

Investigating the Effects of Actual and Ideal Self-Image and Virtual Interactivity on Online Celebrity Brand Equity: Evidence from the Palestinian Market

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Abstract: Objective: This study examines the influence of three customer perception constructs; actual self-image, ideal self-image and virtual interactivity on the dimensions of online celebrities' brand equity. This study conceptualizes online celebrity brand equity as a multidimensional construct composed of brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty. Given the growing application of online influencers in digital marketing, this paper mainly aims to understand the antecedents of online celebrities' brand equity, and how online celebrities brand equity is formed. **Methodology:** The goals of this study had been achieved based on quantitative research design and the data collected from 355 active social media users, who are familiar with the concept of "online celebrities" using a structured online questionnaire. **Results:** Descriptive statistics results showed high ratings of all constructs, with virtual interactivity emerging as the strongest predictor, measurement consistency of the variables was sufficiently strong, as proved by reliability and validity tests. Later on, the structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted to tests the hypotheses of the study. The results indicate that while actual self-image influenced brand image, it has no influence on brand awareness. Ideal self-image showed significant influence on both brand awareness and brand image. Furthermore, virtual interactivity showed a strong significant influence on brand awareness, but not on brand image. On the other hand, the interplay between the dimensions of online celebrities' brand equity showed that brand awareness had a positive impact on brand image, brand image had a positive impact on brand loyalty, however, the study did not find a direct effect between brand awareness and brand loyalty, but there was an indirect effect that could occur if brand image is present as a mediating factor between them. **Conclusion:** The results emphasize the importance of using online celebrities whose image match with the aspirational image of consumers, and who pay great attention to interact with their followers to build a stronger brand awareness. **Recommendations:** The study recommends that brands prioritize selecting online celebrities whose actual and ideal self-images align with their target audiences and focus on high-quality, meaningful content rather than merely increasing interaction frequency, as these factors are more effective in strengthening brand equity.

Keywords: Online Celebrities, Brand Equity, Self-Image, Virtual Interactivity, Social Media Marketing, Digital Economy.

دراسة تأثير الصورة الذاتية الفعلية والمثالية والتفاعل الافتراضي على قيمة العلامة التجارية للمشاهير على الإنترنت: أدلة من السوق الفلسطينية

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ملخص: الهدف: تتناول هذه الدراسة تأثير ثلاثة مفاهيم متعلقة بإدراك العملاء؛ وهي صورة الذات الفعلية، وصورة الذات المثالية، والتفاعل الافتراضي، على أبعاد قيمة العلامة التجارية للمشاهير عبر الإنترنت. كما تصور هذه الدراسة قيمة العلامة التجارية للمشاهير عبر الإنترنت كمفهوم متعدد الأبعاد يتكون من ثلاثة أبعاد: الوعي بالعلامة التجارية، صورة العلامة التجارية، وولاء العلامة التجارية. ونظرًا لتزايد استخدام المؤثرين عبر الإنترنت في التسويق الرقمي، تهدف هذه الدراسة بشكل رئيسي إلى فهم مسببات قيمة العلامة التجارية لمشاهير الإنترنت، وكيفية تشكيلها. **المنهجية:** وقد تحققت أهداف هذه الدراسة بالاعتماد على تصميم بحث كمي وبيانات جمعت من 355 مستخدمًا نشطًا لوسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، ممن لديهم دراية بمفهوم "مشاهير الإنترنت" باستخدام استبيان إلكتروني منظم. **النتائج:** وأظهرت نتائج الإحصاء الوصفي تقييمات عالية لجميع المفاهيم، مع بروز التفاعل الافتراضي كأقوى مؤشر، وكان اتساق قياس المتغيرات قويًا بما يكفي، وهو ما أثبتته اختبارات الموثوقية والصلاحية. وفي وقت لاحق، أجريت نمذجة المعادلات الهيكلية (SEM) لاختبار فرضيات الدراسة. وتشير النتائج إلى أنه على الرغم من تأثير الصورة الذاتية الحقيقية على صورة العلامة التجارية، إلا أنها لا تؤثر على الوعي بها. أظهرت الصورة الذاتية المثالية تأثيرًا كبيرًا على كل من الوعي بالعلامة التجارية وصورتها. علاوة على ذلك، أظهر التفاعل الافتراضي تأثيرًا كبيرًا وهامًا على الوعي بالعلامة التجارية، ولكن ليس على صورتها. من ناحية أخرى، أظهر التفاعل بين أبعاد قيمة العلامة التجارية للمشاهير عبر الإنترنت أن الوعي بالعلامة التجارية كان له تأثير إيجابي على صورة العلامة التجارية، وكان لصورتها تأثير إيجابي على الولاء للعلامة التجارية. ومع ذلك، لم تجد الدراسة تأثيرًا مباشرًا بين الوعي بالعلامة التجارية والولاء للعلامة التجارية، ولكن كان هناك تأثير غير مباشر يمكن أن يحدث إذا كانت صورة العلامة التجارية موجودة كعامل وسيط بينهما. **الاستنتاجات:** تؤكد النتائج على أهمية استخدام المشاهير عبر الإنترنت الذين تتطابق صورتهم مع الصورة الطموحة للمستهلكين، والذين يولون اهتمامًا كبيرًا للتفاعل مع متابعيهم لبناء وعي أقوى بالعلامة التجارية. **التوصيات:** توصي الدراسة بأن تعطي العلامات التجارية الأولوية لاختيار مشاهير الإنترنت الذين تتوافق صورتهم الذاتية الفعلية والمثالية مع جمهورها المستهدف. وأن تركز على تقديم محتوى عالي الجودة بدلاً من مجرد زيادة وتيرة التفاعل. نظرًا لأن هذه العوامل أكثر فاعلية في تعزيز قيمة العلامة التجارية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المشاهير على الإنترنت، قيمة العلامة التجارية، صورة الذات، التفاعل الافتراضي، التسويق عبر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، الاقتصاد الرقمي.

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Introduction

Social media provides its users with enhanced opportunities for communication and self-expression, and thus, giving rise to the phenomenon of “online celebrities” (P.-S. Wei & Lu, 2013). These social media celebrities have evolved with the increasing popularity of social commerce, and thus, their fame mainly relies on their online existence. In contrast, traditional celebrities’ public recognition relies mainly on their profession such as press, and movies (Shao *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, brands today recognize social media as an impactful marketing tool that is specialized in building and enhancing social relationships through online influencers (Nadia Angraini, 2023). Considering that online celebrity endorsement became a successful sector in global marketing, an important question emerges: what factors contribute to the strong influence held by online celebrities? In this research paper, three key drivers of online celebrity brand equity are considered: including actual and ideal self-image congruity, and online celebrities’ virtual interactivity. These drivers are underexplored quite enough, despite their significance in human brand studies. In general, online celebrities are viewed by consumers as a trustable source of information, as they perceive them more credible, mainly because credibility stems from being experts in a particular field (Abbasi *et al.*, 2023). Earlier studies have examined two main types of self-images: ideal self-image, that describes who a person aspires to be, and actual self-image, which represents a person’s true self (Ekinci & Riley, 2003; Sirgy, 1982). Previously, both ideal and actual self-image congruity were found to exert similar effects on consumers’ brand preferences and purchase intention. However, recent research has started to investigate the distinctions between them more closely (Abbasi *et al.*, 2023; Koo *et al.*, 2014; Zogaj *et al.*, 2021). Online celebrities can

naturally and effectively communicate and engage with their audiences through virtual interactivity. In addition, real-time and interactive two-way communication between online celebrities and consumers can enhance purchase intention (Sun *et al.*, 2021). Since the most successful online celebrities are those who respond to their followers and engage with them (Maldonado, 2016), and possess strong expertise in managing and handling their personal social media accounts, particularly in terms of choosing and designing appropriate content for each platform (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; P.-S. Wei & Lu, 2013). Accordingly, this study assumes virtual interactivity as a crucial factor in shaping online celebrity brand equity. To understand customers’ psychological self-perspective, this research offers an alternative approach by examining the relationship between self-image congruity and virtual interactivity (as key determinants of online celebrity brand equity) and the dimensions of online celebrities’ brand equity; represented by: brand awareness, brand image and brand loyalty.

Research Problem

The online celebrity endorsement became a dominant force in digital marketing by enabling brands to improve their engagement through a better online presence. As a result, this shift towards the use of online celebrities creates significant concerns about the determinants of online celebrities’ brand equity, more specifically, actual and ideal self-image congruity (Zogaj *et al.*, 2021). In addition, insufficient empirical attention has been given to the role of virtual interactivity in terms of its influence on the pillars of online celebrity brand equity, despite its apparent importance in digital marketing context (Y. D. Wang & Emurian, 2005). Furthermore, empirical investigations of human brand equity remain underrepresented in brand management research (Mathys *et al.*, 2016), as existing

studies have predominantly examined brands linked to products, organizations, or services. Therefore, this research paper seeks to bridge this gap through an analysis of the interactions among online celebrity dimensions, thus, we can understand how online celebrities form their brand equity.

Research Questions

After a comprehensive examination of the recent literature aligned to the goals of this study, and guided by the stated research problem, five key research questions were developed. These questions had all been answered after a systematic data collection and data analyses were conducted.

RQ1: To what extent does actual self-image influence an online celebrity's brand awareness and brand image?

RQ2: To what extent does ideal self-image influence an online celebrity's brand awareness and brand image?

RQ3: To what extent does virtual interactivity influence an online celebrity's brand awareness and brand image.

RQ4: To what extent does brand awareness impacts brand image in the context of online celebrities?

RQ5: To what extent do brand awareness and brand image affect brand loyalty toward an online celebrity?

Research Objectives

Basically, this research seeks to investigate the determinants of online celebrities' brand equity, and the interrelationships among the dimensions of online celebrity brand equity, and thus understanding how do they build their brand equity? To specify, the objectives are listed below:

RO1: To investigate the primary determinants of online celebrity brand equity, specifically examining the roles of self-image

congruity and virtual interactivity in brand equity development.

RO2: To examine the interactions between the different dimensions of online celebrity brand equity and understand how these dimensions collectively contribute to the overall brand equity formation.

RO3: To develop a comprehensive theoretical framework that explains how online celebrities build and maintain their brand equity through strategic management of identified drivers and consumer psychological factors.

Note: in this research, actual and ideal self-image congruity and virtual interactivity are referred to as customer perception dimensions, or as the antecedents of online celebrity brand equity. Additionally, this study examines the influence of actual self, ideal self, and virtual interactivity on the dimensions of online celebrity brand equity, namely brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty. Accordingly, brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty are treated as the dependent variables.

Hypotheses Development

Fundamentally, self-image congruity perceive alignment between their own identity (both actual and ideal) and the celebrity's persona, and thus, improving consumer identification and brand preference. On the other hand, virtual interactivity describes the ability of the celebrity to meaningfully engage with his/her followers through responsive communication and personalized content, which ultimately fosters emotional connection.

Based upon the above conceptual underpinnings, the following sub-sections provide a clear justification of this research's hypotheses, through examining the recent literature related to self-image congruity, virtual interactivity, and their impact on the dimensions of online celebrities' brand equity.

Self-Concept and Brand Equity of Online Celebrity

Recent research on self-concept has led to the exploration of self-congruity construct, that is described by Sirgy *et al.*, (2000, p. 4) as "the process of matching a consumer's self-concept (or some dimensions of it) with the image of a brand or a product". Dichter (1985) and Halkias *et al.*, (2016) argue that the greater congruence between a consumer's self-image and a brand's image leads to more positive brand evaluations, because it matches his or her self-expression. Dichter and Halkias *et al.*, further state that the higher brand evaluation is indeed an antecedent to brand preference. Furthermore, according to Koo *et al.*, (2014) they indicate that in the context of online stores, customers are more likely to perceive it positively when its image matches their actual self-image. Kang *et al.*, (2009) as well point out that the products perceived usefulness and enjoyment is partially based on the alignment between customer's perceived actual self-image and the brand. Moreover, Yim *et al.*, (2007) believe that the congruence between customers' actual self-image and a brand can notably influence their commitment judgements and satisfaction.

According to Escalas & Bettman (2003), consumers view certain online influencers as inspirational figures who hold specific meanings that help activate their ideal self. Many empirical studies support this perspective. Tseng and Wang (2023) found that consumers' congruence with internet celebrities have a positive correlation with consumers' attitude towards the celebrity, which ultimately increases consumers' purchase intention. According to Choi and Rifon (2012), the more closely a celebrity endorser's image aligns with consumers' ideal self-image, the stronger the impact of the celebrity on consumers will be. For example, this is evident in consumers' favorable attitudes and responses towards the ads and brands that

the online celebrity endorses. Boon and Lomore (2001) argue that when there is congruence between the consumers' ideal self-image and the online celebrity's image, customers are more likely to adopt to specific behaviors promoted by the celebrity, so they can achieve their ideal self-image. When a brand's image aligns with a consumer's ideal self-image, it satisfies the consumer's self-esteem, that is resulted from this congruence (Aguirre-Rodriguez *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, Min *et al.*, (2019) found that congruence between celebrities and brands, along with publicity, significantly influences consumers' attitudes toward both the celebrity and the brand or product, as well as their purchase intentions.

Based upon the previous arguments, the following hypotheses are developed:

H1: The actual self-congruity between the consumer and the online celebrity positively impacts the online celebrity's brand awareness.

H2: The actual self-congruity between the consumer and the online celebrity positively impacts the online celebrity's brand image.

H3: The ideal self-congruity between the consumer and the online celebrity positively impacts the online celebrity's brand awareness.

H4: The ideal self-congruity between the consumer and the online celebrity positively impacts the online celebrity's brand image.

Virtual Interactivity and Online Celebrities' Brand Equity

According to Sun *et al.*, (2021) they state that there the internet celebrity interactivity and consumers' purchased intention are positively correlated. Liu *et al.*, (2020) categorize the virtual interactivity construct into two major dimensions, namely: frequency and diversity. Accordingly, Demir (2011) found that the frequency of interaction is a crucial element that defines interaction intensity. Furthermore, Wang and Emurian (2005) illustrate that long-

term relationships between brands and their followers accompanied with repetitive interactions are essential for building customer trust. On the other hand, Liu *et al.*, (2020) argue that followers might recognize diversity in interaction through two dimensions; platform diversity and the form diversity. For example, Maldonado (2016) illustrate that the utilization of various social media platforms connections can improve the impact of each platform, as well as expand the reach to further potential followers. Furthermore, the diverse forms of presenting celebrities' image, particularly through informal means serve as an important function in captivating the interest of online users. It is also found that on social media platforms, images with a snapshot aesthetic lead to better brand attitudes and stronger intentions to recommend other to follow the Instagram account, compared to those with traditional studio aesthetics (Colliander & Marder, 2018). Van Noort *et al.*, (2012) state that online Followers tend to favor casual, visually pleasing content, such as videos, images, and music, that allows online influencers to express their creativity and showcase their talents. Yadav *et al.*, (2025) concluded that fans' engagement besides digital experience and team interaction significantly contribute in shaping online celebrities brand equity.

Accordingly, the following two hypotheses are formulated:

H5: Virtual interactivity of the online celebrity positively impacts the celebrity's brand awareness.

H6: Virtual interactivity of the online celebrity positively impacts the celebrity's brand image.

Brand Equity Dimensions

Based on Keller's (1993) conceptualization of brand equity, he states that it is reflected by five major dimensions which are brand

awareness, brand image, brand associations, brand loyalty and perceived quality. However, this research paper excludes "brand associations" because they are often treated as equivalent to brand image, and it omits "perceived quality" because it is related to functional product judgment, making it unsuitable for a research focused on human brand.

Utomo & Hidayat (2022) studied the interrelationship among online celebrities' brand equity and fans' purchase intention. Their results indicate that the brand awareness of an online celebrity positively impacts fans image and loyalty towards him or her. celebrity's brand awareness positively impacts his or her image, and loyalty to him or her. furthermore, celebrity's brand image was found to influence the loyalty to him or her, and thus loyalty leads to better consumers' purchase intention.

On the other hand, Azzari & Pelissari (2020) found that brand awareness only does not lead to better consumers' purchase intention, unless the relation is mediated by brand equity. This indicates that the celebrities' awareness only is not a sufficient indicator of his or her brand equity.

Furthermore, L. H. Wei *et al.*, (2023) findings were surprising. They concluded that emotional-based dimensions of online celebrities (brand association and brand loyalty) played an important role in shaping the brand equity of online celebrities', ultimately influencing consumers' intention to purchase. In contrast, attribution-based dimensions of online celebrities' brand equity (brand awareness, brand trust and perceived quality) were found to not have any influence.

Consequently, the relationship between customer perception dimensions will be studied with regard to brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty of online celebrities.

H7: The brand awareness of an online celebrity positively impacts his or her brand image.

H8: The brand awareness of an online celebrity positively impacts his or her brand loyalty.

H9: The brand image of an online celebrity positively impacts his or her brand loyalty.

Methodology

The current research paper seeks the influence of customer perception dimensions: self-Image (both actual and ideal) and virtual interactivity on the dimensions' online celebrities' brand equity. Accordingly, a structured questionnaire was prepared as part of a quantitative research design to achieve the objectives of this study. The questionnaire relied on reliable scales and was distributed to elicit responses from a sample of social media users, who are familiar with online celebrities.

Sample and Population of the Study

This study's population consists of people who have at least one social media account on any platform, and who are familiar with the term "Online Celebrity", and who are residing in the West-Bank of Palestine. Given that data collection process was conducted online, a non-probability sampling method, specifically randomized convenience sampling was applied. The survey link was distributed through several online channels such as social media groups, email lists, professional networks, WhatsApp and telegram channels. The researcher tried to avoid the selection bias through targeting diverse demographic segments (such as gender, age, and occupation), and rotating the order of invitations. Consequently, the total of completed surveys was 392, however, the

researcher filtered the received answers and found 355 valid and suitable responses for moving on to the statistical analysis part.

Data Collection Instrument

The online questionnaire items were prepared and adopted from previous studies that proved to have high validity scales. Additionally, the chosen scales have been preferred because they were assumed by several authors to be the best fit for studies that are similar to the objectives of this research, which can be evidenced by their high levels of citations. For instance, the items of the actual-self dimension (e. g., my actual self-image is consistent with the overall image of this online celebrity), and ideal-self items (e. g., the ideal of myself is very similar to the character of this online celebrity) were originated from Wang *et al.*, (2015), virtual interactivity items were based on McMillan & Hwang (2002) (e. g., interacting with this online celebrity is like having a real conversation). The 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree = 1, Strongly Agree = 5) was used in the questionnaire as a scale to measure respondents answers on the given 21 items.

Ethical Considerations

In general, the respondents were informed in the beginning of the survey that the data will be collected for achieving the goals of the study without sharing it with any third-parties, and the participation to the survey was voluntary. Additionally, the Google Forms platform ensures the protection and confidentiality of respondents' identities, as the platform can only obtain the IP address of respondents. In doing so, no personal information about the respondents have been collected.

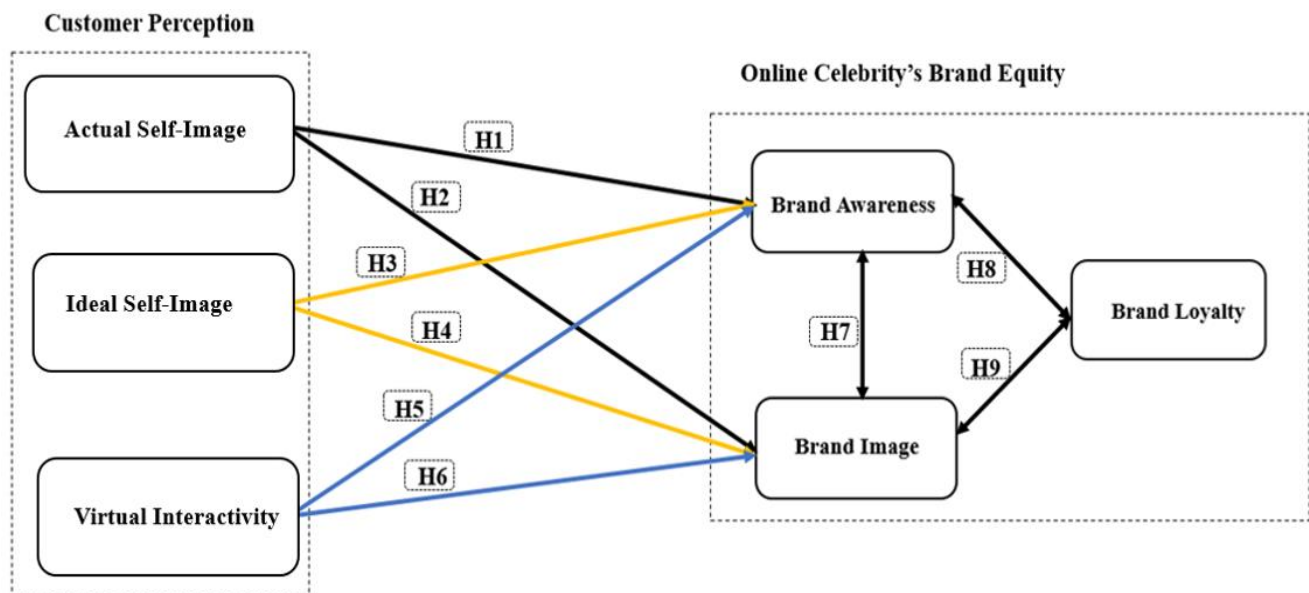


Figure (1): Theoretical Model.

The study proposes this theoretical model to examine how customer perception variables contribute to the development of online celebrity brand equity. Specifically, actual and ideal self-image, and virtual interactivity are conceptualized as independent variables reflecting consumers' psychological and experiential perceptions in online environments.

Drawing on self-concept theory and interactive marketing literature, the model posits that consumers' perceived alignment with their actual and ideal self-images, as well as their level of perceived virtual interactivity with online celebrities are instrumental in shaping the brand equity of an online celebrity through a sequential process represented by brand awareness and brand image, that ultimately lead to brand loyalty.

Results and Discussion

Overall, the questionnaire was completed by a total of 355 participants, and then, the data analysis process was conducted using SPSS and AMOS programs. Initially, descriptive statistics summarized the demographic characteristics of the sample, and their responses to each item. Later on, the Analysis of Moment Structural Equation Modelling (AMOS-SEM) was employed to examine the

proposed hypotheses, and to illustrate the type and direction of relationships exist between consumers Actual Self-Image, Ideal –Self-Image, and Virtual Interactivity as independent variables, Brand Awareness, Brand Image and Brand Loyalty are treated as dependent variable.

Data Analysis

In academic studies, the process of data analysis is applied to transform raw data into meaningful findings, test hypotheses and reach insightful conclusions based on evidences drawn from the data collected. Thereby, the responses from the study sample enable the validation of conceptual frameworks. To do so, the researcher must carefully choose the right statistical technique that aligns with the research design, the nature of hypotheses being tested, while also considering other variables such as sample size, and the complexity of relationships among the constructs of the study. Furthermore, effective data analysis requires ensuring the certain scores of validity and reliability of the used measurement scales.

Consequently, this research paper applies data analysis to investigate the interrelationships between customer perception dimensions, namely, Actual Self-Image (ACT-SEL) Ideal Self-Image (IDE-SEL), and Virtual

Interactivity (VER-INT) that consumers hold towards Online Celebrities Brand Equity (OCBE). The data analysis step included specific statistical tests such as descriptive, reliability, validity, and the Analysis of Moment Structural Equation Modelling (AMOS-SEM), which collectively provide an overall view of the collected data, while also uncovering more detailed insights. To start with, the descriptive statistics tests were conducted in order to analyze and discuss the mean, standard deviation and normality of the research sample, thereby, providing an early indication of participants' perceptions. Following that, the reliability of the instrument was performed and evaluated according to the results of Cronbach's Alpha value for scale measurement. Then the Analysis of Moment

Table (1): Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	189	53.2
	Female	166	46.8
Age	18–25	62	17.8
	26–35	105	30.0
	36–45	103	29.4
	46–53	48	13.7
	53+	32	9.1
Marital Status	Single	147	35.6
	Married	208	64.4
Education Level	High School / Diploma	77	21.7
	Bachelor's Degree	226	63.7
	Master's Degree or above	52	14.6
Occupation	Student	78	22.0
	Employed	179	50.4
	Self-Employed	65	18.3
	Unemployed	33	9.3

As shown in **Table 1**, it can be observed that the sample indicates an almost balanced distribution of gender, a majority of young and adults (18–45 years) who were preferred to fit the context and objectives of the study, a logical distribution of marital status, and a high level of well-educational respondents. Such demographic insights may better reflect the perspectives of individuals who are generally more engaged with social media, and more familiar with influencer marketing.

Structural Equation Modelling (AMOS-SEM) was applied to evaluate the research hypotheses.

Demographic Factors: After removing the answers that included missing data, and the outliers (who did not have any social media account, and who are not familiar with the concept of Online Celebrity), the researcher analyzed the demographical profile of the 355 valid respondents, in order to provide an initial interpretation of consumers' perceptions of online celebrities' brand equity, and to highlight the distribution of participants across key categories. Accordingly, **Table 1** presents a summary of the demographic profile of the 355 respondents.

Descriptive Statistics: Descriptive statistics offer an initial understanding of how participants perceive each construct, serving as a groundwork for further inferential analysis. Accordingly, **Table 2** shows the mean analysis of the four key variables examined in this study: The data presented below were derived from a sample of 355 valid responses, i.e., N = 355. Thereby, the reported values are the mean scores for each variable, in addition to the standard deviation, which indicates the degree of variability among respondent opinions.

Table (2): Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Customer Perception (CP)			
- Actual Self-Image (ACT-SEL)	355	3.50	0.76
- Ideal Self-Image (IDE-SEL)	355	3.53	0.78
- Virtual Interactivity (VER-INT)	355	3.31	0.79
Online Celebrity Brand Equity (OCBE)			
- Brand Awareness (BRA-AWA)	355	3.78	0.69
- Brand Image (BRA-IMA)	355	4.07	0.76
- Brand Loyalty (BRA-LOY)	355	4.25	0.67

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the study variables, including Actual Self-Image, Ideal Self-Image, Virtual Interactivity, and the three dimensions of Online Celebrity Brand Equity. These statistics reveal that mean scores range from 3.31 to 3.78. **Table 2**, shows that Ideal Self-Image received the highest mean score ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.78$), suggesting that participants perceive a marginally stronger aspirational connection with the online celebrity compared to their actual self-concept.

The descriptive statistics results imply that all constructs were rated above 3.0 on the measurement scale, indicating generally positive perceptions across the sample. Furthermore, across all constructs, standard deviations ranged between 0.67 and 0.79, reflecting a moderate level of variability and suggesting a reasonable level of consistency in responses among respondents. Thus, this consistency implies a stable response pattern and supports the reliability of the data for subsequent statistical analyses.

Measurement Model Analysis

In order to determine whether a set of items effectively reflects the intended variable, the

Table (3): Outer Loadings.

	ACT-SEL	IDE-SEL	VER-INT	BRA-AWA	BRA-IMA	BRA-LOY
ACT-SEL4	0.832					
ACT-SEL3	0.777					
ACT-SEL2	0.731					
ACT-SEL1	0.768					
IDE-SEL4		0.842				
IDE-SEL3		0.855				
IDE-SEL2		0.71				
IDE-SEL1		0.752				
VIR-INT5			0.808			
VIR-INT4			0.896			

convergent validity assessment was applied. This is assessed through the outer loadings value, which illustrate the strength of the correlation among a latent variable and its observable items. Generally, an outer loading score that is 0.50 or above is considered acceptable, and a value that is 0.57 or more is extremely desirable. **Table 3** presents the outer loading values for all measurement scale items. As shown in the table, it can be observed that all the outer loadings exceed 0.5.

Furthermore, an acceptable convergent validity requires the average variance extracted (AVE) to be 0.5 or more. Thus, (AVE) was calculated by showing the aggregated squared loadings of each set of indicators linked to each variable. **Table 4** proves that all the AVE scores are above the 0.50 threshold, thereby confirming convergent validity. The composite reliability was evaluated based on F. Hair Jr *et al.*, (2014) , who proposes that the required level has to be 0.70 or higher. Accordingly, the results stated in **Table 4** affirm the acceptable threshold.

	ACT-SEL	IDE-SEL	VER-INT	BRA-AWA	BRA-IMA	BRA-LOY
VIR-INT3			0.733			
VIR-INT2			0.538			
VIR-INT1			0.535			
BRA-AWA3				0.598		
BRA-AWA2				0.685		
BRA-AWA1				0.78		
BRA-IMG3					0.707	
BRA-IMG2					0.747	
BRA-IMG1					0.717	
BRA-LOY3						0.765
BRA-LOY2						0.703
BRA-LOY1						0.841

Table (4): Measurement Model.

Constructs	Items	Loadings	α	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Actual Self-Image (ACT-SEL)	ACT-SEL4	0.832	0.858	0.860	0.605
	ACT-SEL3	0.777			
	ACT-SEL2	0.731			
	ACT-SEL1	0.768			
Ideal Self-Image (IDE-SEL)	IDE-SEL4	0.842	0.866	0.868	0.622
	IDE-SEL3	0.855			
	IDE-SEL2	0.710			
	IDE-SEL1	0.752			
Virtual Interactivity (VER-INT)	VIR-INT5	0.808	0.817	0.839	0.522
	VIR-INT4	0.896			
	VIR-INT3	0.733			
	VIR-INT2	0.538			
	VIR-INT1	0.535			
Brand Awareness (BRA-AWA)	BRA-AWA3	0.598	0.723	0.788	0.555
	BRA-AWA2	0.685			
	BRA-AWA1	0.780			
Brand Image (BRA-IMA)	BRA-IMA3	0.707	0.724	0.792	0.559
	BRA-IMA2	0.747			
	BRA-IMA1	0.717			
Brand Loyalty (BRA-LOY)	BRA-LOY3	0.765	0.854	0.854	0.662
	BRA-LOY2	0.703			
	BRA-LOY1	0.841			

Discriminant validity analysis is essential to confirm that the variables of research model are clearly distinct. This assessment ensures that each construct explains a different phenomenon, and that the variables of the study are not highly connected. The Fornell Larcker Criterion is a commonly applied discriminant validity method, which postulates the value of the square root of AVE for each latent variable

should exceed its correlations with all other latent variables in the research. As shown in **Table 5**, it can be observed that the Fornell and Larcker condition is met, with no construct that violates Fornell and Larcker Criterion. Thus, the results confirm that scale has a discriminant validity and that each latent construct represents itself more than any other latent construct.

Table (5): Fornell-Larcker Test for Discriminant Validity.

	ACT-SEL	IDE-SEL	VER-INT	BRA-AWA	BRA-IMA	BRA-LOY
ACT-SEL	0.778					
IDE-SEL	0.708	0.789				
VIR-INT	0.588	0.422	0.722			
BRA-AWA	0.422	0.512	0.362	0.745		
BRA-IMA	0.522	0.452	0.397	0.615	0.748	
BRA-LOY	0.479	0.423	0.159	0.425	0.718	0.814

Structural Model Analysis

To assess the structural model, the researcher analyzed the statistical significance of the path coefficients corresponding to the hypotheses. The author preferred to divide the model of the study to two sections, since the dependent variable (online celebrity brand equity) is a multi-dimensional construct. Accordingly, the results of the SEM analyses, along with the hypotheses testing results of customer perception constructs are presented in **Table 6**, and shown in **Figure 2**.

The results of (H1) to (H6): Initially the bootstrapping function was utilized on SmartPLS 3.0, to evaluate the study's hypotheses. The significance level was assessed by considering the standardized coefficients (β) and significance values (p). **Table 6** summarizes the structural model results of the first set of hypotheses. Brand

awareness was not significantly influenced by actual self-image, since ($\beta = -0.031$, $p > 0.05$). Hypothesis 1 is therefore unsupported. However, brand image was significantly and positively influenced by actual self-image ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.05$). Hypothesis 2 is thus supported. The results also showed that brand awareness was influenced by ideal self-image, since ($\beta = 0.524$, $p < 0.05$). Accordingly, hypothesis 3 is supported. Brand image was also found to be significantly and positively influenced by ideal self-image ($\beta = 0.406$, $p < 0.05$). Hypothesis 4 is thus supported. Additionally, brand awareness was positively and significantly impacted by virtual interactivity ($\beta = 0.148$, $p < 0.05$). Based upon that, hypothesis 5 was supported. However, brand image was not significantly influenced by virtual interactivity, since ($\beta = -0.059$, $p > 0.05$). Hypothesis 6 is thus unsupported. The overall model of this set of hypothesis is shown in Figure 2.

Table (6): Results of Hypotheses Test (H1) to (H6).

Hypotheses	Effect			Standardized Coefficients	S.E.	Sig	Result
H1	(ACT-SEL)	➡	(BRA-AWA)	-0.031	.080	.804	Unsupported
H2	(ACT-SEL)	➡	(BRA-IMA)	0.26	.092	.034	Supported
H3	(IDE-SEL)	➡	(BRA-AWA)	0.524	.076	***	Supported
H4	(IDE-SEL)	➡	(BRA-IMA)	0.406	.084	***	Supported
H5	(VIR-INT)	➡	(BRA-AWA)	0.148	.043	.044	Supported
H6	(VIR-INT)	➡	(BRA-IMA)	-0.059	.049	.403	Unsupported

*** Significant at .001

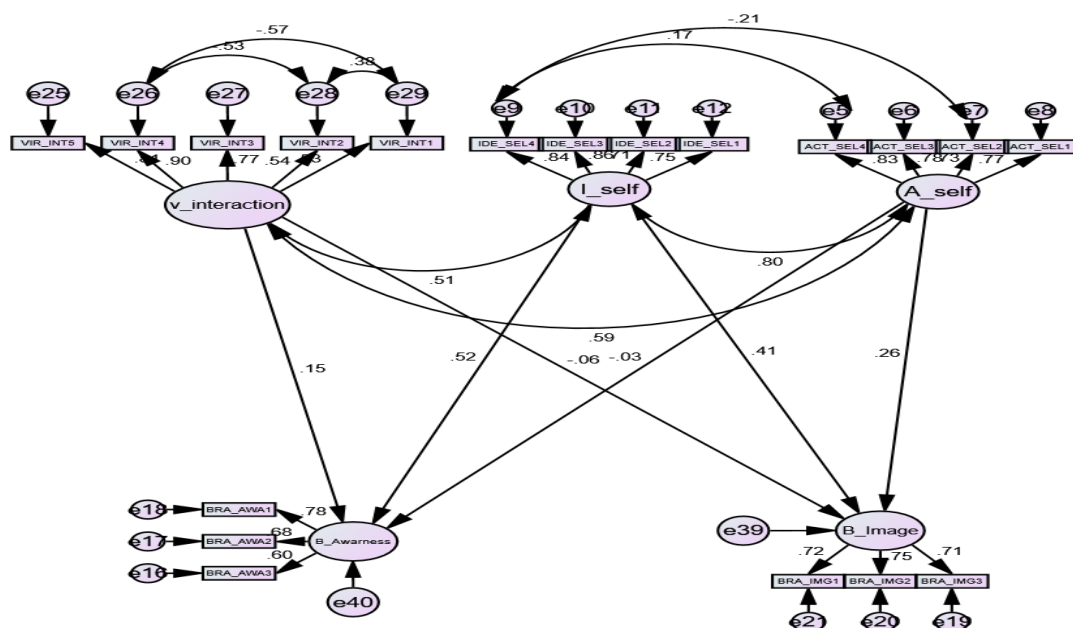


Figure (2): Structural Equation Modeling for (H1) to (H6).

The results of (H7) to (H9: As stated earlier, one of the goals of this study is to understand the correlations among the dimensions of online celebrity brand equity, and thus, concluding how their equity is strongly built. For this reason, the structural equation modeling has also been performed on the dimensions of online celebrity brand equity. **Table 7** presents the structural model results of the second set of hypotheses. Brand image was found to be positively influenced by brand awareness ($\beta = 0.756$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, hypothesis 7 was supported. However, the correlation between brand awareness and brand loyalty was not significant, since ($\beta = -0.096$, $p > 0.05$). Accordingly, hypotheses 8 was not supported. This implies that brand awareness alone does not directly influence customer loyalty. The results also show that brand loyalty was positively influenced by brand image ($\beta = 1.021$, $p < 0.05$). Hypothesis 9 is thus supported.

Table 7: Results of Hypotheses Test (H7) to (H9).

Hypotheses	Effect			Standardized Coefficients	S.E.	Sig	Result
H7	(BRA-AWA)	➡	(BRA-IMA)	0.756	.082	***	Supported
H8	(BRA-AWA)	➡	(BRA-LOY)	0.096	.094	.273	Unsupported
H9	(BRA-IMA)	➡	(BRA-LOY)	1.021	.089	***	Supported

*** Significant at .001

Furthermore, based on the preceding results, brand image is found to act as a full mediator between brand awareness and brand loyalty. This conclusion is supported and evidenced by the insignificant direct effect of brand awareness on brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.096$, $p = 0.273$). The indirect effect path a, the path from brand awareness to the brand image is statistically significant ($\beta = 0.756$, $p < .001$). and path b, the path from brand image to brand loyalty is statistically significant ($\beta = 1.021$, $p < .001$). The bootstrap confidence interval for this indirect effect ranges from 0.637 to 1.201. Therefore, brand awareness affects brand loyalty only through brand image. It is worth noting that standardized estimates slightly above 1.0 can arise in SEM under conditions of high latent construct correlation and do not necessarily indicate model misspecification. The overall model of this set of hypotheses is shown in Figure 3.

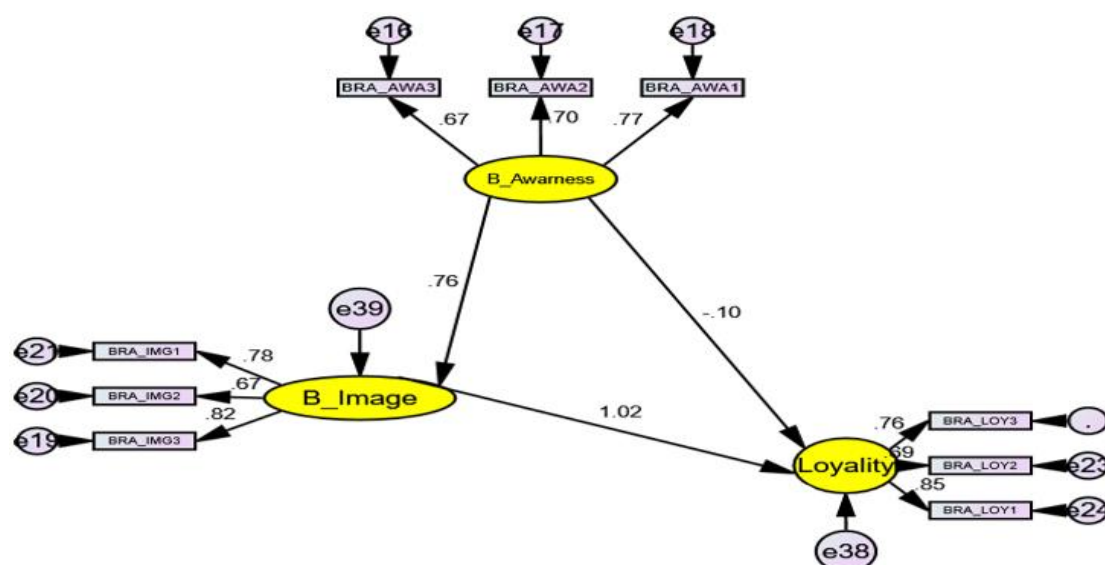


Figure (3): Structural Equation Modeling for (H7) to (H9).

As mentioned earlier, the aim of this research paper was to investigate how the

dimensions of online celebrities' brand equity are shaped through the impact of customers'

perception of self-image congruity and virtual interactivity. Therefore, the study found that actual and ideal self-congruity impact online celebrities brand equity through distinct mechanisms. Actual self-congruity influences the way customers perceive the online celebrities' brand image. This result contradicts with Liu *et al.*, (2020) findings which state that actual self-congruity is not correlated with brand image. On the other hand, ideal self-image contributes in building brand image and awareness of online celebrities, which ultimately leads to brand loyalty. However, the statistical results also reveal that actual self-image does not have a significant association with brand awareness. The authors assume that possible reason for these results may be that influencers possess unique online images and personalities, therefore, customers' actual self-image congruity cannot be easily accomplished. Furthermore, most fans are drawn to the ideal traits of online celebrities, it is logical that they develop ideal self-congruity with these figures, which in turn directly influences brand image. Therefore, this study offers empirical support for the self-congruity theory.

Regarding the virtual interactivity, this research assumed that online fans initially interact with their loved online celebrities, form awareness and image, and then these two factors would lead to brand loyalty of the online celebrity either directly or indirectly. This finding aligns with the results of Barreda *et al.*, (2016) and Chang & Liu, (2009). Nevertheless, the empirical findings of this research paper partially support this hypothesis. Virtual interactivity is able to influence the online celebrities' brand awareness positively, which it's consistent with Chang & Liu, (2009) and it is able to lead to brand loyalty BUT only through the brand image as a mediating construct. In contrast, this research also concluded that virtual interactivity did not have

significant impact on brand image of the online celebrity, which it is consisted with Chang & Liu's, (2009) research results. This discrepancy may stem from the content's nature, which shapes consumer perceptions, rather than mere frequency, which was the focus of this study and may only drive brand exposure.

In terms of the pillars of online celebrity brand equity, the findings show that the relationship between brand awareness and brand image of an online celebrity was positive and significant. This indicates that higher brand awareness leads to a stronger brand image, suggesting that customers who are more aware of a brand/online celebrity perceive him or her more positively. These results are partly consistent with Chang & Liu, (2009) and Barreda *et al.*, (2016) research findings which articulate that strong brand awareness is able to influence other brand factors like brand image, brand loyalty and most importantly it has strong impact on the brand's market share. In line with their findings, this study confirms the correlation between brand awareness and brand image. However, unlike their conclusions, the relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty was not found to be significant in this study, suggesting that the online celebrity's brand awareness alone may not be sufficient to drive loyalty to him or her. Additionally, this research also indicates that the impact of an online celebrity's brand image on fans' loyalty to him or her is statistically significant. In other words, this result highlights that an online celebrity holding a favorable strongly predicts fans' loyalty. Such a result matches Baldauf *et al.*, (2003) research results who elaborate that brand image is a major determinant of brand loyalty.

Furthermore, this research found that there is an indirect effect of brand awareness on brand loyalty of an online celebrity which occurs only through brand image that acts as a full mediator. In other words, the indirect

influence of one construct on another is transmitted through a third variable, known as a mediator. Thus, the study means that the influence of brand awareness on brand loyalty is significant only through the mediating role of brand image. To illustrate, the study firstly discovered a direct impact of brand awareness on brand loyalty was insignificant. Later on, two pathways of indirect effect were found; path a from brand awareness to the brand image which was statistically significant, as well as, path b, the path from brand image to brand loyalty which was statistically significant, and thus, the researcher concluded that brand awareness can affect brand loyalty only through brand image which plays a full mediating role. This finding aligns to some extent with Baldauf *et al.*'s (2003) research findings which illustrate that brand awareness is a crucial driver of brand loyalty for businesses. Similarly, drawing from Barreda *et al.*, (2016) empirical research, it was concluded that the awareness of retailer brands positively affects brand loyalty. However, these studies did not find the brand image as a mediator.

In summary, although human brands are increasingly acknowledged within the brand management discipline, however, empirical research on the formation of human brand equity, particularly for online celebrities, remains limited. This research tried to address this gap by discovering the antecedents of online celebrities' brand equity (including actual, ideal self-image congruity and virtual interactivity) and investigating the interrelationships between human brand equity dimensions, which may both lead to fans' purchase intention as a logical result of brand equity. The results state that customers or fans must be aware of the online celebrity before they build a brand image about him or her, and only then, brand loyalty to the online celebrity can be successfully reached.

Findings

Basically, this research paper aimed to investigate the influence of three customer perception constructs, represented by actual and ideal self-image, and virtual interactivity on the pillars of online celebrities' brand equity; represented by brand awareness, brand image and brand loyalty. Additionally, the research also aimed to explore how do the dimensions of online celebrities' brand equity interact with each other, in order to understand how they build their brand equity. Consequently, the results reinforce the self-image congruity theory in the online marketing context, particularly, social media marketing, demonstrating that both actual and ideal self-congruity play important roles in forming online celebrities brand equity. Specifically, while actual self-congruity mainly contributes to shaping brand image, ideal self-congruity impacts both brand awareness and brand image, ultimately enhancing brand loyalty. Surprisingly, the study found that actual self-congruity does not have any significant influence on brand awareness, and this supports the idea that fans do not tend to associate online celebrities with their actual identities, instead they associate them with their aspirational selves. This indicates that online celebrities function better as symbolic figures who represent consumers desired lifestyles, instead of only reflecting their actual reality. Accordingly, followers tend to recognize and recall brands that are congruent with who they desire to become, rather than who they actually are. Such an aspirational congruence improves emotional engagement with customers, and thus, reinforcing brand recall and loyalty.

Virtual interactivity was also found to be a major determinant of online celebrities' brand equity. Through enabling active engagement with online celebrities, virtual interactivity improves familiarity with online celebrities. The study concluded that while virtual

interactivity significantly influences online celebrities brand awareness, its impact on their fans' image is not significant. Such a result implies to the importance of the content shared by online celebrities. In other words, the perceived image of an online celebrity is determined by the nature and quality of content shared by him/her, instead of just the frequency of interactions occur with fans. This suggests that valuable and meaningful celebrities' content plays a major role in shaping consumers perception.

Additionally, the findings show that brand awareness and brand image are positively correlated, which ultimately leads to fans' being more loyal to the celebrity. However, the results also reveal that brand awareness alone does not directly influence brand loyalty. Nevertheless, an indirect mediating relationship was found which indicates that brand awareness is able to influence brand loyalty only through the mediating role of brand image. This indicates that recognition of a brand only is not sufficient to foster loyalty unless the recognition is accompanied by favorable associations and perceptions. Based upon that, for celebrities to build better brand equity of themselves, they must pay attention to building a positive and strong image, so they can effectively convert consumers' awareness into long-term fan loyalty. Thus, this result highlights the importance of the sequential process of brand development.

Theoretical and Managerial Implication

The results provide valuable theoretical contributions. Firstly, this research extends the self-image congruity theory by highlighting the distinct roles of actual and ideal self-congruity in shaping the online celebrities' brand equity. Since actual self-congruity affects brand image, and ideal self-congruity has a positive impact on both brand awareness and brand loyalty of online celebrities' brand equity, this insight

challenges the previous perspectives on self-congruity and highlights the psychological appeal of online celebrities' as representatives of aspirational lifestyles of their fans.

Second, since the study revealed that virtual interactivity positively influences brand awareness but does not impact brand image. This result indicates that the nature and quality of content being shared by an online celebrity plays a greater role in shaping consumer perception than the frequency of engagement with fans. Accordingly, it can be concluded that such an insight contributes to the marketing theories by suggesting that brand engagement alone is not sufficient for strong brand positioning. Indeed, the content strategy matters more.

Beyond theoretical implications for marketing academics, this research offers two key managerial implications for marketing practitioners. First, brands should carefully choose online celebrities who match their brand identity and are consistent with the target audience's aspirational selves. So, the issue is not based only on the number of followers, but instead brands should analyze the psychological and emotional connections between influencer and fans'. Specifically, this study provides managers with insights on the importance of presenting this bond for consumers through paying more attention to the self-congruity construct and knowing which aspect of it to focus on more.

Second, the findings of this research paper study conclude that content quality of online celebrities is over their engagement with their followers. Therefore, managers must pay sufficient attention for this point when utilizing online celebrities as a marketing and advertising technique in their digital marketing strategies. Since the study suggests that the quality and nature of content is more important than the frequency of interactions that occur

between fans and the online celebrities, managers need to think deep about their content strategy before choosing a specific online celebrity to deliver that content.

Limitations and Future Research Suggestions

Despite this research offers valuable contributions, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the current study considered a specific cultural and geographical context, therefore, generalizability is an important limitation, because consumers' perception of online celebrities differs among cultures. Second, the study examined the online celebrities' influence in the general digital marketing context, without distinguishing between the various modern social media platforms or the different content formats. Given that each platform has its distinct engagement mechanisms and audience behave differently with that platform. Third, the study integrates three main dimensions in the customer perception part which are actual and ideal self-image congruity, and virtual interactivity. However, other psychological and emotional factors can be considered such as social presence, the online celebrity level of expertise, trust and perceived authenticity.

Thus, the above identified limitations of this study, highlight potential areas for future investigations. A cross-cultural comparison study can be conducted to discover how online celebrities influence consumers' behavior in diverse global markets. Furthermore, future research could conduct a study that considers different types of social media platforms to determine how online celebrities' brand equity is formed across different digital platforms. Finally, other psychological and emotional factors can be considered to evaluate customers' perception, such as social presence, the online celebrity level of expertise, trust and perceived authenticity.

Disclosure Statement

- **Ethical approval and consent to participate:** Initially, the authors of this research paper provided an informed consent before participating. Additionally, researchers have applied all the applicable research ethics in their efforts on this study. Additionally, the informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.
- **Availability of data and materials:** All the data that have been collected to achieve the goals of this study are still and will always be stored, and it can be obtained from the corresponding author upon request.
- **Source of research:** This paper is extracted from the first author's doctoral dissertation at Yeditepe University, which has been successfully defended and accepted.
- **Author's Contributions: Muneeb Mohammad Rahall:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft Preparation. **Özge Kirezli:** Supervision, Methodology – Guidance, Writing – Review & Editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.
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