorsement and the performance of the fast food industry. Furthermore, the current study adopts customer attitude and brand selection as mediators on the effect of celebrity endorsement and the performance of the fast food industry. Based on the preceding research gap emanating from the literature review, the conceptual model of the study below was proposed in [Figure 1](#).

## 2.9 Empirical studies and research hypotheses development

The customers' trust in the celebrity is characterized by their openness to hear and accept the celebrity's message in advertisements (Dean & Biswas, 2019). In Indonesia, Mustapha et al. (2021) investigated the impact of celebrity trustworthiness on customers' propensity to make a purchase. According to the results,



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework for the Study.

customers are more likely to make a purchase when they view a celebrity as trustworthy and this improves business performance. In addition, Othman's (2017) research, which used Pepsi as a case study, validated celebrity endorsement by establishing the effect of celebrity endorsement on customer purchasing behavior. The results demonstrated that customers were more likely to make purchases if they considered the celebrities who promoted the brand to be a credible role models. Chan et al. (2021) concluded that trustworthiness may be undermined when customers learn unfavorable information about a celebrity endorser, which in turn affects customers' impressions of the endorser and the endorsed product as well as the brand's reputation. Moreover, an organization's reputation takes a major hit when its representative or celebrity sponsor is involved in a scandal. Thus, it can be proposed that:

**H1:** Celebrity endorsement positively influences the performance of the fast food industry.

According to the literature, a celebrity's credibility affects not only the reception of the message by the target audience, but also the credibility of the brand and the company as a reliable brand (Erdogan, 2019; Othman, 2017; Seno & Lukas, 2017; Singh & Banerjee, 2018; Zhang et al., 2020). Also, research reveals that attractive celebrities may readily change customers' attitudes because of the favorable assumptions that already exist about them (L. Chang, 2016). A study by Wuisan et al. (2020) confirmed that the credibility of the endorser has a significant impact on the persuasiveness of the message (such as advertising). Hashim (2019) show that the physical attractiveness of celebrities has a significant impact on how the target audience responds to the brand's image. According to research conducted by Singh (2018), the credibility of the celebrity endorsing a product is significantly impacted by the

match or compatibility between the product and the celebrity's credibility. Failure to pair a product with a suitable celebrity can damage both parties' reputations and prevent customers from easily associating the two (Abdaziz et al., 2019). Hence it can be hypothesized that:

**H2:** Celebrity endorsement has a positive effect on customer attitude.

According to Enaph et al. (2017), a celebrity endorser's physical attractiveness is crucial to the success of a campaign. Given their star status and physical attractiveness, celebrities can have an impact on the brands they represent. A celebrity's message is more likely to have an influence on brand image and customer purchasing intention if the target audience can relate to (similarity), identify with (familiarity), and enjoy the celebrity's facial characteristics and other physical traits (Erdogan, 2019). Chan et al. (2021) claim that celebrity attractiveness can boost a brand's attractiveness, leading to improved business performance. According to Min et al. (2019), the presence of a celebrity endorser in an advertisement makes it easier to recognize brands that are linked to that endorser. Moreover, the authors pointed out that the appearance of an endorser's name tends to considerably boost the possibility that the product will also be recalled if a correct link is made between the product name and the endorser. H. J. Park and Lin (2020) propose that the endorser's physical attractiveness is used to influence the target audience's perception of the celebrity. Customers have more faith in products endorsed by celebrities they find appealing. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

**H3:** Customer attitude positively affects the performance of the fast food industry.

The phrase "match" or "congruence" has been used in different areas of marketing literature, including discussions of brand extensions, sponsors, co-branding, and celebrity endorsements (Hashim, 2019). The goal across all of these uses is to evaluate how well one brand relates to something else, be it a different product category, another brand, an event, or a person (L. Chang, 2016; Mashapure et al., 2024). Huni and Elliott (2019) assert that a brand's compatibility with a celebrity endorsement is crucial to the point where the absence of such a match can render all other considerations moot, in the case of commercials featuring celebrity endorsements. Brand match up means that the celebrity's character and values should mesh with those of the product being promoted (Corina, 2016). The greater the celebrity endorsement's match to the advertised product, the more powerful the message (Dean & Biswas, 2019). According to previous research on the subject of celebrity-product congruence, the efficacy of celebrity endorsement increases when the characteristics of the hired celebrity are consistent with those of the advertised product (Ha & Lam, 2017). It has also been concluded that the success of a celebrity endorsement depends on how effectively the celebrity's image and the product's image blend (Mustapha et al., 2021).

The influence of celebrity endorsement is still highly debatable and subject to investigation (L. Chang, 2016), particularly for fast food brands, with some studies finding that celebrity endorsements were likely to persuade and induce a high level of brand recall and positive customer attitudes while others finding that this was dependent on other factors apart from the celebrity attributes such as the type of buying and levels of involvement

(Arora et al., 2019; Altangerel & Munkhnasan, 2019; Calvo-Porrall et al., 2021; Oteng-Abayie, 2019). Thus, it is wise to hypothesize that:

**H4:** The match between celebrity endorsement and products influences brand selection.

Literature confirms the direct relationship between brand choice and firm performance (Corina, 2016; Dean & Biswas, 2019; Mustapha et al., 2021). Similarly, C. W. Park et al. (2013) explored the effects of brand logos on customer brand commitment and firm performance. As expected, the study results indicate a positive relationship between the two variables. Also, Rahman et al. (2019) studied how corporate brand selection influences firm performance. The results of this study prove that company brand selection impacts positively on market-based performance. In a related study, Li et al. (2018) investigated the associations amongst green brand, brand selection, and firm performance. The study findings show that brand selection exerts a positive effect on market performance and firm performance. Hence it can be proposed that:

**H5:** Brand selection positively influences the performance of the fast food industry.

Literature approves direct relationships among customer attitude, celebrity endorsement, firm performance, and brand selection. A study by Mustapha et al. (2021) confirms that celebrities influence repeated purchases by customers. Also, studies by Chan et al. (2021) and Othman (2017) on making use of celebrities in businesses established that businesses perform better after adopting celebrities to lead the campaign. Thus, it is confirmed in prior studies that celebrity endorsement positively influences business performance. Also, extant literature indicates that celebrity involvement results in a positive change of customer attitude for the better performance of businesses (Wuisan et al., 2020). Hence, it has been concluded that a positive customer attitude change influences business performance (Chan et al., 2021). Since it has been established that there are direct relationships among the three study variables, i.e. celebrity endorsement, customer attitude, and the performance of fast food retailers, it can be proposed that customer attitude can strengthen the relationship between celebrity endorsement and the performance of fast food retailers. Considering the preceding debate, it can be hypothesized that:

**H6:** Customer attitude plays a mediating role on the relationship between celebrity endorsement and the performance of the fast food industry.

Empirical literature ratifies the influence of celebrity endorsement on brand selection (Mustapha et al., 2021; Seno & Lukas, 2017; Singh & Banerjee, 2018; Zhang et al., 2020). Mustapha et al. (2021) carried a study to investigate factors that influence a customer to make a purchase. The study established that brand selection is influenced by involving a celebrity to create awareness. It was discovered that the celebrity's involvement in activities like advertising products can result in the improvement of brands associated with the celebrity (Hashim, 2019; Mustapha et al., 2021; Othman, 2017). Likewise, a study by Othman (2017) demonstrates that customers are more likely to make a purchase after

considering the celebrities who promote the brand to be a credible role model. In their study, Rahman et al. (2019) concluded that corporate brand selection influences firm performance. Similarly, Li et al. (2018) established that brand selection has a positive effect on market performance and firm performance. In an almost similar study, Chan et al. (2021) settled that the use of celebrities positively results in improved business. Considering the direct relationship among the three variables, i.e. brand selection, celebrity endorsement, and fast food performance, it can be proposed that:

**H7:** Brand selection mediates the effect of celebrity endorsement on the performance of the fast food industry.

Age plays a crucial role in the consumption pattern, especially within the fast food industry (Kaushal & Ali, 2020). In their study, Cha and Seo (2019) concluded that the younger generation has a strong understanding of celebrities and are mostly likely to be attracted to whatever the celebrity does. Thus, businesses take advantage of this behavior by the younger generation to attract them through the use of various celebrities. Also, Altangerel and Munkhnasan (2019) settled that older adults often have lower caloric needs but equivalent or even higher nutritional needs (Ghattas & Al-Abdallah, 2020). In a related study, Kaushal and Ali (2020) concluded that product preferences and brand selection are other aspects of customer behavior which are affected by age (Altangerel & Munkhnasan, 2019). The current study is unique and focuses on how age moderates the relationship between celebrity endorsement and the performance of the fast food industry. Hence it can be suggested that:

**H8:** Customer age plays a moderating role between celebrity endorsement and the performance of the fast food industry.

Service quality promotes business in every industry (Chikazhe et al., 2023a). Despite offering competitive products and services, every business ought to ensure that the quality of service by employees is superior (Gaura et al., 2021; Mutaurwa et al., 2024). The fast food industry can be offering products on demand, but if the quality of service is below customer expectations, the business may fail to attract customers (Denhere et al., 2023). Even if the business engages good celebrities and fails to pay attention to service quality calls, customers can shun the organization (Munyimi & Chikazhe, 2024). Considering all this, it can be hypothesized that:

**H9:** Perceived service quality moderates the effect of celebrity endorsement on the performance of the fast food industry.

### 3. Research design

#### 3.1 Sampling

The study targeted fast food customers in the Harare metropolitan area during the period between February and March 2023. The research adopted a quantitative study

and a cross-sectional survey of 550 fast food customers who were selected. Convenience sampling was used to select respondents who were selected when they visited the fast food retailers to conduct normal business. Researchers selected at least 100 respondents from each retailer to ensure a balanced sample. The selected respondents proceeded to complete the questionnaire after assuring the researcher that they had knowledge of any celebrity being used to market any product or organization within the fast food industry. Harare was chosen because of the large amount of food retailers operating there, and most of the fast food businesses operating within the country are represented in Harare. The main fast food retailers that provided respondents and allowed researchers to gather data were Chicken Inn, Eat'Lick, Nandos, KFC, Chicken Slice, and Pizza Inn. The same firms sometimes make use of celebrities in advertising their products. They make use of musicians, footballers, and comedians among other celebrity types.

### **3.2 Questionnaire design**

A structured questionnaire with Likert type questions ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree was used to collect data. A pilot test was conducted soon after the questionnaire design to ensure reliability and validity and the instrument was fine-tuned before the actual data collection. The instrument had seven sections (celebrity endorsements–CE, fast food performance–FFP, brand selection–BS, customer attitude–CAT, customer age–CUA, perceived service quality–PSQ, and demography) to represent all variables for the current study. Items used in designing the instrument were borrowed from previous related studies and modified to be in line with the current study. [Table 1](#) indicates items and sources for the used research instrument.

## **4. Data collection and analysis**

This study employed a convenience method to select respondents who visited the chosen fast food firms throughout the study period because the sampling frame was uncertain. Convenience sampling was appropriate for the current study since only respondents who were accessible and willing to participate in the survey were taken into consideration. Permission to collect data was first sought from the management of each of the fast food business units. Research assistants were engaged and trained before they assisted in a data collection process. Questionnaires were physically distributed to customers as they relaxed having their meals within the selected businesses (Chicken Inn, Eat'Lick, Nandos, KFC, Chicken Slice, and Pizza Inn). Once the questionnaires were completed, they were collected by the researchers and safely kept awaiting the data analysis stage.

After questionnaire collection, data were entered into SPSS version 21 and cleaned up before the analysis process. The response rate was 93%. In terms of gender, males comprised 31% with females making the remainder (69%). As of the customers' age during the time of the study, 60% of the respondents were below the age of 20, whereas 30% were between 20–30 years of age. The remainder (10) were above 30 years of age. In total, 79% were single customers whereas 21% were married.

**Table 1.** Items and Sources

Celebrity Endorsements	Source
The celebrity is familiar to me	Calvo-Porrall et al. (2021); Baniya (2017); Arora et al. (2019)
Customers are passionate about the celebrity used by the firm	
The firm's products are known through celebrity advertisements	
Celebrity endorsed brands have a good reputation	
Celebrity endorsement brand provides excellent value	Ha and Lam (2017)
<b>Customer attitude</b>	
Customers prefer to buy products advertised by celebrities	
Customer attitude towards advertisement is enhanced by a celebrity	
Celebrity attractiveness influences the attitude towards the fast food firm	Altangerel and Munkhnasan (2019); Gaura et al. (2021)
The type of celebrities used increases product awareness	
<b>Brand selection</b>	
Celebrity image influences my decision to adopt certain products	
Celebrity endorsement builds brand image	Oteng-Abayie, (2019); Goyal and Pitt (2017)
The celebrity has the capability to advertise the firms products	
The celebrity well-explains product features and benefits	
The celebrity is credible	
<b>Fast food industry performance</b>	Chikazhe et al. (2023), Mutaarwa et al. (2024)
Table occupancy is high throughout the trading hours	
The service counters are always busy	
The company continues to open new branches	
The shops are always congested	
<b>Perceived service quality</b>	
Frontline staff are dependable	
Frontline staff do not delay customers	
The fast food retailer embraces digital payment methods	
The firms infrastructure is appealing	
The quality of food is good	

Structural equation modeling (SEM) in AMOS 21 was utilized for data analysis in order to assess the study's hypotheses ( $H_1$ – $H_7$ ). SEM was chosen since it provides the highest likelihood of estimating the complete system in a hypothesized model, allowing the variables to be compared to the data (Ullman & Bentler, 2012). The moderated regression analysis in SPSS version 21 was used to examine hypotheses ( $H_8$ – $H_9$ ) regarding the moderating effect of customer age and perceived service quality on the relationship between celebrity endorsement and fast food performance.

#### 4.1 Validation of measurement

By evaluating common method bias, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, the measurement was shown to be valid. Studies of this kind that ask the same respondents to provide feedback on independent and dependent variables may be threatened by common method bias. The respondents' friendliness and ability to provide positive responses explains the measurement inaccuracy. The covariation of hidden constructs and the validity and reliability of measurement items are both impacted by common method bias. The Harman's single-factor technique was employed in this investigation to identify common method bias. As a result, SPSS V21 was used in conducting an exploratory factor analysis with a fixed number of factors of 1. The resulting one-factor solution explained a 56.127% variance. This shows that the study was not threatened by common technique bias.

Convergent validity was assessed using the measurement model fit indices, standardized factor loadings, individual item reliability, critical ratio, Cronbach's alpha, and composite reliability. The findings support convergent validity. Version 21 of AMOS was used to conduct the measurement model. The outcomes show respectable fit indices: CMIN/DF ( $\chi^2/df$ ) = 3.002; goodness of fit index = 0.912; adjusted goodness of fit index = 0.922; normed fit index = 0.921; Tucker–Lewis index = 0.941; comparative fit index = 0.933; root mean square error of approximation = 0.048. Also, convergent validity results met minimum conditions, as presented in Table 2.

As for discriminant validity, all average variance extracted were greater than 0.6 and above the corresponding squared inter-construct correlations (Zait & Berteau, 2011). Thus, all the scale validation results satisfied minimum conditions and permitted research hypotheses testing. Results for discriminant validity test are presented in Table 3.

**Table 2.** Results for Convergent Validity

Construct & items	Standardized factor loading	Individual item reliability	Critical ratio	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability
<i>Celebrity Endorsements</i>					
CE1	.785	.945	-	.896	.901
CE2	.854	.736	8.145***		
CE3	.779	.901	19.314***		
CE4	.901	.673	16.987***		
CE5	.799	.817	27.345***		
CE6	.698	.765	15.682***		
CE7	.921	.894	9.345***		
CE8	.714	.914	11.302***		
<i>Customer attitude</i>					
CAT1	.822	.904	-	.912	.943
CAT2	.746	.822	17.245***		
CAT3	.788	.947	38.140***		
CAT4	.723	.801	16.278***		
<i>Brand selection</i>					
BS1	.902	.902	-	.872	.987
BS2	.782	.811	25.315***		
BS3	.856	.746	18.654***		
BS4	.881	.744	14.215***		
BS5	.743	.698	32.451***		
<i>Fast food industry performance</i>					
FFP1	.698	.699	-	.821	.835
FFP2	.781	.632	9.647***		
FFP3	.821	.845	18.642***		
FFP4	.784	.965	14.310***		
FFP5	.813	.770	10.254***		
<i>Perceived service quality</i>					
PSQ1	.944	.807	-	.857	.869
PSQ2	.973	.902	31.025***		
PSQ3	.808	.744	21.345***		
PSQ4	.714	.810	15.642***		
PSQ5	.831	.699	16.345***		
<i>Customer age</i>					
CUA1	.647	.845	-	.801	.823
CUA2	.741	.701	16.340***		
CUA3	.730	.843	11.021***		
CUA4	.667	.778	9.457***		

CR is fixed; \*\*\*significant at  $p < .001$ .

**Table 3.** Mean (M), Standard Deviation (SD), AVE, and SICC.

Construct	M	SD	CE	CAT	BS	FFP	PSQ	CUA
CE	4.012	1.210	<b>.611</b>					
CAT	4.114	1.142	.302	<b>.589</b>				
BS	4.304	.978	.178	.301	<b>.701</b>			
FFP	3.987	.945	.256	.402	.400	<b>.647</b>		
PSQ	4.012	1.124	.289	.258	.178	.245	<b>.701</b>	
CUA	3.987	.879	.334	.242	.341	.301	.330	<b>.677</b>

Diagonal elements in bold represent AVEs.

**Table 4.** Results of Hypotheses Tests.

Hypotheses	Hypothesized Relationships	Standardized Regression Weight	Critical Ratios	Remark
H1	CE→FFP	.281	3.696***	Supported
H2	CE→CAT	.294	4.037***	Supported
H3	CAT→FFP	.239	3.017***	Supported
H4	CE→BS	.397	5.674***	Supported
H5	BS→FFP	.205	2.975***	Supported

SRW, Standardised regression weight; CR, critical ratio; \*\*\*significant at  $p < .001$ .

## 4.2 Hypotheses testing ( $H_1$ – $H_5$ )

Model fit indices were satisfactory (CMIN/DF ( $\chi^2/df$ ) = 3.235; goodness of fit index = 0.955; adjusted goodness of fit index = 0.916; normed fit index = 0.923; Tucker–Lewis index = 0.932; comparative fit index = 0.907; root mean square error of approximation = 0.039) (Iacobucci, 2010; Mulaik et al., 1989). Hypotheses test results for direct relationships are summarized in Table 4.

The results, summarized in Table 4, show that celebrity endorsement has a positive effect on fast food industry performance. Therefore,  $H_1$  can be supported. Celebrity endorsement was found to positively influence customer attitude, thus  $H_2$  is supported. Moreover, customer attitude had a positive effect on fast food industry performance, suggesting that  $H_3$  is supported. Similarly, celebrity endorsement had a positive effect on brand selection, meaning  $H_4$  is supported. Finally, brand selection was found to positively influence fast food industry performance, finding support for  $H_5$ .

## 4.3 Mediation results

The results for the mediation effect of customer attitude ( $H_6$ ) and brand selection ( $H_7$ ) on the effect of celebrity endorsement on the performance of the fast food industry are represented in Table 5.

The results in Table 5 indicate that customer attitude partially mediates the effect of celebrity endorsement on the performance of the fast food industry, confirming  $H_6$ . Also, it was found that brand selection partially mediates the effect of celebrity endorsement on the performance of the fast food industry. Hence,  $H_7$  was supported.

**Table 5.** Mediation Test Results.

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficient	Description	Comment
H6	CE→CAT→FFP	.295***	CAT partially mediates the effect of CE on FFP	Partial mediation
H7	CE→BS→FFP	.308***	BS partially mediates the effect of CE on FFP	Partial mediation

\*\*\*Significant at  $p < .001$ .

#### 4.4 Moderation results ( $H_8$ – $H_9$ )

Moderated regression analysis was executed in SPSS V21 to test  $H_8$  and  $H_9$ . The results indicate that the relationship between celebrity endorsement and customer age had a positive effect on the performance of the fast food industry ( $\beta = .139$ ;  $t = 2.112$ ;  $p = .013$ ). This suggests that customer age moderates the effect of celebrity endorsement on the performance of the fast food industry. Therefore,  $H_8$  is supported. Likewise, the results show that relationship between celebrity endorsement and perceived service quality had a positive influence on the performance of the fast food industry ( $\beta = .148$ ;  $t = 2.302$ ;  $p = .014$ ). This suggests that perceived service quality moderates the effect of celebrity endorsement on the performance of the fast food industry. So,  $H_9$  is supported.

### 5. Discussion and conclusions

#### 5.1 Discussion

Competition within Zimbabwe's fast food industry demands that successful organizations do not only rely on celebrity endorsement since it is insufficient in promoting sales growth. Earlier studies emphasize the involvement of celebrities in promoting business growth (Cha & Seo, 2019; Ghattas & Al-Abdallah, 2020; Makri et al., 2019; Mustapha et al., 2021; Srivastava et al., 2020; Tian et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2020). However, prior studies ignored the involvement of customer attitude, brand awareness, customer age, and perceived service quality when studying the celebrity involvement–business performance relationship. Thus, the current study becomes unique and sought to include customer attitude, brand selection, customer age, and perceived service quality to improve the performance of business and its sustainability. Hence, the study contributes to the marketing body of knowledge through the results that indicate that age and service quality variables are pertinent to the celebrity endorsement–fast food industry performance relationship. The study's empirical results confirm all the hypothesized relationships, highlighting the importance of customer attitude, brand awareness customer age, and perceived service quality in the relationship between celebrity endorsement and fast food industry performance. Thus, the study confirmed all direct relationships ( $H_{1-5}$ ) indicating that these variables must not be treated in isolation but they have to complement each other. Likewise, the mediation effect of customer attitude and brand awareness together with the moderation effect of customer age and perceived service quality made uniqueness to the celebrity endorsement–fast food performance relationship and contributes to the marketing body of knowledge.

#### 5.2 Conclusions

The study findings confirmed all direct relationships ( $H_1$ – $H_5$ ), which shows that the performance of the fast food industry is determined by the use of celebrities to attract customers. Also, customer attitude and brand awareness were found to have direct influence on the performance of the fast food industry. It was also one of the study

findings that endorsement of celebrities influences both brand awareness and customer attitude. The results obtained from all direct relationships corroborate literature (Calvo-Porrall et al., 2021; Enaph et al., 2017; Mustapha et al., 2021; Osei-Frimpong et al., 2019).

Additionally, the study settled that customer attitude partially mediates the effect of celebrity endorsement on fast food industry performance. The finding show support for H<sub>6</sub>. This implies that customer attitude can be considered in the relationship between celebrity endorsement and the fast food performance. Thus, management for the fast food firms in Zimbabwe ought to pay attention to positive attitude change of their customers when celebrities are endorsed as this result in increased business performance.

As for brand awareness, the study settled that brand awareness plays a mediation role on the effect of celebrity endorsement on fast food industry performance. Hence H<sub>7</sub> was supported. Thus, fast food firms should consider brand awareness planning for the engagement of celebrities to influence the performance of fast food firms. The chosen celebrities must be in a position to attract customers and influence the selection of certain brands. This, confirms literature (Makri et al., 2019) that customers intuitively attach value with their purchase when brand names are connected to the celebrities.

In addition to the influence of celebrity endorsement on fast food performance, customer age was found to play a moderating role in influencing the relationship giving support to H<sub>8</sub>. The majority of customers for the fast food industry comprises the young generation, between 18 and 35 years. These have better knowledge of celebrities and follow their advertisements as compared to the older age (Makri et al., 2019). Thus, compared to younger adults, older adults often have lower caloric needs but equivalent or even higher nutritional needs (Ghattas & Al-Abdallah, 2020) which are frequently brought on by decreased exercise, modifications in metabolism, or age-related loss of bone and muscle mass. People's capacity for cognitive processing decreases with age, which has an impact on how they make decisions about what goods and services to buy (Cha & Seo, 2019). It can therefore be concluded that the relationship between celebrity endorsement and fast food performance is strengthened by introducing customer age as a moderator.

Moreover, the study came to the conclusion that perceived service quality moderates the effect of celebrity endorsement on the fast food industry performance giving support to H<sub>9</sub>. Perceived service quality is considered as the customer's evaluation of the overall excellence or superiority of the service (Gaura et al., 2021). Hence, the four characteristics; dependability, reliability, superiority, and consistency, are used to gauge perceived quality because they can be used to gauge customers' overall perception of a good or service (Denhere et al., 2023) especially within the fast food industry. Quality is one of the most crucial elements that have a big impact on customer decisions (Chikazhe et al., 2023b). It is therefore concluded that the provision of perceived service quality should be a priority within the fast food industry. Thus, perceived service quality complements the relationship between celebrity endorsement and fast food performance.

### **5.3 Theoretical implications**

The study finding that celebrity endorsement predicts customer attitude, brand awareness, and fast food performance corroborates The Meaning Transfer Model. The model advocates that the mode of behavior is based on the meanings

assigned to individuals (Till & Shimp, 2018) which are explained by customer behavior change influenced by celebrities. Also, the study results corroborate The Elaboration Likelihood Model which explains how a persuasive message affects a target audience (Blackwell, 2018). Thus, the study results indicate that the fast food industry can make use of celebrities to persuade customers to buy their offerings.

The current study findings are useful since no study has been conducted within emerging markets in the sub-Saharan region like Zimbabwe to focus on customer attitude and brand selection as mediators between the celebrity endorsement–business performance relationship within the fast food industry. Moreover, none of the prior studies included customer’s age and perceived service quality as moderators of the effect of celebrity endorsement on retail business performance. Thus, the current study findings contribute to the closure of this knowledge gap in literature.

### **5.4 Managerial implications**

A number of managerial ramifications are shown by the research’s findings. The study findings proved that all the selected variables (celebrity endorsement, brand selection, customer attitude, customer age, and perceived service quality) influence the performance of the fast food industry. Management ought to take advantage of celebrity endorsement to promote brand awareness and change customer attitude, especially when introducing new products on the market. The current study further established that the younger generation (below 30 years) was better at responding to marketing activities initiated by modern celebrities. Thus, age was found to moderate the relationship between celebrity endorsement and the performance of the fast food industry. This calls for management to consider the type of celebrities, especially those most preferred by the younger generation (below 30 years) when selecting celebrities for their advertisements. Moreover, the fast food industry needs to find out more about celebrities that can be accepted by the older generation (those above 30 years) so that businesses can capture their attention. Likewise, perceived service quality proved to be a strong moderator which influences the relationship between celebrity endorsement and the performance of the fast food industry. This implies that, despite selecting a good celebrity to help create awareness for the brand, management for fast food firms should ensure that their employees are well-trained to deliver superior service quality. This is because product taste and price are almost similar within the fast food industry and only separated by the quality of service as perceived by customers. Providing superior service quality results in customer attitude change, hence promoting business growth.

### **5.3 Limitations**

The study was conducted in Harare only and during this time the country’s economy was hard hit by rising inflation. Most customers had little disposable income which could have affected the study results. More so, sampling the

population from one city only could have limitations to the study because currently the distribution of the functional industry is uneven in Zimbabwe and this is affecting business activity in the country. It would have been interesting to collect data from all over the country had it been that resources were available. Additionally, the sample's demographics were heavily weighted toward the younger generation (those under 35), raising the possibility that the findings may favor the younger generation.

#### 5.4 Further research

The current study restricted the study to a single sector, the fast food industry, and this made the generalizations of findings difficult. Future studies can improve the study results by using different sectors. Future studies may also extend the study to other towns and cities. Studies in stable emerging markets are welcome as this can improve the study results. Other studies can gather data from the fast food employees since the current study collected data from customers only.

#### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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