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# Credibility and consumer-based brand equity: A multidimensional ‘between-within’ perspective in low involvement settings

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## ABSTRACT

This study adopts a multidimensional ‘between-within’ perspective of credibility to investigate the impact of celebrity credibility on consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) and the mediating role of brand credibility in this relationship, with each construct conceptualized and operationalized as multidimensional. To do so, this study surveys 338 young consumers of carbonated soft drinks, a low involvement setting, and analyzes the data using covariance-based structural equation modeling with a bias-corrected bootstrap. The results show that celebrity credibility improves CBBE mainly through a direct route, with brand credibility carrying a smaller yet significant indirect share of the effect, a pattern of complementary partial mediation that the elaboration likelihood model predicts for low involvement consumption. These findings extend theory by showing that celebrity credibility operates mainly directly in this low involvement setting, which, read against evidence from high involvement settings, points to involvement as a boundary condition on when the effect runs directly and when it runs through the brand. Given that the direct route carried most of the effect while brand credibility carried a smaller significant share, managers in low involvement settings are best served by leading with a credible endorser and sustaining brand credibility as a supporting signal.

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## 1. Introduction

Consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) refers to the value a brand adds to a product in the minds of consumers, shaping their preferences and purchase decisions (Keller 1993). This value rests on brand-related assets, including brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (Aaker 1991), which makes CBBE a critical determinant of long-term marketing success (Zhang, Vorhies, and Zhou 2023), particularly in competitive, low involvement markets such as carbonated soft drinks, where brands struggle to stand apart on product features alone (Lang, Lim, and Guzmán 2022). To build this equity, firms invest heavily in celebrity endorsement (Elberse and Verleun 2012), betting that the attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness of a well-known figure (Ohanian 1990) will transfer meaning and value to the brand (McCracken 1989). The notion of a celebrity has also widened to include social media influencers, whom consumers increasingly treat as celebrities in their own right (Bastrygina et al. 2024; Cheah, Koay, and Lim 2024; Joshi et al. 2025; Koay et al. 2023).

Whether this bet pays off in low involvement settings is far from settled. Evidence that celebrity endorsement improves brand equity comes largely from high involvement categories (Dwivedi, Johnson, and McDonald 2015; see Halder, Pradhan, and Chaudhuri 2021 for a review), whereas low involvement products invert the conditions of that evidence. Celebrities do not come cheap, yet low involvement products are often inexpensive and bought with little deliberation, which raises the question of whether an expensive endorser can lift brand equity at all when consumers barely think about the purchase (Lang, Lim, and Guzmán 2022). Brand credibility, the extent to which a brand is perceived to deliver on its promises (Erdem and Swait 2004), sits at the center of this question, as the literature remains unclear on whether brand credibility mediates the relationship between celebrity credibility and CBBE in such settings or leaves the endorser to act alone.

What is theoretically new here extends beyond relocating known credibility dimensions to a fresh setting. Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell (2011) found that celebrity credibility reached brand equity only indirectly, through brand credibility, in a high involvement category, an insight that suggests consumers there processed the endorsement through effortful evaluation of the brand. Low involvement consumption inverts this processing logic, as consumers conserve cognitive effort and lean on peripheral cues (Petty and Cacioppo 1986), which implies that celebrity credibility should reach brand equity mainly through a direct heuristic route while retaining a smaller signaling path through brand credibility. In that sense, this study tests a mechanism contingent on involvement rather than a single effect assumed to hold across contexts, and, read against the high involvement evidence of Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell (2011), it points to involvement as a boundary condition on when celebrity credibility operates directly and when it operates through the brand, an account the celebrity endorsement literature has left largely implicit.

To test this mechanism, this study adopts a multidimensional ‘between-within’ perspective, treating credibility as distinct *between* its celebrity and brand forms and as dimensional *within* each form, as collapsing credibility into a single score can hide which of its facets carries an effect. Celebrity credibility comprises attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness (Ohanian 1990), brand credibility comprises trustworthiness and

expertise (Erdem and Swait 2004), and CBBE comprises brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (Aaker 1991). The empirical setting is a survey of young consumers of carbonated soft drinks in Sri Lanka, which offers a genuinely low involvement category in an emerging market that branding research continues to under-represent (Lang, Lim, and Guzmán 2022). The remainder of this study presents the conceptual and theoretical background, the hypotheses, the method, the analysis and results, the discussion, and the implications, closing with the conclusion, limitations, and future research directions.

## 2. Conceptual and theoretical background

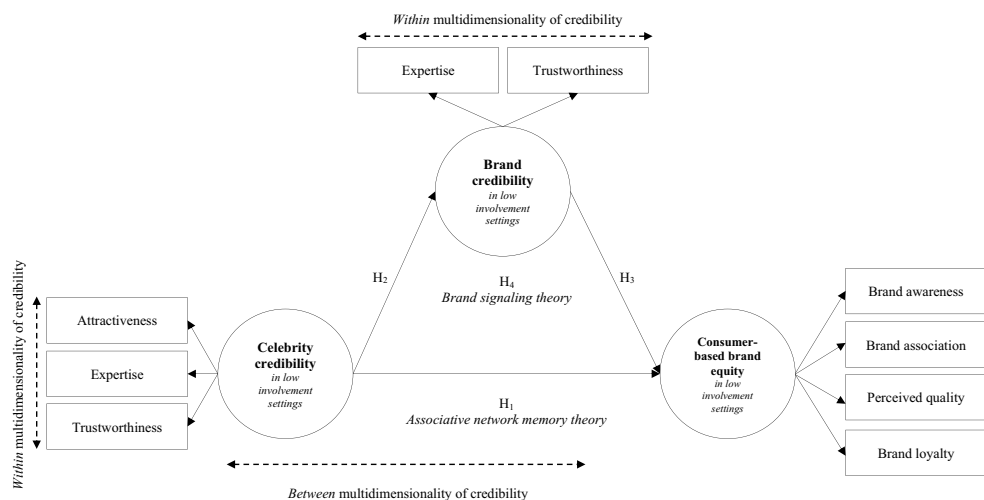
Three concepts anchor this study. *Celebrity credibility* reflects the extent to which a celebrity endorser, that is, an individual who enjoys public recognition and uses this recognition on behalf of a brand in an advertisement, is perceived as believable by consumers (McCracken 1989). Ohanian (1990) identifies three dimensions of this believability. Attractiveness captures the appeal of the celebrity, expertise captures the perception of a celebrity's knowledge and skill, and trustworthiness captures the perception of a celebrity's honesty and integrity.

*Brand credibility* reflects the believability of a brand's promise, wherein trustworthiness refers to the willingness of the brand to deliver on its promises consistently and expertise reflects the brand's ability to do so competently (Erdem and Swait 2004). In markets where products are perceived as interchangeable, this credibility becomes a differentiator, as a credible brand lowers the information costs and perceived risk of choosing it (Erdem, Swait, and Louviere 2002).

*CBBE* is the consumer-side view of brand equity, capturing the value that consumers attach to a brand through brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (Aaker 1991; Yoo and Donthu 2001). This view is rooted in cognitive psychology (Keller 1993) and information economics (Erdem and Swait 1998) and it dominates brand equity research because consumer perceptions are what marketing activity can most directly shape (Pappu, Quester, and Cooksey 2006).

Two theories explain how these concepts connect. *Associative network memory theory* holds that memory is a network of nodes joined by associative links, wherein activating one node spreads activation to the nodes connected to it (J. R. Anderson 1976; Collins and Loftus 1975). Keller (1993) brought this account into branding by positioning a brand as a node whose equity depends on the favorability and strength of its linked associations. When a celebrity endorses a brand, the attributes of the celebrity become associated with the brand in memory, such that thinking of one activates the other (Till 1998; Till and Shimp 1998).

*Brand signaling theory*, rooted in information economics, holds that brands serve as signals that convey information in marketplaces characterized by asymmetric and imperfect information (Erdem and Swait 1998; Kirmani and Rao 2000). A credible endorser is one such signal, functioning as a brand ally whose reputation vouches for unobservable product quality (Rao, Qu, and Ruekert 1999), and brand credibility is the state that determines whether the brand's own signals are believed (Baek, Kim, and Yu 2010; Erdem and Swait 2004).



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model of credibility and consumer-based brand equity in low involvement settings.

The two theories speak to different parts of the same process, which is why reading them jointly gives the framework more explanatory force than either provides alone. Selecting the two together follows a *matching* logic in which each theory is retained for its *fit* to one part of the mechanism, with the pair combined only because a single credible endorser is the causal source behind both, an approach recent guidance treats as central to principled theory selection (Hollebeek et al. 2025). Associative network memory theory speaks to the direct path, as a credible endorser forms and activates brand-linked nodes in memory and transfers meaning to the brand without requiring deliberate evaluation (du Plessis, D’Hooge, and Sweldens 2024; Till 1998). Brand signaling theory speaks to the indirect path, as a credible endorser also raises the credibility of the brand as a signal, with that elevated brand credibility conveying quality and reliability to consumers (Erdem and Swait 1998; Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell 2011). The elaboration likelihood model (Petty and Cacioppo 1986) explains why both operate at once in the setting studied herein, as low involvement consumers process persuasive information mainly through the peripheral route and rely on credibility cues rather than effortful scrutiny of arguments. This reliance implies that celebrity credibility should exert a strong direct effect on brand equity as a heuristic cue while a smaller portion of its influence operates through brand credibility as a secondary signal. This combined reading yields a specific and testable expectation of partial rather than full mediation, which distinguishes the low involvement case from the high involvement case of Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell (2011), where celebrity credibility reached brand equity only through brand credibility.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model that follows from this reading.

### 3. Hypotheses development

#### 3.1. *Celebrity credibility and CBBE*

Associative network memory theory explains why celebrity credibility should raise each dimension of CBBE. A credible celebrity functions as an additional node that becomes linked with the brand node through repeated pairing in advertising, such that thinking of the celebrity brings the brand to mind, which improves the recall and recognition that constitute brand awareness (Keller 1993; Till 1998). The celebrity also carries an established set of meanings that transfer to the brand through the endorsement, strengthening brand associations (McCracken 1989). Beyond associations, celebrities serve as extrinsic cues from which consumers infer product quality, lifting perceived quality while lowering perceived risk (Dean 1999). Repetition adds a further channel, as repeated exposure to the celebrity-brand pairing makes the linked attitude more accessible and more likely to guide behavior, feeding brand loyalty over time (Fazio, Powell, and Williams 1989; Till and Shimp 1998).

The direct route is strongest under low involvement, where consumers spend little cognitive effort and read the credibility of the endorser as a peripheral cue for the value of the brand rather than working through the details of the product (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Evidence that celebrity endorsement improves CBBE nonetheless comes mainly from high involvement settings (Dwivedi, Johnson, and McDonald 2015; Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell 2011), which leaves the low involvement case, where the direct route should be strongest, largely untested (Lang, Lim, and Guzmán 2022). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

**H<sub>1</sub>.** Celebrity credibility has a significant positive impact on CBBE in low involvement settings.

#### 3.2. *Celebrity credibility and brand credibility*

Brand credibility builds on the consistency of the brand's marketing mix (Erdem and Swait 1998; McCarthy 1964), and promotion is the mix element that speaks most directly to consumers (Yoo, Donthu, and Lee 2000). Celebrity endorsement is a potent form of promotion because the endorser functions as a source signal whose attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness are read as vouching for the brand's promise (Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell 2011). A credible ally lends its reputation to claims about unobservable quality (Rao, Qu, and Ruekert 1999). Given the substantial sums that firms commit to endorsement deals (Elberse and Verleun 2012), consumers can also infer that a brand willing to make such a costly and visible commitment is confident in its own quality (Kirmani and Rao 2000). Prior demonstrations of this effect again come from higher involvement industries (Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell 2011), which motivates the following hypothesis for the low involvement setting.

**H<sub>2</sub>.** Celebrity credibility has a significant positive impact on brand credibility in low involvement settings.

### **3.3. Brand credibility and CBBE**

Brand signaling theory holds that the value of the information a brand conveys hinges on its credibility, as a message from a brand that consumers do not believe cannot reduce their uncertainty (Erdem and Swait 1998). A credible brand signal lowers information costs and perceived risk, which reduces price sensitivity (Erdem, Swait, and Louviere 2002) and strengthens the awareness, associations, perceived quality, and loyalty that constitute CBBE (Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell 2011). This signaling value should be pronounced in low involvement markets, where consumers are unwilling to verify quality for themselves and lean instead on the credibility of the brand (Lang, Lim, and Guzmán 2022). Prior support for this relationship likewise comes from higher involvement settings (Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell 2011), which motivates the following hypothesis.

**H<sub>3</sub>.** Brand credibility has a significant positive impact on CBBE in low involvement settings.

### **3.4. Mediating role of brand credibility between celebrity credibility and CBBE**

Taken as a pair, the two preceding relationships imply an indirect route from celebrity credibility to CBBE through brand credibility, running alongside the direct route of H<sub>1</sub>. Specifying brand credibility as a mediator rather than a moderator or a parallel cause rests on the causal order among the three constructs. A moderator would need to exist before the endorsement and would change the strength of the celebrity credibility to brand equity link without itself being shaped by the endorser, yet brand credibility here is raised by the credible endorser, which is the defining signature of a mediator rather than a moderator (Baron and Kenny 1986; Zhao, Lynch, and Chen 2010). A purely parallel account, in which celebrity credibility and brand credibility each influence brand equity with no path between them, is ruled out once celebrity credibility is shown to raise brand credibility. Signaling theory supplies the direction of that path, as the endorser functions as the source signal and brand credibility as the receiving state that carries quality information to consumers (Erdem and Swait 1998; Rao, Qu, and Ruekert 1999). The mediation is expected to be partial rather than full, as the peripheral route leaves a strong direct heuristic effect intact alongside the smaller signaling path, an outcome that Zhao, Lynch, and Chen (2010) classify as complementary mediation. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

**H<sub>4</sub>.** Brand credibility significantly mediates the relationship between celebrity credibility and CBBE in low involvement settings.

## 4. Method

The objective of this study is to examine the impact of celebrity credibility on CBBE and the mediating role of brand credibility in this relationship. To meet this objective, a survey was conducted with carefully selected stimuli and participants.

### 4.1. Stimuli selection

Three actual advertisements served as stimuli, chosen on two criteria. First, each advertisement featured one of the three most popular and well-established carbonated soft drink brands in Sri Lanka, which are Coca-Cola, Pepsi, and Elephant House Cream Soda, such that respondents evaluated brands they genuinely encounter. Second, each advertisement prominently featured a well-known celebrity who endorses the respective brand, ensuring that respondents could readily identify the endorser. Each printed advertisement was embedded in a separate version of the questionnaire and participants were randomly assigned to one of the three versions.

Using three real brands rather than one guarded against idiosyncrasy tied to a single brand or a single endorser. Random assignment to one of the three versions spread prior brand equity, brand familiarity, and endorser-brand congruence across the sample rather than letting them load onto any one condition, which keeps these brand-specific and ad-specific influences from being confounded with the estimated paths. The constructs were modeled as consumers' perceptions of credibility rather than as the identities of particular brands, keeping the analysis focused on the credibility mechanism rather than on the standing of Coca-Cola, Pepsi, or Elephant House. Real stimuli were chosen deliberately, as recognizable brands and endorsers reproduce the conditions under which low involvement consumers form judgments, though this realism trades against the tighter control that fictitious stimuli would allow, a limitation revisited at the end.

### 4.2. Participant selection

The unit of analysis was the individual consumer of carbonated soft drinks in Sri Lanka. Following prior studies of this category that drew on undergraduate samples (Koordeman et al. 2010), the study targeted undergraduate students aged 18 to 26, enrolled in Sri Lankan universities, who have consumed carbonated soft drinks. A judgmental sampling method (Lim 2025) produced a final sample of 338 undergraduates, of whom 56.8% were male, with the largest age group aged 24 to 26 (41.7%).

The reliance on a homogeneous student sample fits the aim of this study, which is to test theory rather than to project point estimates onto a national population. Calder, Phillips, and Tybout (1981) distinguish theory application, where a homogeneous sample sharpens a causal test by holding extraneous variation low, from effects application, where a representative sample is needed to generalize a specific magnitude. Young adults aged 18 to 26 are heavy consumers of carbonated soft drinks and are familiar with the brands and endorsers used here, which makes them an appropriate population for examining how credibility shapes brand equity. The theory-testing gain comes at a cost to external validity, with the reach of the point estimates to other cultures, age groups, and categories treated as an open question for future research.

The study followed recognized ethical standards for survey research with human participants. At the time of data collection, the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura had no formal ethics approval requirement for low-risk survey research. In line with faculty practice, formal permission for the data collection was instead obtained from the coordinator of the relevant graduate unit, a procedure designed to protect the privacy and confidentiality of respondents, and the chairperson of the faculty research committee has confirmed this procedure in writing. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, respondents were informed about the study and could withdraw at any point, and the responses were stored confidentially and used only for research.

### **4.3. Measurement selection**

All constructs were measured with previously validated scales. Celebrity credibility was operationalized as a second-order construct comprising attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness, measured with Ohanian's (1990) 15-item scale of five semantic differential items per dimension, each anchored by an attribute and its opposite (e.g., attractive-unattractive) on five points. Brand credibility was operationalized as a second-order construct comprising trustworthiness, assessed with four items, and expertise, assessed with two items, following Erdem and Swait (2004). CBBE was operationalized as a second-order construct comprising brand awareness, measured with three items adapted from Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell (2011) and Yoo and Donthu (2001), brand associations and perceived quality, each measured with four items adapted from Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell (2011), and brand loyalty, measured with three items from Yoo and Donthu (2001). Apart from the semantic differential items, all items used a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). To establish content validity (Lim et al. 2026), the English-language questionnaire was pre-tested with 12 experts, six marketing academics and six marketing managers, whose feedback informed revisions to wording and layout.

## **5. Analysis and results**

The data were analyzed using covariance-based structural equation modeling (SEM) in IBM SPSS AMOS (v.31), following the two-step approach of evaluating the measurement model first and the structural model only afterwards (J. C. Anderson and Gerbing 1988).

### **5.1. Common method bias**

Since all constructs were captured in one survey, common method bias was assessed with Harman's one-factor test (Podsakoff and Organ 1986). An unrotated principal component analysis of all 35 administered items returned nine components with eigenvalues above one, together accounting for 72.90% of the variance, with the first component explaining only 19.59%. Since no single factor accounted for the majority of the variance, common method bias is unlikely to explain the relationships observed here.

## 5.2. Measurement model

Confirmatory factor analysis assessed the reliability and validity of celebrity credibility, brand credibility, and CBBE, each specified as a second-order construct (Tables 1 and 2). Model refinement removed five items from celebrity credibility (two from attractiveness, one from expertise, and two from trustworthiness) along with two items from the perceived quality dimension of CBBE. The refinement removed 7 of the 35 original items, or one item in five, and each affected dimension kept at least two items, preserving the content of every construct. Items were dropped on a stated statistical rule: standardized residuals above 2.5, a standard step for improving unidimensionality and fit rather than a search for a flattering solution (J. C. Anderson and Gerbing 1988; Hair et al. 2019). Expert pre-testing had established content validity before estimation (Lim 2025), which means the retained items continued to cover the intended domain of each construct).

Convergent validity held across the retained items. All 28 standardized loadings were significant and ranged from 0.63 to 0.94, clearing the 0.50 minimum and, in most cases, the stricter 0.70 ideal (Hair et al. 2019). The average variance extracted reached 0.71 for celebrity credibility, 0.58 for brand credibility, and 0.53 for CBBE, above the 0.50 benchmark for every construct (Fornell and Larcker 1981), and the dimension-level values ranged from 0.49 to 0.77. The single value marginally below the benchmark, 0.49 for the trustworthiness dimension of brand credibility, pairs with a composite reliability of 0.79, and average variance extracted is a conservative index, which leaves convergent validity intact even where a value is modest (Fornell and Larcker 1981; Lim et al. 2026).

Discriminant validity was first assessed with the criterion of Fornell and Larcker (1981), under which the square root of the average variance extracted for each construct, shown on the diagonal of Table 2, should exceed the correlations between that construct and every other construct. This condition was met, with inter-construct correlations ranging from 0.13 to 0.37 (Table 2). The stricter concern is conceptual overlap rather than statistical fit, as the criterion of Fornell and Larcker (1981) can pass even when constructs are hard to separate in principle (Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2015). Celebrity credibility and brand credibility carry different referents, one attached to a person the consumer observes and one attached to the entity that makes the product, and the trustworthiness and expertise items are worded against those distinct referents rather than a shared object. The data support this separation directly, as the observed correlation between celebrity credibility and brand credibility is only 0.13 and the largest inter-construct correlation only 0.37, both far below the level that considerable overlap would produce. The heterotrait-monotrait ratios confirm the separation, at 0.21 for celebrity credibility and brand credibility, 0.32 for celebrity credibility and CBBE, and 0.42 for brand credibility and CBBE, each well below the conservative 0.85 threshold (Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2015). Discriminant validity here therefore rests on both grounds, the conceptual distinctiveness of the referents and the low observed association between the constructs.

Reliability was adequate throughout. Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.71 to 0.91 across the constructs and their dimensions, meeting the 0.70 threshold (Cronbach 1951; Nunnally 1978), and composite reliability reached 0.96 for celebrity credibility, 0.89 for brand credibility, and 0.93 for CBBE, above the recommended 0.70 (Hair et al. 2010).

**Table 1.** Measurement model statistics.

| Construct / dimension              | Code | Item                                                                                                              | Loading | Average variance extracted | Cronbach's alpha | Composite reliability |
|------------------------------------|------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|----------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Celebrity credibility</b>       |      |                                                                                                                   |         | <b>0.71</b>                | <b>0.81</b>      | <b>0.96</b>           |
| Attractiveness of celebrity        | CCA1 | Beautiful – Ugly                                                                                                  | 0.69    | 0.68                       | 0.86             | 0.86                  |
|                                    | CCA2 | Elegant – Plain                                                                                                   | 0.89    |                            |                  |                       |
|                                    | CCA3 | Sexy – Not sexy                                                                                                   | 0.88    |                            |                  |                       |
| Expertise of celebrity             | CCE1 | Experienced – Inexperienced                                                                                       | 0.79    | 0.70                       | 0.90             | 0.90                  |
|                                    | CCE2 | Knowledgeable – Unknowledgeable                                                                                   | 0.86    |                            |                  |                       |
|                                    | CCE3 | Qualified – Unqualified                                                                                           | 0.86    |                            |                  |                       |
|                                    | CCE4 | Skilled – Unskilled                                                                                               | 0.83    |                            |                  |                       |
| Trustworthiness of celebrity       | CCT1 | Dependable – Undependable                                                                                         | 0.94    | 0.77                       | 0.91             | 0.91                  |
|                                    | CCT2 | Honest – Dishonest                                                                                                | 0.88    |                            |                  |                       |
|                                    | CCT3 | Trustworthy – Untrustworthy                                                                                       | 0.81    |                            |                  |                       |
| <b>Brand credibility</b>           |      |                                                                                                                   |         | <b>0.58</b>                | <b>0.80</b>      | <b>0.89</b>           |
| Trustworthiness of brand           | BCT1 | (Particular brand of carbonated soft drink) delivers what it promises.                                            | 0.73    | 0.49                       | 0.79             | 0.79                  |
|                                    | BCT2 | (Particular brand of carbonated soft drink) product claims are believable.                                        | 0.70    |                            |                  |                       |
|                                    | BCT3 | (Particular brand of carbonated soft drink) can trust.                                                            | 0.73    |                            |                  |                       |
|                                    | BCT4 | (Particular brand of carbonated soft drink) never pretend anything that it isn't.                                 | 0.63    |                            |                  |                       |
| Expertise of brand                 | BCE1 | (Particular brand of carbonated soft drink) reminds me of someone who's competent and knows what he/she is doing. | 0.79    | 0.75                       | 0.85             | 0.86                  |
|                                    | BCE2 | (Particular brand of carbonated soft drink) has the ability to deliver what it promises.                          | 0.94    |                            |                  |                       |
| <b>Consumer-based brand equity</b> |      |                                                                                                                   |         | <b>0.53</b>                | <b>0.84</b>      | <b>0.93</b>           |
| Brand awareness                    | BAW1 | Recognize (particular brand of carbonated soft drink) among other competing brands.                               | 0.81    | 0.58                       | 0.80             | 0.80                  |
|                                    | BAW2 | Aware of (particular brand of carbonated soft drink).                                                             | 0.73    |                            |                  |                       |
|                                    | BAW3 | Characteristics of (particular brand of carbonated soft drink) come to the mind quickly.                          | 0.74    |                            |                  |                       |
| Brand association                  | BAS1 | (Particular brand of carbonated soft drink) offer good value for money.                                           | 0.74    | 0.54                       | 0.83             | 0.83                  |
|                                    | BAS2 | Like (particular brand of carbonated soft drink).                                                                 | 0.78    |                            |                  |                       |
|                                    | BAS3 | Trust (particular brand of carbonated soft drink) as a manufacturer.                                              | 0.70    |                            |                  |                       |
|                                    | BAS4 | (Particular brand of carbonated soft drink) would be technically advanced.                                        | 0.73    |                            |                  |                       |
| Perceived quality                  | PQ1  | (Particular brand of carbonated soft drink) is very consistent quality.                                           | 0.75    | 0.55                       | 0.71             | 0.71                  |
|                                    | PQ2  | (Particular brand of carbonated soft drink) offer excellent features.                                             | 0.73    |                            |                  |                       |

*(Continued)*

**Table 1.** (Continued).

| Construct / dimension | Code | Item                                                                                                 | Loading | Average variance extracted | Cronbach's alpha | Composite reliability |
|-----------------------|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|----------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Brand loyalty         |      |                                                                                                      |         | 0.64                       | 0.84             | 0.84                  |
|                       | BL1  | Loyal to (particular brand of carbonated soft drink) when considering the purchase.                  | 0.74    |                            |                  |                       |
|                       | BL2  | (Particular brand of carbonated soft drink) would be the first choice when considering the purchase. | 0.87    |                            |                  |                       |
|                       | BL3  | Not buy other brands if (particular brand of carbonated soft drink) is available at the store.       | 0.79    |                            |                  |                       |

Notes: Fit indices: Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) (338) = 456.43 ( $p < 0.01$ ), Comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.97, Goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = 0.91, Normed fit index (NFI) = 0.91, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = 0.97, Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.032, Standardized root mean residual (SRMR) = 0.05. All constructs are measured on a 5-point scale. All standardized factor loadings are significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). Items removed from attractiveness of celebrity are 'Attractive – Unattractive' and 'Classy – Not classy'. The item removed from expertise of celebrity is 'An expert – Not an expert'. Items removed from trustworthiness of celebrity are 'Reliable – Unreliable' and 'Sincere – Insincere'. Items removed from perceived quality are 'Quality of (particular brand of carbonated soft drink) is extremely high' and '(Particular brand of carbonated soft drink) is very reliable'. These items were removed because of standardized residuals above 2.5.

**Table 2.** Correlation matrix.

| Construct                   | Mean | Standard deviation | Celebrity credibility | Brand credibility | Consumer-based brand equity |
|-----------------------------|------|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| Celebrity credibility       | 3.87 | 0.50               | <b>0.84</b>           |                   |                             |
| Brand credibility           | 3.43 | 0.56               | 0.13*                 | <b>0.76</b>       |                             |
| Consumer-based brand equity | 3.73 | 0.45               | 0.26**                | 0.37**            | <b>0.73</b>                 |

Notes: \*\* = Correlation is significant at  $p < 0.01$ . \* = Correlation is significant at  $p < 0.05$ . Diagonal values in bold are the square root of the average variance extracted.

### 5.3. Structural model

The structural model was tested in two steps, following Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell (2011). Model 1, a main effect model without the mediator, tested  $H_1$ , and Model 2, a mediation model with brand credibility included, provided the estimates for  $H_2$  and  $H_3$ , with  $H_4$  assessed from the two models jointly and through a bootstrap of the indirect effect. Both models fit the data well, with every index meeting its recommended threshold (Table 3).

#### 5.3.1. Main effect model (Model 1)

Model 1 examined the impact of celebrity credibility on CBBE without the mediator. Celebrity credibility had a significant positive impact on CBBE ( $\beta = 0.54$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting  $H_1$  (Table 4).

#### 5.3.2. Mediation effect model (Model 2)

Model 2 added brand credibility. Celebrity credibility retained a significant positive impact on CBBE ( $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and significantly raised brand credibility ( $\beta = 0.29$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), supporting  $H_2$ , and brand credibility significantly raised CBBE ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting  $H_3$  (Table 4).

**Table 3.** Goodness-of-fit indices for structural models.

| Fit indices                                     | Recommended                           | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------|---------|
| <b>Absolute fit indices</b>                     |                                       |         |         |
| Relative chi-square ( $\chi^2/df$ )             | $\leq 3$ Hair et al. 2010             | 1.23    | 1.35    |
| Goodness-of-fit index (GFI)                     | $\geq 0.90$ Hair et al. 2010          | 0.94    | 0.91    |
| Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) | $\leq 0.06$ Hu and Bentler 1999       | 0.026   | 0.032   |
| Standardized root mean residual (SRMR)          | $\leq 0.08$ Hu and Bentler 1999       | 0.04    | 0.05    |
| <b>Incremental fit indices</b>                  |                                       |         |         |
| Normed fit index (NFI)                          | $\geq 0.90$ Bentler 1992              | 0.94    | 0.91    |
| Comparative fit index (CFI)                     | $\geq 0.90$ Gerbing and Anderson 1992 | 0.99    | 0.97    |
| Tucker-Lewis index (TLI)                        | $\geq 0.90$ Hair et al. 2010          | 0.99    | 0.97    |
| <b>Parsimony fit indices</b>                    |                                       |         |         |
| Adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI)           | $\geq 0.80$ MacCallum and Hong 1997   | 0.92    | 0.89    |
| Parsimony normed fit index (PNFI)               | $\geq 0.50$ Wu 2009                   | 0.81    | 0.81    |

Notes: Model 1 = Main effect model (without mediator). Model 2 = Mediation effect model (with mediator). Both models are estimated with covariance-based structural equation modeling.

**Table 4.** Structural model results.

| Relationship                                                                             | Model 1 | Model 2              | Result    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|----------------------|-----------|
| H <sub>1</sub> . Celebrity credibility → Consumer-based brand equity                     | 0.54*** | 0.40**               | Supported |
| H <sub>2</sub> . Celebrity credibility → Brand credibility                               |         | 0.29**               | Supported |
| H <sub>3</sub> . Brand credibility → Consumer-based brand equity                         |         | 0.46***              | Supported |
| H <sub>4</sub> . Celebrity credibility → Brand credibility → Consumer-based brand equity |         |                      | Supported |
| Direct effect                                                                            |         | 0.40** [0.16, 0.66]  |           |
| Indirect effect                                                                          |         | 0.13** [0.04, 0.29]  |           |
| Total effect                                                                             |         | 0.53*** [0.30, 0.77] |           |

Notes: Model 1 = Main effect model (without mediator). Model 2 = Mediation effect model (with mediator). Standardized estimates are reported. The indirect, direct, and total effects for H<sub>4</sub> are standardized estimates from a bias-corrected bootstrap with 5,000 resamples, with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals in brackets. The pattern of a significant indirect effect alongside a significant direct effect of the same sign reflects complementary (partial) mediation. \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ .

H<sub>4</sub> was assessed first through the causal-steps logic of Baron and Kenny's (1986) procedure, read against the two estimated models. Celebrity credibility raised brand credibility in Model 2 ( $\beta = 0.29$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), brand credibility raised CBBE in Model 2 ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and celebrity credibility raised CBBE in Model 1 without the mediator ( $\beta = 0.54$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Adding brand credibility to the model reduced the direct effect of celebrity credibility on CBBE from 0.54 in Model 1 to 0.40 in Model 2, a decline that leaves a significant direct effect in place. The pattern points to partial rather than full mediation.

The causal-steps logic has known limits, which is why a direct test of the indirect effect is now preferred (Zhao, Lynch, and Chen 2010). A bias-corrected bootstrap with 5,000 resamples estimated the indirect effect of celebrity credibility on CBBE through brand credibility (Preacher and Hayes 2008). The indirect effect was positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.13$ , 95% bias-corrected CI [0.04, 0.29],  $p = 0.005$ , excluding zero), representing about a quarter of the total effect of 0.54. A significant indirect effect alongside a significant direct effect of the same sign is complementary mediation in the terms of Zhao, Lynch, and Chen (2010), a recognized form of partial mediation rather than a departure from theory. The result supported H<sub>4</sub> (Table 4).

## 6. Discussion

The findings clarify how credibility builds brand equity when consumers barely deliberate. Each hypothesis is discussed in turn.

### 6.1. *Impact of celebrity credibility on CBBE ( $H_1$ )*

This study confirmed that celebrity credibility affected CBBE significantly and positively, supporting  $H_1$ , with a total effect of 0.54 ( $p < 0.001$ ) in Model 1 that stayed significant as a direct effect of 0.40 ( $p < 0.01$ ) once brand credibility entered the model. The attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness of a credible endorser add value to the brand even in a category where consumers spend little effort on the purchase, which extends evidence previously drawn from higher involvement settings (Dwivedi, Johnson, and McDonald 2015; Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell 2011) to a setting where the direct heuristic route carries the effect.

### 6.2. *Impact of celebrity credibility on brand credibility ( $H_2$ )*

This study found that celebrity credibility raised brand credibility ( $\beta = 0.29$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), supporting  $H_2$ . Consumers transfer the believability of the endorser to the brand's own promise, which is consistent with the signaling account in which a credible ally vouches for the brand (Rao, Qu, and Ruekert 1999; Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell 2011) and indicates that the substantial sums invested in endorsement earn a return in credibility as well as in equity.

### 6.3. *Impact of brand credibility on CBBE ( $H_3$ )*

This study found that brand credibility raised CBBE ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting  $H_3$ . In a market of near-interchangeable products, the brand judged willing and able to deliver on its promises earns stronger awareness, associations, perceived quality, and loyalty, which extends signaling evidence from higher involvement settings (Erdem and Swait 1998; Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell 2011) to a setting where consumers rarely verify quality for themselves.

### 6.4. *Mediating role of brand credibility ( $H_4$ )*

This study established that brand credibility partially mediated the relationship between celebrity credibility and CBBE, supporting  $H_4$ , with the direct path remaining the dominant one. The partial pattern is what the elaboration likelihood model predicts for a low involvement category, rather than a result at odds with it (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). The direct effect of celebrity credibility on CBBE stayed the larger of the two paths, which fits a peripheral route where the credibility of the endorser works mainly as a heuristic cue. A smaller share of the influence ran through brand credibility, which shows that the signaling path operates alongside the heuristic one without displacing it. Full mediation would have been the awkward finding here, as it would imply that consumers reached brand equity only after processing brand credibility, the kind of effortful path that low involvement discourages. Partial mediation reconciles the two mechanisms rather than setting them against each other.

## 7. Implications

This study examined the impact of celebrity credibility on CBBE, the influence of celebrity credibility on brand credibility, the effect of brand credibility on CBBE, and the mediating role of brand credibility in the relationship between celebrity credibility and CBBE in a low involvement setting. The multidimensional ‘between-within’ approach kept the distinct dimensions of celebrity and brand credibility in view throughout, rather than collapsing each into a single score (see Halder, Pradhan, and Chaudhuri 2021).

### 7.1. Theoretical contributions

Even so, the contribution is best stated with care. Modeling celebrity and brand credibility as second-order constructs is established practice, not an analytical advance. The phrase *between* and *within* is used here as a conceptual lens that keeps the dimensional structure visible rather than as a new statistical technique. What the study adds is a mechanism that shifts with involvement. Celebrity credibility reached brand equity only through brand credibility in the high involvement case of Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell (2011), whereas here, in a low involvement case, it reached brand equity mainly through a direct heuristic route with a smaller signaling path retained, which makes the direct-dominant partial mediation the boundary condition rather than the mediation itself. Framed against recent guidance on theory development, this is a theoretical extension that specifies a boundary condition rather than a new theory, which keeps the claim proportionate to a single confirmatory study (Lim 2026). Questions that this confirmatory design leaves open, among them dimensional asymmetry across the credibility facets and configurational paths of the kind that fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis can trace, are promising directions for work that asks which combinations of cues are sufficient rather than which average paths hold.

The interestingness of this extension lies in its counterintuitive character, in the sense of a finding that is unusual but sensible (Lim 2026). A direct effect of an endorser on brand equity emerging precisely where consumers think least appears unusual against the intuition that persuasion requires attention, yet the elaboration likelihood model renders it sensible, given that minimal thinking is exactly the condition under which a credibility cue substitutes for scrutiny (Petty and Cacioppo 1986).

Each theory gains something specific from this extension. For associative network memory theory, the results show that the associative links formed through a credible endorsement are strong enough to lift brand equity directly even when the category engages consumers at a low cognitive level, which extends the demonstrated reach of the theory beyond the high involvement domains where it is usually tested (Keller 1993; Till 1998). For brand signaling theory, the results show that the signaling path survives under low involvement rather than disappearing, though in a diminished share, which refines the account of when brand credibility carries the effect of an endorsement (Erdem and Swait 1998; Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell 2011).

### 7.2. Managerial implications

The findings give managers of low involvement brands three concrete directions. First, select endorsers on the credibility attributes that did the work in this study, choosing

celebrities who score high on attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness (Ohanian 1990), as these attributes raised brand equity directly. Second, treat the endorsement as a dual-pathway investment, using the endorser to lift awareness and associations immediately while aligning the endorsement with the brand's promise, which lets brand credibility accumulate alongside. Third, protect brand credibility by delivering on claims, as exaggerated promises erode the trust on which the signaling path depends (Román, Riquelme, and Iacobucci 2024).

The low involvement finding shapes how these areas are weighted. The endorser is the dominant cue that consumers act on quickly, whereas brand credibility is the slower-built signal that carries a smaller but real share of the effect. This weighting argues for leading a campaign with a credible endorser and sustaining brand credibility as the supporting asset rather than treating the two as interchangeable. In practice, brand messaging in this setting should stay simple and heuristic-friendly, tying the endorser's credibility directly to the brand's core promise, for instance, a claim of consistent quality or refreshing taste that a consumer can absorb without deliberation (Lang, Lim, and Guzmán 2022).

### **7.3. Limitations and future research**

Two limits deserve emphasis given the design. The use of real brands and real endorsers keeps the setting realistic but leaves prior brand equity, familiarity, and endorser-brand congruence only distributed by random assignment rather than fully controlled, which means an experiment with fictitious brands and endorsers would isolate the credibility effect more cleanly. The single-country student sample suits the theory-testing aim, yet the size of the paths should be read as specific to this setting until replication across cultures, age groups, and product categories establishes their reach. Work that models the credibility facets asymmetrically or maps sufficient combinations of cues through configurational methods would extend the account beyond the average paths tested here. The cross-sectional design further restricts causal inference and the observation of change, which invites longitudinal work on how endorser credibility and brand credibility build equity over time.

## **8. Conclusion**

This study examined how celebrity credibility builds CBBE in a low involvement setting, finding a dual pathway in which the endorser lifts brand equity directly while brand credibility carries a smaller, significant indirect share. For managers, the message is to lead with a credible endorser and to sustain brand credibility as the supporting signal. Beyond this practical value, the theoretical contribution is that this mechanism shifts with the level of involvement. In this low involvement setting, celebrity credibility reached brand equity mainly through a direct heuristic route, whereas in the high involvement setting of Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell (2011) it operated only through brand credibility. The multi-dimensional lens kept the distinct credibility facets in view as that comparison was drawn. Overall, the study adds to marketing communication research on branding and celebrity endorsement, without claiming more than a single cross-sectional design can carry.

## Disclosure statement

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

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## Data availability statement

Data can be made available upon reasonable request.

## Ethics statement

This study involved a survey of human participants and followed recognized ethical standards. At the time of data collection, the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura had no formal ethics approval requirement for low-risk survey research, and, in line with faculty practice, formal permission for the data collection was obtained from the coordinator of the relevant graduate unit, a procedure that protected the privacy and confidentiality of participants and that the chairperson of the faculty research committee has confirmed in writing. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, respondents could withdraw at any time, and the data were kept confidential and used only for the purposes of this research.

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