CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENT AND BRAND EQUITY: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF BRAND POSITIONING IN THE TELECOMMUNICATION SECTOR OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
This study aims to investigate the effect of celebrity endorsement on brand equity and how brand positioning mediates this relationship in the telecommunication industry in Nigeria. Studies on celebrity endorsement have considered the impact on brand equity but give little or no attention to the mediating effect of brand positioning. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design and quantitative method. A total of (435) copies of questionnaires was administered to University Students from the four (4) selected tertiary institutions in Lagos State, Nigeria. The study adopted purposive, stratified and convenience-sampling techniques for the respondents for this study. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Structural Equation Modeling Partial Least Square (3.0). The model indicated a statistically significant path co-efficient; specifically, a significant relationship was found among the variables celebrity endorsement on brand positioning and brand equity. The findings revealed that brand positioning is an essential element for competitive advantage and increasing brand equity.

Keywords: Celebrity endorsement, Brand equity, Brand positioning, telecommunication

1. INTRODUCTION

The telecommunication industry in Nigeria is highly competitive with restricted entry and extraction barriers. The industry has experienced a greater degree of sophistication, with a creation of domestic and intercontinental brands that has activated a vigorous competition where businesses strive for consumers to be conscious of their brand and embrace some promising, robust, and exceptional brand equity in their retention via aggressive marketing exertions (Ateke & Akani, 2018). Businesses strive to outpace each other through different strategies, with the understanding that making a mark from a lot of marketing communication focused at the customers and captivating their devotion is a striking means of attaining competitive improvement (Ateke & Akani, 2018). Hence, organisations and brands continue to engage different strategies to increase their customer base and remain competitive in the dynamic global marketplace. Increasing brand equity is an inevitable marketing strategy for promoting brand awareness and goodwill. Brand equity is created and developed overtime (Marques, da Silva, Davcik & Faria, 2020). As this development takes root, it translates into incremental consumer trust which sustains the brand name or image. In many parts of the world, the use of celebrities as a component of marketing strategy in building brand equity is prevalent (Keller & Brexendorf, 2019), and over the years, this component of marketing has become one of the most crucial strategies for providing exceptional differentiation and acceptance for brands. Furthermore, the positioning of a product or brand in the mind of the consumers is a critical factor in communicating the benefits the brand provides and differentiates it from those of its competitors. An organisation's brand positioning focuses on either the consumer or the competitors by associating the product benefits from the customer point or create a favourable image in the mind of the consumer (Ajeyalemi, Dixon-Ogbechie, 2020). Hence, positioning refers to the process of creating an image or identity for a given product, or branding the minds of the target market. To attain this achievement, marketing specialists have formulated numerous tactics; such as celebrity endorsement. The employment of celebrities as representatives is a recognized exercise in marketing promotion that has enjoyed an extensive usage in modern times despite of the high cost of contracting celebrities. Celebrity endorsement has become one of the most important marketing strategy for providing a distinct differentiation among the mobile telecommunication brands *(*Hennayake, 2017). Since the mobile telecommunication industry deregulation began in the late 2001, there has been substantial increase in competition among brands with the four (4) licensed Companies such as MTN, GLO, AIRTEL, and ETISALAT (now 9mobile). Competition for space in the market is on the increase and positioning is one of the main tools that the companies are using to increase their market share. Meanwhile, studies on the mediating effect of positioning in the relationship between celebrity endorsement and brand equity have been relatively overlooked and ignored (Okoisama, Best, & Anyanwu, 2017 & Okorie & Agbaleke, 2017). The increase in competition among many telecommunication firms has necessitated the need for service providers to adopt celebrity endorsement. Studies such as (Hassan & Jamila, 2014; Ladipo, Oniku, Akeke & Chileuwa, 2018) adopted a uni-dimensional approach to celebrity endorsement and primarily focused on brand equity, ignoring the role of a mediating role of a brand positioning strategy. Understanding the influence of brand positioning as a mediator of celebrity endorsement has not been established in the literature (Randhawa, Sharma & Malhotra, 2015). Therefore, this study, therefore, seeks to fill the gap on the extent to which celebrity endorsement affects brand equity and how brand positioning strategies mediate the relationship in the mobile telecommunication Industry. The research seeks to achieve the following objective:

To determine the extent to which celebrity endorsement affects brand equity and how brand positioning mediate between them.

The objective is hypothesized as follows:

There is no significant mediating effect of brand positioning on the relationship between celebrity endorsement and brand equity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The concept of celebrity endorsement

The term celebrity itself is a broad term; it includes actors, stars, models, athletes or sports celebrities (Randhawa, Sharma, & Malhotra (2015). In retrospect, the term celebrity can be derived from the Latin “celebritatu”, which means famous. Friedman and Friedman (1979) provided early concepts of celebrities, including actors, politicians, models, sports athletes and entertainers and other publicly recognised celebrities. Celebrities usually have attributes such as Attractiveness, knowledge, trustworthiness, and likability. Advertisers hope to associate these attributes with a brand or product. Celebrities are individuals who are recognised by a large part of the public in a specific population (Oyeniyi, 2014). Swerdlow and Swerdlow (2003) describe celebrities as having commands individuals with beloved and attractive qualities who receive public attention and recognition. Silvera and Austad (2004) believe that celebrities are individuals who receive attention and have unique characteristics among a large number of people, such as attractiveness and trustworthiness Celebrities are very well-known people and attract a certain degree of public attention and influence in the daily media (Kaur & Gang, 2016).

2.2 Celebrity endorsement

Solomon (2002) believe that celebrity endorsements refer to the use of well-known athletes, movie celebrities, music icons and TV stars to promote or advertise products and services. In this study, celebrity endorsements are a blueprint that focuses on achieving enhanced marketing performance that is beneficial to the company. According to Kaur and Garg (2016), celebrity endorsements are a form of branding or advertising campaigns that involve celebrities using their reputation to help promote products or services. Research on celebrity endorsements seems to have put forward different views on the exact meaning of celebrity endorsements (Hung, 2014; Ofori-Okyere & Asamoah, 2015; Solomon, 2002). Okyere and Asamoah (2015) considered celebrity endorsement as an effective and more efficient marketing strategy where famous personalities who have achieved a lot of feats and laurels in their professions as athletes, models, entertainers, actors or actresses, business personalities, politicians or religious leaders used their fame to promote the brand. Ibok and Ibok (2013) describe celebrity endorsements as another form of product advertising that telecommunications companies use to promote their products, services, and ideas among existing and potential consumers. Roll (2006) pointed out that endorsements are brand communication channel in which a celebrity serves as the spokesman for the brand and certifies the argument and the role of the brand by extending to the brand its image, reputation, status in society or expertise in the field. In addition, celebrities can not only gain widespread public recognition among certain groups of people, but also influence brand awareness. Celebrity endorsements are commonly used as positioning tools for Nigerian companies to promote their brands in an excellent way (Okorie & Agbaleke, 2017). Studies have shown that celebrity endorsements are an easy way to connect with consumers (Ibok and Ikon, 2013; Kaur and Garg, 2016; Oyeniyi, 2014; Silda and Austad, 2004). Celebrity endorsement can reduce the time for consumers to transit from the cognitive stage to the action stage of the consumer purchase behavior process (Martey, 2014). Celebrity endorsers are individuals who are well known to the public for their achievement in areas other than endorsed products. Advertisers often hire celebrities to lend their personality to products or brands. Compared with non-celebrity spokespersons (Petty & Cacioppo, 1983), the use of celebrities is more likely to cause attitude and emotional reactions.

2.3 Concept of brand equity

Aaker (1991), in his work, defined brand equity as the set of brand assets or liabilities associated to a brand name and symbols that add value to or subtracts value from the value provided from consuming a firm's good or service. The customer-based brand equity primarily focused on the viewpoint of the customer, which help the marketers to develop an appropriate marketing plan to understand and build the brand (Cerri, 2012). The employee-based brand equity notes the differential effects that the brand knowledge has on the employee's work environment (Fajam & Hongi, 2015; Keller, 2003). Extant literature in the field of marketing has focused on customer-based brand equity. Scholars and marketing experts believe that customer-based brand equity is the dominant approach used for research and industry-based practices (Fajam & Hongi, 2015; Keller, 2003). Aaker (1991) one of the branding's academic in the USA identified five brand equity components, which are five categories of brand assets that add or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm or to that firm's customers or both as follows : brand association, brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and other proprietary assets. According to Aaker, the model can be used to explain the different brand equity component, which rises as brand association increases, brand awareness increases and perceived quality increases. Increasing brand equity is an inevitable marketing strategy to improve brand awareness and promote company goodwill (Hosseini & Moezzi, 2015). In marketing, brand equity simply means defining the organization to create and maintain the intangible value of the company's brand name. The concept of brand equity can be traced back to advertising practitioners in the early 1980s. Early research used a variety of financial techniques to check brand equity. In recent research, brand equity has been explained based on the customer’s perspective (Chatzipanagiotou, Christodoulides, & Veloutsou, 2019). Brands have long used celebrity appeal. In various categories of products or services, more and more brands rely on the broad appeal of celebrities. Once there are new faces on the popularity rankings, advertisers will wait in line to make it popular. Some people believe that celebrities can break the chaos of advertising and make advertising and brands more eye-catching, thereby ensuring the attention of target groups. Therefore, even in various promotional activities, consumers are attracted by the product. Therefore, celebrity endorsements are attractors to promote the brand in the market space.

2.4 Brand positioning

Brand positioning is a new business concept used for marketing. Many authors have written ideas about brand positioning. According to Alfred and Ezute (2014) organization use brand positioning as a basis for building or managing a brand. In addition, brand positioning communicates the brand's interests to its target audience (Bilggili & Ozkul, 2015). Brand positioning is a marketing strategy that helps stimulate purchase behavior among customers, thereby helping to build their loyalty to the company's brand. According to Kotler, the brand positioning of Keller, Hassan, Baalbaki and Shamma (2012) is a unique process that can develop the company's products and corporate image to ensure a competitive advantage in consumer mentality. Brand positioning can convey the advantages of the brand to the target audience in the market (Bilggili & Ozkul, 2015). In addition, brand positioning can also explain the difference between the company's brand and its competitors and its positioning in the minds of customers. Scholars believe that brand positioning strategies can increase the company's customer base in the market space. Asikhia and Binuyo (2013) believe that brand positioning is a market-driven development process that requires consideration of the ever-changing business environment and the need to provide quality services to customers. According to Bueno and Jeffery (2014), brand positioning can also be called positioning strategy, brand strategy or brand positioning statement. The author regards positioning strategy as an organised system for finding windows in the minds of target customers. Bueno and Jeffery (2014) believe that effective brand positioning can maximise customer relevance and competitive uniqueness, thereby maximising branding. Therefore, establishing a successful brand positioning is essential for establishing a global brand in the market. According to the definition above, Brand positioning helps marketers establish a strong brand preference in the market, which will affect the target customers' decision to choose a brand. In the commercial field, brand experts have adopted a variety of positioning strategies to promote goods and services in an excellent way. In addition, these positioning strategies have been applied to enhance organisational performance in the corporate world. Scholars believe that positioning strategies are essential for building brand equity and consumer satisfaction. (Akpoyomare, Adeosun & Ganiyu, 2013; Chelimo, 2012; Edema & Ezute, 2014 & Sanusi, Ajilore & Oloyede, 2014). Akpoyomare, Adeosun and Ganiyu (2013) pointed out that brand experts and marketing experts have adopted six positioning strategies in brand establishment and management. These strategies are features or attributes, product categories or advantages, usage or applications, users or usage, competitors, price and quality.

2.5 Brand positioning strategies

A brand positioning strategy includes building brand associations in the minds of consumers to make them perceive the brand in a particular way. In Competitor-Based Positioning, a firm position directly or against one or several competitors to show its superiority among others offering the same or similar brands in the market. Country Positioning: is a strategy that is used for some products that have similarity with some country of origin. Examples include Nigerian Dunlop tires, French wines, Japanese Auto. Cultural Symbols Positioning consists of the use of cultural symbols to differentiate brands from those of competitors. The aim is to introduce something very significant to the people that other competitors are not associating with. Customer Benefit Positioning is a strategy that involves communicating some unique benefits of a company product or service. The company focus is to highlight the unique benefits that are important in fulfilling the needs and wants of the target customer. The company can decide to use skimming market pricing or market penetration pricing. In skimming pricing, companies use high-price strategies to show that their products and services are of excellent quality, and only high-income consumers or customers can afford them. Other companies use marketing penetration pricing, which involves setting lower prices for goods and services in order to quickly attract a large number of buyers and gain a larger market share. Position by quality, position by size, position by company name, position by color or graphic, position by event, position by personality or celebrity, position by visibility. Companies use high-price strategies to show that their products and services are of superior quality, and only high-income consumers or customers can afford it.

3. METHODS

Copies of the questionnaire were administered to undergraduate students in; Lagos State Polytechnic, University of Lagos and Lagos State University. The copies of questionnaire were distributed and retrieved by the researcher with the help of field assistants, and the researcher was able to observe respondent behaviour while filling the questionnaires which increased the quality of the research work. Personal contact approach was used for both the distribution and retrieval of the questionnaires. The questionnaire took an average of 20-30minutes to fill. The administration of questionnaires took place within the periods where the students were having a break or waiting for their lectures as this was an appropriate time for getting their undivided attention. Table 1.1 shows the allocation of copies of the questionnaire using a simple fraction.

Tab1e 1: Response rate of se1ected tertiary institutions

S/N	Code of Se1ected Institutions	Copies of Questionnaire Distributed	Copies of Comp1eted Questionnaire and va1id	Percentage (%)	Copies of Questionnaire not returned and not va1id	Percentage (%)
1	UNI ‘A’	224	203	40.6	21	4.2
2	UNI ‘B’	137	114	22.8	23	4.6
3	UNI ‘C’	139	118	23.6	21	4.2
	Tota1	500	435	87	65	13

***Note:**
UNI ‘A’ = University of 1agos.
UNI ‘B’ = 1agos State Po1ytechnic.
UNI ‘C’ = 1agos State University.

3.1 Reliability of the research instrument

Reliability is the extent to which the measurements taken with a particular instrument are repeatable (Hair, Bush & Ortinau, 2009). This study adopted the test of internal consistency to check the reliability of the research instrument. This method indicates the overall reliability of the questionnaire. A minimum level of 0.7 is recommended to show that an instrument is internally consistent. According to Stacks (2002), the alpha values between .70 and 1.00 indicate high reliability. Table 2 revealed a high internal consistency and reliability with Cronbach's alpha values higher than the minimum perimeter, thus accepting the internal reliability of the measures used in this study.

Table 2: Constructs reliability

Construct	No of items	Composite Reliability	Decision rule	Remarks
Celebrity endorsement	17	.796	> 0.70	Acceptable
Brand positioning	16	.707	> 0.70	Acceptable
Brand equity enhancement	26	.769	> 0.70	Acceptable
Total	59	.757		

The result in Table 2 indicated that the instrument had an excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach Alpha coefficient at .757. This questionnaire was therefore considered reliable for this study.

3.2 Method of data presentation and analysis

Data collected were carried out using IBM SPSS version 25 software. Multivariate regression analysis via structural and measurement models was applied to test hypothesis. The use of structural modelling helped to explain a statistically significant amount of variance in the dependent variable (DV) after accounting for the influence of the mediating variable. At the same time, the use of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) via Partial Least Square (PLS3.0) was adopted to analyze the entire hypothesis and to model the path coefficients and relationship between the variables.

3.3 Ethical consideration

The researcher ensures that the respondent's views, responses, and opinions are objectively reported. In addition, the researcher ensures that respondents are well informed about the background and purpose of the study. Furthermore, all information provided was used for the purpose of research and treated with anonymity and utmost confidentiality. The respondents were allowed to decline their participation at will at any point without any explanation.

3.4 Test of research hypothesis

The Partial Least Square (PLS) path modelling method was adopted. The PLS path modelling method was developed by Wold (1982). In essence, the PLS algorithm is a sequence of regressions in terms of weight vectors. PLS-SEM are often used on small sample size, because this method does not consider distribution assumptions (Astrachan, Patel, & Wanzenried, 2014; Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011). The coefficient of determination/ r-squared, path coefficient (β value) and T-statistic value, effect size ($f2$), the predictive relevance of the model, and Goodness-of-Fit (GOF) index were the core standards for evaluating the structural model. The structural model is the inner model in structural equation modelling. It measures path coefficients (R2) values and significant values. Boots strapping method finds the significance (Vinzi, Chin, Henseler, & Wang, 2010). The test of hypothesis helps to determine whether there is adequate statistical proof or evidence in favour or against the proposed hypothesis. The hypothesis is stated in a null form while the aim is to either reject or accept a null hypothesis.

H_0: ***There is no significant mediating effect of brand positioning on the relationship between celebrity endorsement and brand equity***

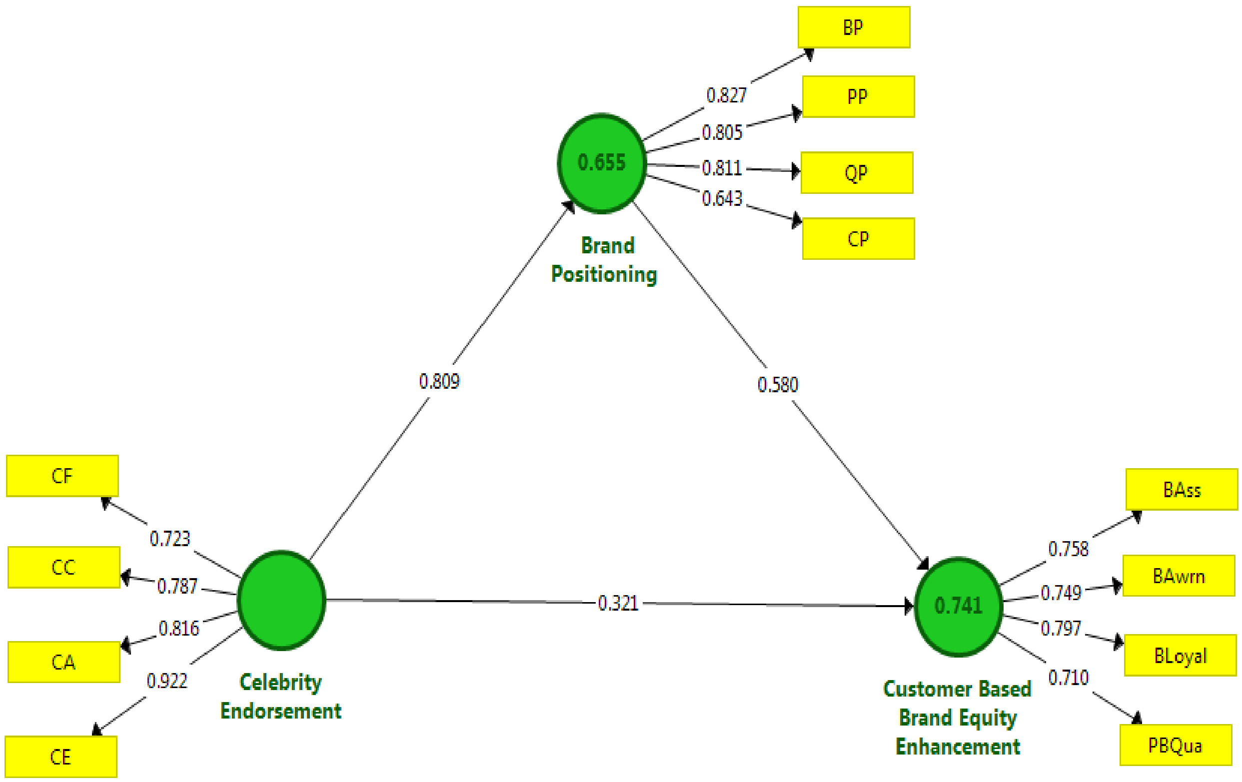

Figure 1 inner model (Path Co-efficient and P-values); Outer Model (Outer Weights/Loadings and T-values)

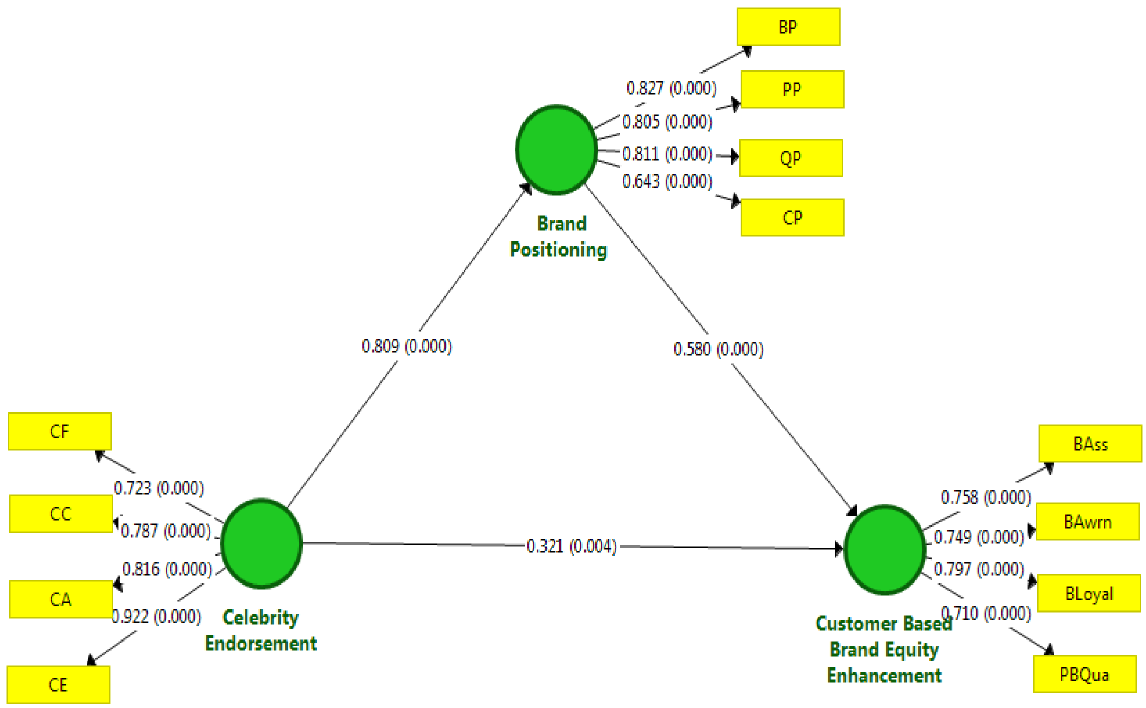

Figure 2: Inner model (Path Co-efficient); Outer Model (Outer Weights/Loadings)

Figure 1.2 reveals that there is significant and strong relationship between celebrity endorsement and brand equity enhancement (β =0. 321, t = 3. 338, p = 0. 004), celebrity endorsement and brand positioning strategy has a strong a significant relationship (β =0. 809, t = 10.836, p = 0. 000); while brand positioning strategy and brand equity enhancement also showed a weak and significant relationship at β r=0.580 (P-value < 0.05). R-Square is the proportion of variance in the dependent variable, which can be predicted from the independent variable. This value indicated that there is a variance of 65.5% between celebrity endorsement and brand positioning strategy. This means that 65.5% variance of a brand positioning strategy is only explained by the degree of celebrity endorsement.

A variance of 74.1% was also observed for celebrity endorsement as a brand positioning strategy for brand equity enhancement in the Nigerian Telecommunication Industry. This means that 74.1% variance of customer-based brand equity enhancement is only explained by the degree of celebrity endorsement and brand positioning strategy. A summary of the path coefficients showing the mediating role of celebrity endorsement on brand positioning and customer-based brand equity enhancement is demonstrated in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3: Path Coefficients for mediating effect of brand positioning on the relationship between celebrity endorsement and brand equity

Variables	Path Co-efficient (O)	Std. Dev. (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/ STDEV	P Values

Celebrity Endorsement → Brand Equity	0.321	0.065	3.338	0.004
Celebrity Endorsement → Positioning Strategy	0.809	0.056	10.836	0.000
Positioning Strategy → Brand Equity	0.580	0.088	6.222	0.000
	R Square (R^2)		R Square Adjusted	(R^2)
Positioning Strategy	0.655		0.637	
Brand Equity	0.741		0.729	

The path coefficient of all constructs indicates significant relationships in the analysis at .05. The model indicated statistically significant path co-efficient; specifically, a significant relationship was found among the variables (celebrity endorsement on brand equity and brand positioning). Hence, all path coefficients were of practical importance since the significance level is below .05. The result also indicated an increase in celebrity endorsement when mediated by brand positioning. From the model, it could be inferred that brand positioning strategy significantly mediate the relationship between celebrity endorsement and brand equity in the Nigerian Telecommunication Industry.

4. Discussion of findings and conclusions

Marketing is not a new idea; celebrity endorsements are marketing goods. And while not all companies adhere to the principle of celebrity endorsement, it is based on relatively basic reasoning. Nevertheless, there are methods to fine-tune the effectiveness of endorsements, which contribute to greater effects. The findings revealed that brand positioning is a very important element for competitive advantage. This result also states that the celebrity's personal credibility is crucial for any brand-celebrity collaboration to be successful. When celebrity endorsements serve as an external signal that helps customers to sift through the enormous brand confusion in the marketplace, the celebrity's popularity factor significantly affects consumer acceptance. The findings also state that the endorsement has a positive effect on an attractive endorser. In certain areas such as physical appearance, intellectual capabilities, athletic competence and lifestyle, the endorser should be appealing to the target audience. It has been demonstrated that an endorser that seems attractive as described above has a greater chance of enhancing the brand's memorability that he/she endorses. This supports the works of (Rockute, Minelgaite, Zailskaite-Jakšte & Damaševicius, 2018).

The result from the hypothesis states that the success of the brand-celebrity relationship depends heavily on the compatibility in terms of branding, personality, market positioning vis-à-vis competition and lifestyle between the brand and the celebrity. Once a brand signs on a celebrity, these are some of the compatibility considerations that need to exist for the brand to exploit the partnership to its fullest. Although companies must adhere to these three major principles, it may be hard to find celebrities that fulfil all these three conditions. Companies may selectively prioritize one factor over the other depending on the nature of the brand and the type of product used.

This seems simple, but in order to demonstrate their effect, endorsements must have a target market similar to that in which the "influencer" has to begin. The key thing to remember by businesses is that celebrity endorsements cannot replace the systematic processes of brand building. When branding grows as a disciplinary business it is important to be extra careful to use any conceivable contact channel rather than just a celebrity endorsement. If all these steps are taken and incorporated in the branding process, then outlets such as celebrity endorsements will provide the cutting edge as they did with Adidas and many others.

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