The Impact of Celebrity Endorsement of a Conspiracy Theory on the Media Consumers

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The Impact of Celebrity Endorsement of a Conspiracy Theory on the Media Consumers
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Introduction
The purpose of this study is to examine how much influence celebrities have on an individual. Individuals who are more likely to be influenced by celebrities have a tendency to enjoy the same things. These individuals then start to believe and support the same concepts as the celebrities, like a conspiracy theory. A study done by Fleck, Korchia, and Le Roy (2012) focused on celebrities in advertising endorsing a particular brand. In this particular study, the emphasis was on a celebrity endorsing a controversial topic, something that had not previously been studied.

H1. Those who are exposed to a liked celebrity endorsing a conspiracy theory will more likely to accept the conspiracy theory than those who were not exposed to a celebrity’s endorsement of a conspiracy theory.

When a celebrity endorses a controversial topic, media consumers might question the celebrity’s character. Therefore, it is predicted that individuals who are exposed to a celebrity endorsing a conspiracy theory will have a lower parasocial relationship than those who are not exposed.

A parasocial relationship “is the perception of a television viewer [or in our case- a participant] of a relationship with someone known through the media” (Schiappa, Allen, & Gregg, 2007).

H2. Those who are exposed to a liked celebrity endorsing a conspiracy theory will report lower parasocial relationships with the liked celebrity than those who were not exposed to a celebrity’s endorsement of a conspiracy theory, showed that there was no significant difference in the parasocial relationship.

Methods
The study consisted of 162 Chapman University students, 135 (82.1%) were female and 29 (17.9%) were male. There were 158 (72.8%) Whites, 26 (16%) Asians, 11 other (6.8%) participants, 4 (2.5%) Native Americans, 2 (1.2%) Latinos, and 1 (0.6%) African American. The mean age of participants was 19.78 (SD= 2.27).

Participants were randomly assigned to be exposed to a news article discussing a celebrity endorsing a conspiracy theory and then were asked questions regarding acceptance of the conspiracy theory and parasocial relationships. Both variables were measured on a seven-point scale:
- Acceptance α = .91 (ex- I’m not sure anyone stepped onto the moon)
- Parasocial Relationship α = .81 (ex-The celebrity makes me feel comfortable as if I’m with a friend)

Results
H1: The hypothesis was supported- the experimental group accepted the conspiracy theory more than the control group t(160), 4.71, p < .05
H2: The hypothesis was not supported- there was no significant difference between the control group and experimental group t(160), 1.07, p = .29

Discussion
It was found that participants exposed to the fake news article of a celebrity endorsing the conspiracy theory accepted the theory more than those who were not exposed to the article, supporting H1. On the contrary, H2 was not supported; parasocial relationships did not differ significantly between the control group and experimental group.

Participants most likely either believe the conspiracy when exposed to the celebrity’s endorsement and therefore the parasocial relationship won’t change, or they will think what the celebrity is saying about the conspiracy theory is absurd and therefore will have a lower parasocial relationship compared to those who weren’t exposed to the celebrity endorsement.

While it was a strength that the celebrities chosen for this topic were not previously associated with a conspiracy theory, it also was a limitation. In future studies, it would be insightful to compare results of celebrities who are not associated with conspiracy theories with those celebrities that are. In future studies, it could also be interesting to study the effects of an emotional conspiracy theory such as September 11th.

Conclusion
This study has tested competing models- media consumers will most likely either accept the conspiracy theory when exposed to a liked celebrity endorsing a conspiracy or will start to question the celebrity’s character and therefore will report a lower parasocial relationship. Therefore, it was found that those who were exposed to the celebrity’s endorsement had higher levels of acceptance of the conspiracy and did not distance themselves from the celebrity.

References