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Relationships Between Parasocial Relationships, Brand Learning, and Brand Love: Moderated Mediation Effect of Celebrity Endorser Credibility

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ABSTRACT

This study integrates affect transfer, social identity, and source credibility theories to empirically investigate how parasocial relationships with celebrity endorsers shape consumer brand love, focusing on consumer brand learning processes and perceptions of endorser credibility. This study employs the PROCESS macro to test hypotheses, utilizing survey data collected from 519 Chinese consumers in the realm of fashion brands. Our key findings suggest that consumer brand learning positively mediates the link between parasocial relationships and brand love. Furthermore, among the three dimensions of celebrity credibility, trustworthiness and expertise are pivotal in enhancing the positive indirect impact of a parasocial relationship on brand love, whereas the moderated mediating effect of attractiveness on this indirect path is not significant. This study advances the conceptual understanding of how parasocial relationships and endorser credibility jointly shape consumer brand love through cognitive and affective mechanisms, highlighting that dimensions of endorser credibility differ in their influence. The findings also offer practical insights for marketers navigating the complex landscape of celebrity endorsements, consumer learning, and consumer attitudes toward brands.

In the fashion industry, numerous brands compete for consumer attention, and brand love has emerged as a critical factor enabling fashion brands to stand out in a crowded marketplace (Fetscherin and Conway 2011; Vernuccio, Boccalini, and Patrizi 2025; Zhang, Xu, and Gursoy 2020). Amid rapid industry growth and transformation, collaborations between fashion brands and celebrities have emerged as a key strategy for fostering consumer affection and loyalty (Hu, Kim, and Kang 2025). Celebrity endorsement is a widely used marketing strategy, wherein firms invest substantial resources to strengthen brand associations through collaborations with well-known individuals (i.e., influencers) or those with favorable public images (Aw and Labrecque 2020). Growing research has consistently demonstrated that such influencer marketing strategies effectively foster positive brand associations (Jun et al. 2023), consumer emotional attachment to brands (Zhou et al. 2020), brand attitude and trust (Li, Hosain, and Zaman 2026), and social media engagement (Kim and Baek 2025).

Strategically chosen celebrity endorsers have played a critical role in revitalizing brand images and performance in both Western and Eastern markets. For example, McDonald's collaboration with Travis Scott in 2020 leveraged his influence among young consumers to boost sales and

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social media visibility (Wiener-Bronner 2020). Similarly, Burberry's appointment of Emma Watson helped reposition the brand with youthfulness and global appeal, contributing to its revival (Byrne 2023). Diet Coke's partnership with Taylor Swift strengthened the brand's connection with younger female consumers amid competition and health concerns (Coffee 2013). In 2023, Hai Lan Zhi Jia appointed actor Zhang Songwen as its brand endorser, generating widespread consumer interest (Xinhuanet 2023). The Chinese men's fashion brand, primarily associated with middle-aged men's wear, struggled to redefine its image despite prior celebrity endorsements. Following Zhang Songwen's appointment, the brand's net profit increased by 40.14%, compared with the previous year (Sina 2023).

Collectively, these cases illustrate how aligning a brand with an endorser who embodies the desired symbolic and demographic associations can effectively reshape the brand meaning and enhance marketplace performance. In a culturally diverse and rapidly evolving market, selecting a celebrity endorser has become a deliberate and influential decision. In the Chinese market, celebrity endorsement increasingly emphasizes relationship-building rather than mere exposure because interactions between celebrities and consumers are often sustained across interconnected social media ecosystems. For instance, TikTok (Douyin), among the leading short-form video platforms in China, has become a major venue where endorsement advertising is highly active (Yuan et al. 2025). Here endorsers engage audiences through appealing promotional content while fostering trust-based relationships through ongoing interactions—a dynamic shown to positively influence firms' financial performance (Park and Lin 2020).

In this context, the current study moves beyond examining the direct effects of celebrity endorsements on brand evaluation. Instead, it focuses on the underlying mechanisms through which parasocial relationships formed through celebrity endorsements shape consumer brand learning processes—an important cognitive pathway through which these relationships may ultimately translate into brand love.

This study addresses two key gaps in the existing literature. First, although prior research has advanced knowledge of the transformative effects of celebrity endorsers on brands (Jun et al. 2023; Li, Hosain, and Zaman 2026; Zhou et al. 2020), whether and how these strategies lead to substantive changes in consumer learning behaviors remains unclear. With the rise of advanced information retrieval technologies, exploring the nuances of brand-related exploration and learning related to brands is increasingly important.

Many studies have examined the impact of parasocial relationships on brand outcomes, such as brand preference (Liu, Liu, and Zhang 2019), brand affect (Mizukoshi 2024), brand loyalty (Zhong, Shapoval, and Busser 2021), and brand equity (Yuan et al. 2025). However, there remains limited empirical evidence regarding the role of consumer brand learning, which highlights the cognitive processes through which consumers acquire information and develop brand or product expertise (Kim, Kim, and Kurata 2025). This gap limits the comprehensive understanding of consumer–brand dynamics in celebrity endorsement.

Second, understanding how different characteristics of celebrity endorsers shape consumer responses has become an important issue in celebrity endorsement research. In particular, marketers increasingly rely on different dimensions of endorser credibility when strategically selecting celebrity endorsers. Although endorser credibility is largely beyond a firm's direct control, it substantially affects consumer responses, rendering its impact on brand love both theoretically and practically significant (Trivedi and Sama 2021).

Despite this importance, existing research offers limited insights. For example, in the influencer-marketing context, Reinikainen et al. (2020) show that endorser credibility mediates the link between parasocial relationships and brand trust. Similarly, numerous studies have examined how the characteristics of information sources affect parasocial relationships (Tran et al. 2024), as well as how parasocial relationships influence brand attitude through source credibility (Lin et al. 2021). Nevertheless, the specific moderating role of different dimensions of source credibility on the links between parasocial relationships, consumer brand learning, and brand love remains largely unexplored.

Whereas prior research on celebrity endorsement and parasocial relationships has often examined outcomes such as brand attitude and purchase intention, this study focuses on brand love as the focal relational outcome. Brand love reflects a deep and passionate consumer–brand relationship characterized by a strong emotional connection and long-term commitment (Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012). As such, brand love provides an appropriate lens for understanding how parasocial relationships with celebrity endorsers translate into strong and enduring consumer–brand relationships.

Against this background, the present study examines whether and how parasocial relationships with celebrity endorsers influence brand love by incorporating the perspectives of consumer brand learning and celebrity endorser credibility. Considering the abovementioned gaps in knowledge, this study addresses the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do parasocial relationships with celebrity endorsers influence brand love in the fashion industry?

Research Question 2: Through what mechanisms and under what conditions do parasocial relationships translate into brand love, particularly through consumer brand learning and different dimensions of celebrity endorser credibility?

Specifically, employing PROCESS macro with survey data from 519 Chinese fashion consumers, this study advances the literature in two major ways. First, by integrating affect transfer theory and social identity theory, this study clarifies how parasocial relationships with celebrity endorsers influence consumer brand love through consumer cognitive learning process. Accordingly, the study extends affect-based frameworks (Li, Hosain, and Zaman 2026; Zhong, Shapoval, and Busser 2021) by introducing consumer brand learning as a cognitive mechanism (Al-Jundi, Shuhaiber, and Augustine 2019; Kim, Kim, and Kurata 2025; Sun et al. 2022), thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of how parasocial bonds are internalized into brand love.

Second, drawing on source credibility theory, this study examines the moderating role of endorser credibility—trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise—on the relationship between parasocial relationships and consumer brand learning, thereby leading to brand love. Not all dimensions of endorser credibility exert equal influence; only trustworthiness and expertise have significant moderated mediation effects. This study contributes to advancing knowledge on the source credibility literature (Lin et al. 2021; Tran et al. 2024) by underscoring whether and how the strength and direction of these effects differ across credibility dimensions.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. After the theoretical background and conceptual framework are outlined, the research hypotheses are presented and the research methodology, including the sample, data collection procedures, and measures, is described. Then the empirical results are reported, followed by a discussion of the findings, the theoretical and managerial implications, and suggested directions for future research. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key points.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Relationship between parasocial relationship and brand love

A celebrity endorser is defined contemporarily as someone with public recognition (i.e., a celebrity) who collaborates with a brand to promote it (Bergkvist and Zhou 2016; McCracken 1989). Although the domain of parasocial relationships can encompass key opinion leaders, internet celebrities, and brand mascots, celebrity endorsements remain the most structured and widely adopted corporate strategy in this domain. Consequently, prevailing literature on parasocial relationships has consistently underscored the positive impact of these relationships on consumer perceptions and attitudes toward brands (Li, Hosain, and Zaman 2026; Liu, Liu, and Zhang 2019; Mizukoshi 2024; Yuan et al. 2025).

First conceptualized by Horton and Wohl (1956), the term parasocial relationship described a close connection between mass media characters and their audiences. The notion has since evolved to the digital sphere, extending to brands, celebrities, and virtual personas (Labrecque 2014). In this study, following Vickery and Ventrano (2021), a parasocial relationship is defined as a one-sided bond that develops between viewers and a media persona over time. Further, Bi and Zhang (2023) distinguish parasocial relationships—long-term connections formed over time—from parasocial interactions, which arise from single media exposures, and represent more immediate perceptions. However, reviews of prior consumer questionnaires indicate that these terms are often conflated because their measurement items are largely indistinguishable. Accordingly, this study does not distinguish between the terms when citing literature on parasocial interaction and branding; it consistently uses the term parasocial relationship.

An emerging focus in parasocial relationship research entails its link to brand love (Fetscherin and Conway 2011; Li, Hosain, and Zaman 2026; Liu, Liu, and Zhang 2019; Zhang, Xu, and Gursoy 2020). Brand love and brand attachment are closely related but conceptually distinct constructs (Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012). Brand attachment refers to the strength of the emotional bond connecting a consumer with a brand. By contrast, brand love represents a broader and more intense consumer–brand relationship that encompasses several components such as emotional connection, passion-driven behaviors, self–brand integration, and long-term commitment.

Table 1 summarizes key empirical studies examining how parasocial relationships influence consumer attitudes and behaviors toward brands. Most studies report a direct and positive effect of parasocial relationships on brands (Aw and Labrecque 2023; Gong 2021; Mizukoshi 2024), although Lin et al. (2021) found no significant association. Many of these studies have incorporated endorser source credibility as a mediating variable to explain the mechanisms driving these effects (Lin et al. 2021; Reinikainen et al. 2020).

Collectively, this body of research advances understanding of how parasocial relationships shape consumer perceptions and behaviors, providing valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners. However, earlier studies have not examined how the consumer cognitive learning process relates to the link between parasocial relationships and brand love. A further challenge lies in understanding how different dimensions of source credibility influence the consumer cognitive and affective responses that shape brand love when parasocial relationships are evident.

Theories and conceptual framework

By contrast, this study theorizes the moderated mediated effect linking parasocial relationships and brand love (i.e., baseline relationship) through consumer brand learning and source credibility. To this end, we anchor and integrate the affect transfer, social identity, and source credibility theories in the celebrity endorsement context.

First, affect transfer theory posits that favorable affect, such as love, can be transferred from one person or object to another (Biswas, Biswas, and Das 2006). For example, Zhang, Xu, and Gursoy (2020) applied this theory to explain how tourists' parasocial interactions with a destination influence their brand love for that destination. In the present context, the baseline relationship concerns parasocial relationships and brand love, with parasocial relationships representing the one-sided affect of consumers toward a celebrity endorser. Affect transfer theory suggests that this affect can extend from the endorser to the associated brand.

Second, this study integrates social identity theory to elucidate the mediating role of consumer brand learning in the relationship between parasocial relationships and brand love. This theory explains how individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups and how these categorizations shape attitudes, behaviors, and intergroup relations (Kim et al. 2025; Tajfel and Turner 1979). It posits that individuals inherently need to seek a positive and distinct social identity to express their self-concept, often perceiving certain people, objects, or brands as part of their social groups.

Table 1. Empirical research on the relationship between parasocial relationship and brand.

Study	Study context	Theoretical perspective	Parasocial relationship aspects	Explanatory mechanism(s)		Outcome variable	Key findings related to our study
				Mediator(s)	Moderator(s)		
Fetscherin and Conway (2011)	Survey of 180 U.S. consumers on favorite car brands	Interpersonal love theory	Parasocial love	N/T	N/T	Brand love	• Direct effect of parasocial love on brand love (+)
Lee and Watkins (2016)	Survey of total 907 female participants on luxury brands by watching video vlogs[b]	Parasocial interaction theory Social comparison theory	Parasocial interaction	N/T	N/T	Brand value Brand user-imagery fit Brand luxury	• Direct effect of parasocial interaction on brand value (+), brand user-imagery fit (+), and brand luxury (+)
Lee and Lee (2017)	Survey of 314 participants on hotel social media platforms	Parasocial interaction theory Brand community integration model	Parasocial interaction	Self-brand connection	N/T	Brand usage intention	• Direct effect of parasocial interaction on brand usage intention (+) is mediated by self-brand connection (+)
Gong (2021)*	Survey of 452 Sina Weibo users in China on celebrity endorsement	Source credibility model Elaboration likelihood model	Parasocial interaction	Brand credibility	Product involvement	Attitudes toward advertising/ product Purchase intention Retweet intention	• Direct effect of parasocial interaction on attitudes toward advertising(+)/product(ns) is mediated by brand credibility (+)
Liu, Liu, and Zhang (2019)	Survey of 401 Chinese female consumers on video blogging	Balance theory	Parasocial interaction	N/T	N/T	Perceived brand quality Brand affect Brand preference	• Direct effect of parasocial interaction on perceived brand quality (+), brand affect (+), and brand preference (+)
Reinikainen et al. (2020)*	Survey of 302 Snapchat users on audience comments in influencer marketing	N/A	Parasocial relationship	Influencer credibility	N/T	Brand trust	• Direct effect of parasocial relationship on brand trust (+) is mediated by influencer credibility (+)
Zhang, Xu, and Gursoy (2020)	Survey of 225 residents of Guangzhou, China, on destination brand love for Hong Kong	Balance theory Affect transfer theory Social influence theory	Parasocial interaction	N/T	Potential vs. previous visitors	Destination brand love	• Direct effect of parasocial interaction on destination brand love (+) is moderated by status of potential vs. previous visitors (ns)
Zhong, Shapoval, and Busser (2021)	Survey of 209 U.S. Baby Boomer consumers on hospitality brand – consumer relationship on social media	Social exchange theory	Parasocial relationship	Customer engagement	N/T	Brand loyalty	• Direct effect of parasocial relationship on brand loyalty (+) is mediated by customer engagement (+)
Haobin Ye, Fong, and Luo (2021)	Survey of 306 Chinese tourists on social media spokespersons of online travel agents	Social identity theory Social exchange theory Meaning transfer model	Parasocial interaction	N/T	Spokesperson–brand congruence	Brand identification	• Direct effect of parasocial interaction on brand identification (+) is moderated by spokesperson–brand congruence (+)

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

Study	Study context	Theoretical perspective	Parasocial relationship aspects	Explanatory mechanism(s)		Outcome variable	Key findings related to our study
				Mediator(s)	Moderator(s)		
Lin et al. (2021)	Survey of 364 U.S. female university students regarding Instafamous influencers	Source credibility theory	Parasocial interaction	Trustworthiness Expertise Attractiveness	N/T	Brand attitude	• Direct effect of parasocial interaction on brand attitude (ns) is mediated by source trustworthiness (+), expertise (ns), and attractiveness (+)
Yuan et al. (2025)	Survey of 542 social media users in China on Adidas brands' social media service	Signaling theory Social exchange theory	Parasocial relationship	N/T	N/T	(Brand) Value equity Brand equity (Brand) Relationship equity	• Direct effect of parasocial relationship on value equity (+), brand equity (+), and relationship equity (+)
Aw and Labrecque (2023)*	Survey of total 325 undergraduate students on brand transgressions[d]	Parasocial interaction theory Attribution theory	Parasocial relationship	Brand self-congruity	Transgression controllability	(Brand) forgiveness Brand trust:	• Direct effect of parasocial relationship on forgiveness (+) and brand trust (+) is mediated by brand self-congruity (+) and moderated by transgression controllability (ns)
Mizukoshi (2024)	Survey of 1,013 Japanese Twitter users on corporate accounts	N/A	Parasocial relationship	N/T	Corporate account–brand congruency	Brand affect	• Direct effect of parasocial relationship on brand affect (+) is moderated by corporate account–brand congruency (ns)
Li, Hosain, and Zaman (2026)	Survey of 428 respondents on the Chinese food industry	Stimulus-organism-response model	Parasocial relationship	Brand trust	N/T	Brand attitude	• Direct effect of parasocial relationship on brand attitude (+) is mediated by brand trust (+)
The present study	Survey of 519 urban consumers in China on celebrity endorsement of fashion brands	Affect transfer theory Social identity theory Source credibility model	Parasocial relationship	Consumer brand learning	Trustworthiness Expertise Attractiveness	Brand love	• Direct effect of parasocial relationship on brand love (+) is mediated by consumer brand learning (+) and moderated by trustworthiness (+), expertise (+), and attractiveness (ns)

Note. N/A = not applicable; N/T = not tested; ns = nonsignificant relationship; (+) = significant and positive relationship.
*The method of designing a survey experiment is employed.
[a]Although Study 1 for the survey used 185 responses, Studies 2 and 3 with experimental designs used 66 and 129 responses, respectively.
[b]Studies 1, 2, and 3 used 396, 88, and 423 responses, respectively.
[c]Customer equity drivers represent three dimensions of brand value equity; brand equity; brand relationship equity.
[d]Study 1 used 195 responses from Malaysia, and Study 2 used 130 responses from the United States.

Applying this perspective, Haobin Ye, Fong, and Luo (2021) demonstrated that consumers use parasocial interactions with spokespersons and brands as tools to express their social identity and reinforce identification. This implies that consumers, motivated to enhance their social identity, actively seek to understand and engage with members of their perceived social group. In the current research, we postulate that consumers perceive celebrity endorsers, together with the endorsed brand and products, as part of their social group. Because consumer learning involves proactive and self-directed behaviors aimed at satisfying personal needs and strengthening brand or product connections (Al-Jundi, Shuhaiber, and Augustine 2019; Kim, Kim, and Kurata 2025; Sun et al. 2022), individuals with parasocial relationships are more likely to engage in learning activities related to the endorsed brand.

Third, source credibility theory highlights endorser traits that shape the perceived credibility of their messages (Ohanian 1990). In her seminal work, Ohanian (1990) developed and validated a three-dimensional scale of celebrity credibility—trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness—widely used to examine endorsement outcomes. These dimensions have been shown to influence endorsement effectiveness (Ladhari, Massa, and Skandrani 2020), parasocial interaction (Zhang, Xu, and Gursoy 2020), and brand evaluations (Zhou et al. 2020). Accordingly, the present study applies source credibility theory to investigate which dimensions of celebrity credibility most effectively drive consumer brand love, thereby offering actionable insights for strategic endorsement decisions. By examining the relative influence of each dimension, this study seeks a more nuanced understanding of the complex mechanisms that underlie the dynamics between celebrity endorsements, source credibility, and consumer – brand relationships.

Importantly, the moderating role of source credibility is theorized only on the path from parasocial relationships to consumer brand learning, not on the direct affective links to brand love. From a social identity theory perspective, consumer identification with a celebrity endorser encourages consumers to internalize and process brand-related information derived from the relationship. In this cognitive stage, we anticipate that the endorser's perceived credibility (i.e., trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness) shapes the depth and quality of consumer learning engagement. However, once brand love is formed, its strength is more likely to be driven by processes such as consumer identification and affect transfer rather than by variations in perceived endorser credibility. Accordingly, in the current research, source credibility is conceptualized as a moderator of the parasocial relationship–brand learning link, reflecting its central role in facilitating the cognitive internalization process, rather than in altering affective outcomes.

In summary, our conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 integrates these theoretical perspectives, emphasizing two central propositions: (1) consumer brand learning mediates the link between parasocial relationships with celebrity endorsers and brand love; and (2) specific dimensions of source credibility moderate the indirect effect of consumer brand learning in the realm of celebrity endorsement promotional strategies. Grounded in affect transfer, social identity, and source credibility theories, the framework offers a structured foundation for exploring the mechanisms through which celebrity endorsements shape consumer–brand relationships.

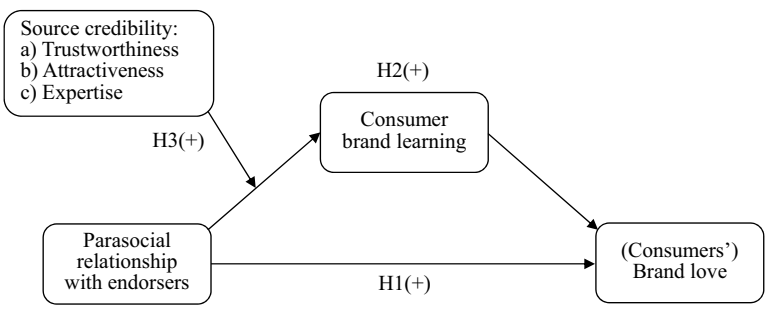


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Hypotheses development

Direct effect of parasocial relationship on brand love

Prior research has consistently demonstrated a positive association between parasocial relationships and brand love, particularly in the context of celebrity endorsement (Table 1). Within such relationships, factors including the consumer's perceived connectedness to a brand (Lee and Lee 2017) and endorser credibility as an information source (Lin et al. 2021; Reinikainen et al. 2020) have been shown to enhance the willingness to use the brand, strengthen brand trust, and foster favorable brand attitudes.

Building on this evidence, prior studies (Aw and Labrecque 2023; Li, Hosain, and Zaman 2026; Zhong, Shapoval, and Busser 2021) affirm that parasocial relationships exert a direct positive influence on brand-related outcomes. Accordingly, this study conceptualizes the relationship between consumer parasocial ties with celebrity endorsers and brand love as a critical link. Affect transfer theory provides a theoretical basis for understanding how such relationships develop, positing that emotions elicited by one object can be transferred to another closely associated entity, even if the latter evokes little or no affect independently (Huddy and Gunnthorsdottir 2000). In consumer contexts, this phenomenon elucidates how individuals' preexisting affect—encompassing mood, emotion, and feelings—toward one object (i.e., a parasocial bond with an endorser) is transferred to another closely associated entity (i.e., brand) (Shimp 1981).

This study considers celebrity endorsers as affect-triggering objects that evoke strong emotional connections. Through affect transfer, these emotions are conveyed to the endorsed brand, which functions as the closely related object. Thus, enduring parasocial bonds with endorsers are expected to foster strong affective connections with the endorsed brand, ultimately leading to brand love. Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Parasocial relationships with celebrity endorsers positively influence consumer brand love.

Indirect effect of parasocial relationship

The learning process, often described as vicarious innovativeness, involves acquiring information about new products (Hirschman 1980). Consumers engage in this process through various channels such as advertising, word of mouth, the internet, and social media, which collectively shape their understanding of innovations. Consumer learning broadly includes the acquisition of knowledge and experiences that influence decision-making, spanning from product exploration and purchase to consumption and future repurchase (Al-Jundi, Shuhaiber, and Augustine 2019; Kim, Kim, and Kurata 2025; Sun et al. 2022). In the current study, consumer brand learning is defined as the dynamic acquisition of knowledge, attitudes, and associations related to a brand endorsed by a celebrity.

To clarify the mediating role of consumer brand learning in the relationship depicted in Hypothesis 1, this study draws on social identity theory, explaining that individuals seek to build and sustain a positive self-concept through their group affiliations (Kim et al. 2025; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Specifically, we believe that celebrity endorsement of a brand can symbolically represent it as a social group (Arora et al. 2021). In this context, consumers may identify with the brand not only for its products but also as part of a broader social category associated with the celebrity's persona, values, and lifestyle (Park and Yim 2020). As Schmidt and Spreng (1996) noted, consumers with strong parasocial relationships are more likely to engage in brand learning, driven by a strong motivation to explore and understand the brand. Moreover, greater brand knowledge enables consumers to recognize subtle distinctions between brands and products (Marques et al. 2020). Consequently, consumers who gain knowledge through brand learning are better equipped to make informed brand choices and are more inclined to align themselves with brands that reflect their values and preferences.

Importantly, consumer learning encompasses not only factual knowledge but also experiential and emotional dimensions. Within the framework of social identity theory, learning becomes a mechanism through which consumers reinforce their social identity, thereby cultivating a deeper and more enduring emotional bond with the endorsed brand (Park and Yim 2020). Accordingly, consumers not only gain insight into brand attributes but also develop stronger brand attitudes (Liu et al. 2020), greater involvement, resilience to negative information (Elsharnouby et al. 2021), and ultimately a more comprehensive connection to the brand. Consequently, consumers with stronger parasocial relationships are more likely to engage in brand learning, which in turn strengthens their emotional connection with the brand and, ultimately, enhances brand love.

In summary, consumer brand learning serves as the mediating mechanism through which parasocial relationships with celebrity endorsers translate into brand love. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2: Consumer brand learning positively mediates the positive direct impact of parasocial relationships with celebrity endorsers on brand love.

Moderated mediation effect of source credibility

This study extends the indirect effect proposed in Hypothesis 2 by examining the moderating role of celebrity endorsers' source credibility in the relationship between parasocial relationships and consumer brand learning. Source credibility is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise (Hu, Kim, and Kang 2025; McCracken 1989; Ohanian 1990). Specifically, trustworthiness refers to the perceived honesty and credibility of a source; attractiveness to its familiarity and likability; and expertise to its perceived knowledge and competence vis-à-vis the subject matter. According to source credibility theory, although these dimensions are interrelated, each uniquely shapes consumer perceptions of an endorser, influencing their cognitive and emotional connection with the endorsed brand (Gong 2021; Hu, Kim, and Kang 2025; Lin et al. 2021).

Applying these insights, we argue that endorser credibility is pivotal in determining how effectively parasocial relationships translate into consumer brand learning and, ultimately, brand love. Among its key dimensions, trustworthiness represents the perceived honesty and integrity of a celebrity, which significantly shapes consumer perceptions and attitudes (Punjani and Kumar 2021; Tran et al. 2024). When an endorser is viewed as highly trustworthy, consumers tend to regard the information shared through parasocial interactions as reliable and authentic, enhancing brand-related learning and ultimately strengthening brand love.

Similarly, attractiveness is an important dimension of endorser credibility that influences consumer affective and cognitive responses. Prior research has shown that attractive endorsers elicit more favorable evaluations of advertisements and brand messages (Munnukka, Uusitalo, and Toivonen 2016). When consumers perceive an endorser as physically or symbolically attractive, parasocial relationships generate stronger emotional resonance, which heightens consumer receptivity to brand information. This heightened affective engagement facilitates greater brand learning, which in turn nurtures brand love.

Finally, expertise captures the perceived competence and knowledge of the endorser, enhancing both message credibility and persuasive impact (Calvo-Porral, Rivaroli, and Orosa-González 2021; Kim and Baek 2025). Endorsers perceived as highly knowledgeable provide informational cues that strengthen consumer cognitive processing of brand messages. Consequently, parasocial relationships with such endorsers are more likely to promote active brand learning, which in turn strengthens consumer affective connection with the brand and ultimately enhances brand love.

Our arguments are largely consistent with insights from previous studies. For example, studies have linked source credibility with parasocial relationships (Chung and Cho 2017; Gong and Li 2017), showing its impact on product-related decision-making within the cognitive processing of endorsements. Similarly, Lee and Kim (2020) found that brand credibility strengthens positive

perceptions of brand messages by consumers and their willingness to engage in voluntary promotion in online settings. Consequently, the present study proposes that higher levels of endorser trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise amplify the positive indirect effect of parasocial relationships on brand love, depicted in Hypothesis 2, while strengthening the link of parasocial relationships to consumer brand learning. Thus, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 3: Trustworthiness (a), attractiveness (b), and expertise of the celebrity endorser (c) strengthen the positive direct impact of parasocial relationships with celebrity endorsers on consumer brand learning, leading to brand love.

Methodology

Data collection and sample

This study investigated Chinese consumers and their engagement with celebrity endorsement behaviors in the realm of fashion brands. China was selected as the research context because it represents one of the world's largest fashion markets where celebrity endorsement plays a prominent role in shaping consumer perceptions and brand evaluations (Hung, Chan, and Tse 2011). In such a context, consumers are more likely to develop parasocial relationships with celebrities, making China an appropriate setting for examining the effects of celebrity endorsement on brand-related outcomes.

To ensure that respondents had a distinct impression and memory of celebrity endorser advertisements, this study defined fashion products clearly prior to questionnaire administration. Several examples of fashion brand endorsers in the Chinese market were presented as specific illustrations: for example, Louis Vuitton endorsed by Liu Yifei and Gu Ailing, Shiseido endorsed by Liu Yifei, and Hailanzhijia endorsed by Lin Gengxin and Zhang Songwen.

To capture changes in consumer cognition and behavior toward fashion brands based on celebrity endorser advertisements, participants were prompted to recall their past behaviors and feelings toward typical fashion brands. It was emphasized that fashion brands encompassed both high-end labels and affordable clothing, luggage, and cosmetics brands. These products are extensively integrated into the daily lives of Chinese consumers, and celebrity endorsement is widely employed as a crucial marketing strategy by these brands.

To initiate the questionnaire, participants were first asked a screening question: "Do you have a favorite or most impressive celebrity endorser in mind?" Only those who answered "Yes" proceeded to the subsequent sections of the survey. These respondents were then instructed to recall and describe their favorite or most impressive celebrity endorser in detail. This screening procedure was implemented to ensure that the survey focused on individuals with a clearly identifiable celebrity endorser, enhancing the reliability, validity, and contextual relevance of the collected data.

The data for this study were gathered through an online consumer panel facilitated by Changsha Ranxing IT, Ltd., known for its reliability in China. A quota sampling technique was employed to enhance sample representativeness in terms of age and gender (Kim, Kim, and Kurata 2025). In total, 519 valid responses were collected from Chinese consumers. Table 2 summarizes the sample demographics.

Measurement

Table 3 outlines the scale employed in this study. Six constructs, assessed on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*), are multi-item and reflective constructs.

First, following Sun and Wu (2012), this study measured parasocial relationships using a set of five items. This construct aims to capture the degree to which respondents form a one-sided connection with a celebrity endorser. Second, based on Al-Jundi, Shuhaiber, and Augustine (2019), consumer brand learning was assessed through a series of five items. This construct seeks to gauge the extent to which individuals acquire knowledge, attitudes, and associations

Table 2. Sample profile ($n = 519$).

Characteristic		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	259	49.9
	Female	260	50.1
Age, years	< 20	100	19.3
	20–29	105	20.2
	30–39	109	21.0
	40–49	105	20.2
	≥ 50	100	19.3
Educational background	High school or less	51	9.7
	University	421	81.1
	Postgraduate or above	47	9.1
Annual income, yuan	< 20,000	67	12.9
	20,001–37,000	75	14.5
	37,001–50,000	87	16.8
	≥ 5,0001	290	55.9
Region	Beijing	128	24.7
	Shanghai	129	24.9
	Guangzhou	130	25.0
	Shenzhen	132	25.4

Table 3. Constructs and measurement assessment.

	Estimate[a]	CR	AVE
Parasocial relationship *(Cronbach's α = 0.81)*		0.84	0.52
I think the celebrity endorser is like an old friend.	0.69		
The celebrity endorser keeps me company when watching him/her in a show/movie/drama.	0.66		
I like hearing the voice of the celebrity endorser.	0.63		
I like to compare my ideas with what the celebrity endorser says.	0.71		
I miss seeing the celebrity endorser when he/she does not have a show/movie/drama on.	0.71		
Consumer brand Learning *(Cronbach's α = 0.80)*		0.86	0.54
I frequently learn beneficial information about the brand endorsed by the celebrity from various sources (e.g., the internet or social networking)	0.67		
If I heard about the brand endorsed by the celebrity, I would like to know the details about it.	0.63		
I enjoy searching for information about the brand endorsed by the celebrity.	0.68		
I am more actively learning on the brand endorsed by the celebrity compared to my peers.	0.68		
I spend more time learning the brand endorsed by the celebrity than my peers.	0.71		
Brand love *(Cronbach's α = 0.73)*		0.86	0.54
I am very passionate about the brand that is endorsed by the celebrity.	0.64		
I am very attached to the brand that is endorsed by the celebrity.	0.61		
The brand endorsed by the celebrity is awesome.	0.62		
I love the brand endorsed by the celebrity.	0.69		
Trustworthiness of endorser *(Cronbach's α = 0.78)*		0.85	0.54
He/she is dependable.	0.68		
He/she is honest.	0.67		
He/she is reliable.	0.69		
He/she is sincere.	0.53		
He/she is trustworthy.	0.64		
Attractiveness of endorser *(Cronbach's α = 0.70)*		0.82	0.54
He/she is attractive.	0.63		
He/she is classy.	0.63		
He/she is elegant.	0.54		
He/she is sexy.	0.63		
Expertise of endorser *(Cronbach's α = 0.76)*		0.83	0.50
He/she is an expert.	0.69		
He/she is experienced.	0.58		
He/she is knowledgeable.	0.58		
He/she is qualified.	0.62		
He/she is skilled.	0.63		

Note. AVE = average variance extracted; CR = composite reliability.
[a]Standardized factor loading.

related to the endorsed brand through various experiences and interactions. Third, following Trivedi and Sama (2021), brand love was measured using four items. This construct aims to capture the emotional connection and affection that consumers develop toward the endorsed brand. Fourth, celebrity endorsers' credibility, encompassing trustworthiness with five items, expertise with five items, and attractiveness with four items, was assessed based on Ohanian (1990); each aspect of credibility captured the perceived reliability, competence, and attractiveness of the celebrity endorser, respectively.

Finally, gender and age were controlled for as covariates in our analysis. Specifically, we coded gender as 1 for men and 0 for women, and used actual age as a measure of age. By doing so, we aimed to control for potential response variations due to differences in age and gender and to ensure that our study results are not biased and can be generalized to the population.

All measurement items were adapted from previously validated English-language scales and slightly modified to fit this study context. The original items were translated into Chinese following a careful translation procedure. To ensure translation accuracy and clarity, two Chinese graduate students with a high level of English proficiency compared the English and Chinese versions of the questionnaire and evaluated whether the translated items accurately reflected the intended meanings. Additionally, a pilot check was conducted in which the graduate students completed the questionnaire and provided feedback on wording clarity and potential misunderstandings. Based on their feedback, minor wording adjustments were made to ensure that the items were clear and appropriate for Chinese respondents.

Common method bias

To mitigate the potential impact of common method bias, we employed the marker variable approach (Lindell and Whitney 2001). Specifically, we chose an item from a theoretically unrelated scale, "The dignified image of the celebrity will be lower", as a response to the following question: "How do you feel about your most impressive celebrity endorser advertising or promoting other companies' goods or brands simultaneously?" ($M = 2.39$, SD = 1.14) with correlations of $|r| < 0.26$. Our analysis revealed that the observed and adjusted correlations had negligible differences ($\Delta|r| = 0.01$–0.03), indicating that common method bias did not significantly influence our results.

Analysis and results

Construct validity

To evaluate construct validity (Fornell and Larcker 1981; Kim et al. 2025), we performed confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS 29, which indicated a satisfactory fit of the measurement model to the data (χ^2 (335) = 567.40, $p < 0.001$, CMIN/DF = 1.69, IFI = 0.95, CFI = 0.95, GFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.04). Regarding convergent validity, both average variance extracted (AVE) values (0.50 to 0.54) and composite reliability (CR) values (0.82 to 0.86) exceeded the respective thresholds of 0.50 and 0.60, confirming robust convergent validity (Table 3). Additionally, this study confirmed that all AVE values for each pair of constructs surpassed their shared variance (r^2) between constructs (0.19 to 0.49) in Table 4, alleviating concerns about discriminant validity.

Hypothesis testing

Utilizing Hayes (2018) PROCESS macro, this study employed a moderated mediation approach (Models 4 and 7) to evaluate the proposed hypotheses. Table 5 presents the summarized outcomes (see Appendix Table A1 for further details).

Table 4. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix.

Constructs	Mean	SD	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6	X7	X8
X1 Parasocial relationship	3.83	0.68	**0.72**	*0.38*	*0.40*	*0.23*	*0.42*	*0.26*	*0.01*	*0.01*
X2 Consumer brand learning	3.93	0.63	0.62*	**0.74**	*0.49*	*0.22*	*0.27*	*0.19*	*0.00*	*0.00*
X3 Brand love	4.01	0.61	0.63*	0.70*	**0.71**	*0.23*	*0.36*	*0.25*	*0.02*	*0.00*
X4 Expertise	4.02	0.57	0.48*	0.47*	0.48*	**0.70**	*0.31*	*0.23*	*0.00*	*0.00*
X5 Trustworthiness	4.11	0.57	0.65*	0.52*	0.60*	0.56*	**0.73**	*0.23*	*0.01*	*0.01*
X6 Attractiveness	4.19	0.51	0.51*	0.43*	0.50*	0.48*	0.48*	**0.74**	*0.00*	*0.00*
X7 Age	33.68	11.30	0.10*	0.04	0.13*	0.07	0.09	0.03	—	*0.01*
X8 Gender[a]	0.50	0.50	0.08	0.02	−0.01	0.00	0.09*	−0.05	−0.09*	—

Note. In the matrix, the lower values represent the correlation coefficients between constructs, and the upper values, shown in italics, denote the squared correlation coefficients. The bold values along the diagonal of the matrix indicate the square roots of the AVE values.
*$p < 0.05$.
[a]Dummy variable.

Table 5. Hypothesis testing results.

	Mediation analysis (Model 4)			Moderated mediation analysis (Model 7)								
				Trustworthiness (a)			Attractiveness (b)			Expertise (c)		
		95% CI			95% CI			95% CI			95% CI	
IVs, DVs, Hypotheses	b	Lower	Upper	b	Lower	Upper	b	Lower	Upper	b	Lower	Upper
Regression model 1 (DV = BL)												
Hypothesis 1. PSR	0.286***	0.220	0.352	0.286***	0.220	0.352	0.286***	0.220	0.352	0.286***	0.220	0.352
CBL	0.494***	0.423	0.352	0.494***	0.423	0.352	0.494***	0.423	0.352	0.494***	0.423	0.352
Age	0.004*	0.001	0.007	0.004*	0.001	0.007	0.004*	0.001	0.007	0.004*	0.001	0.007
Gender	−0.048	−0.119	0.023	−0.048	−0.119	0.023	−0.048	−0.119	0.023	−0.048	−0.119	0.023
R^2	0.563***	—	—	0.563***	—	—	0.563***	—	—	0.750***	—	—
Regression model 2 (DV = CBL)												
PSR	0.568***	0.505	0.631	0.465***	0.384	0.546	0.506***	0.431	0.580	0.478***	0.409	0.548
TRU	—	—	—	0.279***	0.182	0.377	—	—	—	—	—	—
ATT	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.223***	0.124	0.323	—	—	—
EXP	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.267***	0.183	0.350
PSR × TRU	—	—	—	0.180**	0.068	0.291	—	—	—	—	—	—
PSR × ATT	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.104	−0.015	0.223	—	—	—
PSR × EXP	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.140*	0.019	0.3261
Age	−0.001	−0.005	0.003	−0.002	−0.006	0.002	−0.001	−0.005	0.003	−0.001	−0.005	0.002
Gender	−0.044	−0.121	0.051	−0.046	−0.129	0.038	−0.018	−0.103	0.068	−0.027	−0.110	0.056
R^2	0.379***	—	—	0.419***	—	—	0.402***	—	—	0.425***	—	—
Indirect effect of IV on DV												
Hypothesis 2. PSR → CBL→ BL	0.280	0.216	0.351	0.230	0.159	0.313	0.250	0.187	0.324	0.236	0.173	0.308
Moderated mediation effect												
Hypothesis 3. Index of moderated mediation	—	—	—	0.089	0.024	0.159	0.052	−0.020	0.129	0.069	0.008	0.140

Note. 95% CI = lower/upper limit of 95% percentile bootstrap confidence interval with a dataset of 5,000; ATT = attractiveness; b = unstandardized coefficients; BL = brand love; CBL = consumer brand learning; DV = dependent variable; EXP = expertise; IV = independent variables; PSR = parasocial relationship; TRU = trustworthiness.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, and ***$p < 0.001$.

First, regarding a direct effect in Hypothesis 1 and indirect effect in Hypothesis 2, the outcomes of Model 4 (IV = parasocial relationship, mediator = consumer brand learning, DV = brand love) indicated that parasocial relationship with a celebrity endorser significantly increases brand love (Hypothesis 1: $b = 0.286$, SE = 0.034, t value = 8.514, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting Hypothesis 1. Additionally, as anticipated, Model 4 results confirmed a significant positive indirect effect

of parasocial relationships with celebrity endorsers on brand love through consumer brand learning (Hypothesis 2: $b = 0.280$, SE = 0.035, 95% CI = [0.215, 0.352]), supporting Hypothesis 2.

Second, to examine Hypothesis 3, suggesting that source credibility—trustworthiness (a), attractiveness (b), and expertise (c)—of the celebrity endorser strengthens the positive indirect effect of parasocial relationships with the celebrity endorsers on brand love via consumer brand learning, a moderation mediation analysis model was employed using Model 7. The results revealed a significant and positive moderated mediation effect of trustworthiness (Hypothesis 3a: $b = 0.089$, SE = 0.039, 95% CI = [0.024, 0.158]) and expertise (Hypothesis 3c: $b = 0.069$, SE = 0.035, 95% CI = [0.008, 0.140]). However, the findings did not reveal a significant moderated mediation effect involving the attractiveness component of celebrity endorsers' credibility (Hypothesis 3b: $b = 0.052$, SE = 0.034, 95% CI = [−0.020, 0.129]). Overall, Hypothesis 3a and Hypothesis 3c were supported, whereas Hypothesis 3b was not supported.

Post hoc analysis

The direct effect of age on brand love was significant ($b = 0.004$, SE = 0.002, t value = 2.521, $p = 0.012$). Age and gender were included as basic demographic controls because they may influence evaluations of celebrity endorsers and emotional attachment to brands. Consistent with methodological recommendations that control variables should be theoretically justified (Bernerth and Aguinis 2016), other demographic variables were not included in the main model. We also conducted robustness checks including additional demographic variables (i.e., education, income), and the results of our main findings remained substantively unchanged.

Additionally, we conducted simple slope analysis to plot the interaction effect between parasocial relationships and source credibility in predicting consumer brand learning (Aiken and West 1991). Figure 2 illustrates that, whereas the effect of parasocial relationship on consumer brand learning becomes stronger when trustworthiness ($b_{_high\ trustworthiness} = 0.568$, t value =10.400, $p < 0.001$ vs. $b_{_low\ trustworthiness} = 0.362$, t value = 6.626, $p < 0.001$) and expertise ($b_{_high\ expertise} = 0.558$, t value =11.642, $p < 0.001$ vs. $b_{_low\ expertise} = 0.398$, t value = 8.316, $p < 0.001$) are present, attractiveness has a nonsignificant moderating effect ($b_{_high\ attractiveness} = 0.559$, t value =10.087 $p < 0.001$ vs. $b_{_low\ attractiveness} = 0.453$, t value = 14.140, $p < 0.001$).

Discussion and implications

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the literature in two main ways. First, it advances theoretical understanding by identifying consumer brand learning as a critical cognitive mechanism explaining how parasocial relationships translate into emotional engagement with brands, conceptualized as brand love. Whereas prior studies have primarily examined direct affective pathways between parasocial relationships and brand love (Li, Hosain, and Zaman 2026; Liu, Liu, and Zhang 2019), limited attention has been paid to how consumers cognitively process and internalize brand- or product-related information through learning (Al-Jundi, Shuhaiber, and Augustine 2019; Kim, Kim, and Kurata 2025; Sun et al. 2022). Although Sun et al. (2022) emphasized the learning desire of consumers as a predictor of satisfaction, empirical evidence regarding the mediating role of brand learning within parasocial contexts has remained absent.

By integrating social identity theory with affect transfer theory, this study provides the first empirical validation of consumer brand learning as a mediating mechanism that links parasocial relationships with celebrity endorsers to brand love. Our findings are important because this theoretical refinement surpasses emotion-based explanations and underscores the interplay between cognitive processing and affective outcomes in consumer–brand relationships. Consequently, it broadens the conceptual foundation of parasocial relationship research and

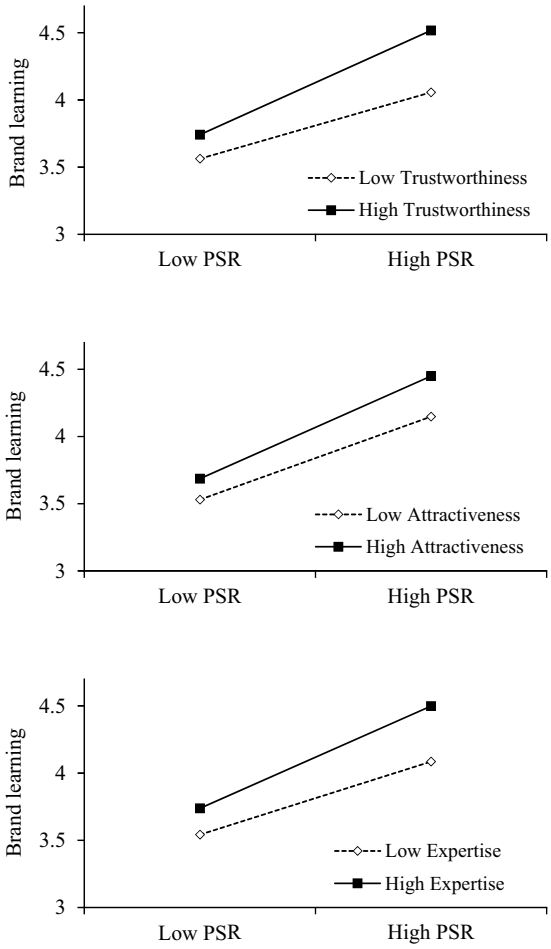


Figure 2. Two-way interaction.
Note. PSR = parasocial relationship. This figure shows the simple slopes of parasocial relationship on brand learning at ±1 SD (i.e., high vs. low) from the mean of trustworthiness (a), attractiveness (b), and expertise (c).

opens new avenues for exploring the role of consumer learning in diverse affective decision-making contexts.

Second, this study contributes to theory by uncovering the differential moderating roles of the three dimensions of endorser credibility—trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise—in the relationship between parasocial interactions and brand love through consumer brand learning. Although previous research has predominantly conceptualized source credibility as a mediator linking parasocial relationships to brand-related outcomes (Lin et al. 2021; Reinikainen et al. 2020), this study advances the literature by introducing a moderating perspective, demonstrating that credibility dimensions can amplify or attenuate the cognitive and affective pathways that connect consumers to brands.

We highlight that trustworthiness and expertise significantly strengthen the indirect effect of parasocial relationships on brand love via brand learning, underscoring the importance of consumer perceived reliability and competence of celebrity endorsers in facilitating deeper brand understanding and emotional bonding. By contrast, attractiveness—despite its prominence in celebrity image—does not significantly enhance this indirect effect, aligning with prior evidence that sports stars' attractiveness has limited impact on brand love (Zhou et al. 2020). Non-attractive individuals are unlikely to be selected as endorsers, and brand learning—such as actively

searching for and processing brand-related information—is often time-consuming and effortful. Therefore, our findings regarding attractiveness suggest that, although celebrities' physical appeal may attract initial attention from consumers, it may lack the cognitive depth necessary to facilitate brand learning that ultimately leads to brand love.

Overall, by shifting the theoretical lens from mediation to moderation, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how distinct credibility dimensions interact with parasocial mechanisms in predicting the consumer learning process of cognitive pathways that connect consumers to brands. This contribution enriches the conceptual framework of celebrity endorsement research, inviting future studies to explore these dynamics of credibility dimensions across diverse cultural and product contexts.

Managerial implications

Our findings provide several actionable insights for brand and marketing managers operating in highly competitive and media-saturated markets.

First, managers should strategically cultivate parasocial relationships between consumers and celebrity endorsers as a foundation for building brand love. Rather than relying solely on exposure frequency, firms should design consistent and authentic touchpoints that allow consumers to develop emotional bonds with endorsers, such as behind-the-scenes content, live interviews, and interactive social media events. These initiatives transform celebrity endorsements from one-way promotional messages into ongoing relational experiences. In markets such as China, where fandom culture and media engagement are deeply embedded in everyday consumption, investing in structured platforms that facilitate parasocial interaction can strengthen long-term consumer–brand relationships.

Second, firms should encourage active consumer brand learning, which functions as the cognitive bridge linking parasocial interaction to brand love. When consumers develop parasocial relationships with endorsers, they often seek additional brand-related information through the content shared by those endorsers. Thus, beyond simple information dissemination, managers should design participatory and exploratory content that allows consumers to learn about the brand from the endorser's perspective.

For example, endorsers can create product walkthrough videos explaining how and why they use the brand, behind-the-scenes storytelling that introduces the brand's philosophy or production process, or interactive livestream sessions where audiences ask questions and explore product features in real time. Such formats encourage consumers to actively process brand-related information rather than passively receive it, thereby facilitating deeper brand learning. This learning process represents the key mechanism through which parasocial interactions with endorsers translate into stronger brand love.

Third, the findings indicate that not all dimensions of endorser credibility exert equal influence, highlighting the importance of boundary conditions in the endorsement process. Managers should prioritize trustworthiness and expertise when selecting celebrity endorsers rather than relying primarily on attractiveness. Specifically, trustworthiness and expertise strengthen the effectiveness of the parasocial relationship–brand learning mechanism identified in this study, thereby facilitating the development of brand love.

Whereas attractiveness may draw initial attention, trustworthiness and expertise enhance the credibility of brand-related information and stimulate consumer learning. Endorsers perceived as reliable and knowledgeable increase confidence in brand messages and contribute to stronger consumer–brand relationships. This insight is particularly relevant in competitive markets such as China's fashion industry, where celebrity endorsement has become a dominant branding strategy and strongly shapes consumer perceptions and brand evaluations (Hung, Chan, and Tse 2011).

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that suggest promising avenues for future research. First, the analysis focused on the affective construct of brand love rather than concrete behavioral outcomes such as actual purchase or recommendation behavior. Whereas this focus allowed for a deeper understanding of consumer affective relationships with brands, future studies could extend this framework by linking brand love to behavioral indicators to capture a more holistic view of consumer–brand relationships.

Second, this study examined only the moderating effects of source credibility dimensions in parasocial relationships. Although this approach provided meaningful insights into the emotional mechanisms of celebrity endorsement, future studies should incorporate additional contextual or relational variables that may refine this understanding. Factors such as brand engagement (Zhong, Shapoval, and Busser 2021), knowledge (Elsharnouby et al. 2021) and personality congruency (Arora et al. 2021) between the endorser and brand, and audience demographics could serve as valuable moderators, enabling marketers to make more informed and context-sensitive endorsement decisions.

Third, the measurement of consumer brand learning was based on adapted scales from prior research on innovative consumer behavior (Al-Jundi, Shuhaiber, and Augustine 2019). Future research could develop a more targeted and multidimensional measure that captures learning specific to brand-related contexts, especially incorporating digital learning behaviors such as online search, social media exploration, and user-generated content interaction.

Fourth, although the theoretical framework integrates affect transfer, social identity, and source credibility theories, the empirical model operationalized only the cognitive mechanism of consumer brand learning as a mediator. The affective mechanism implied by affect transfer was not measured directly. Consequently, the current study captures how parasocial relationships translate into brand love primarily through cognitive processing, but it does not empirically clarify whether affective responses precede, coexist with, or interact with these cognitive processes. Future research should incorporate explicit affective mediators, such as emotional contagion, affective trust, or perceived warmth, to clarify how affective and cognitive mechanisms operate independently, sequentially, or jointly within the endorsement effect process.

Fifth, the moderated mediation analysis showed that among the three dimensions of celebrity credibility, only trustworthiness and expertise strengthened the indirect effect of parasocial relationships on brand love. The nonsignificant moderating role of attractiveness suggests that the underlying process revealed through moderation is more cognitive than affective in nature. This pattern raises questions about the current practice of collaborating with attractive celebrities or influencers with favorable public images (Aw and Labrecque 2020). Future studies could more explicitly examine the relative contribution of affect transfer (direct emotional influence) versus cognitive learning in shaping brand love.

Finally, this study's empirical setting was confined to the Chinese fashion market. Given the cultural variability in celebrity–consumer relationships, future research should adopt a cross-cultural comparative design to examine the generalizability of these findings across different markets. Considering the potential divergence between Eastern and Western endorsement dynamics (Hu, Kim, and Kang 2025), examining how trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness operate in diverse cultural and industry contexts would also provide more precise guidance for global marketers in selecting endorsers who resonate authentically with audiences in various cultural environments.

Conclusion

By integrating affect transfer, social identity, and source credibility theories, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how parasocial relationships with celebrity endorsers cultivate

brand love. The empirical evidence from 519 Chinese fashion consumers demonstrates that consumer brand learning serves as a key cognitive bridge that translates parasocial interaction into brand love. Furthermore, the findings reveal that endorser credibility exerts differentiated moderating effects: trustworthiness and expertise reinforce the indirect pathway from parasocial relationships to brand love, whereas attractiveness plays a limited role in this process.

These insights extend prior parasocial relationship research by moving beyond affective explanations and uncovering how consumers cognitively internalize celebrity influence through brand learning. From a managerial perspective, the results underscore the importance of selecting endorsers whose credibility traits, particularly trustworthiness and expertise, can strengthen consumer learning and emotional engagement with brands (i.e., brand love). Therefore, this study advances theoretical and practical understanding of the mechanisms through which celebrity endorsements shape enduring brand–consumer relationships.

Disclosure statement

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

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Appendix A

Table A1. Additional information on regression analysis results using unstandardized coefficients.

	Mediation analysis (Model 4)			Moderated mediation analysis (Model 7)								
				Trustworthiness (a)			Attractiveness (b)			Expertise (c)		
IVs, DVs, Hypotheses	SE	*t* value	*p* value	SE	*t* value	*p* value	SE	*t* value	*p* value	SE	*t* value	*p* value
Regression model 1 (DV = BL)												
Hypothesis 1. PSR	0.034	8.514	<0.001	0.034	8.514	<0.001	0.034	8.514	<0.001	0.034	8.514	<0.001
CBL	0.036	13.582	<0.001	0.036	13.582	<0.001	0.036	13.582	<0.001	0.036	13.582	<0.001
Age	0.002	2.521	0.012	0.002	2.521	0.012	0.002	2.521	0.012	0.002	2.521	0.012
Gender	0.036	−1.328	0.185	0.036	−1.328	0.185	0.036	−1.328	0.185	0.036	−1.328	0.185
R^2	0.563***	—	—	0.563***	—	—	0.563***	—	—	0.563***	—	—
Regression model 2 (DV = CBL)												
PSR	0.032	17.672	<0.001	0.041	11.222	<0.001	0.038	13.360	<0.001	0.036	13.466	<0.001
TRU	—	—	—	0.050	5.619	<0.001	—	—	—	—	—	—
ATT	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.051	4.405	<0.001	—	—	—
EXP	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.043	6.271	<0.001
PSR × TRU	—	—	—	0.057	3.164	0.002	—	—	—	—	—	—
PSR × ATT	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.061	1.723	0.085	—	—	—
PSR × EXP	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.062	2.271	0.023
Age	0.002	−0.545	0.586	0.002	−0.934	0.351	0.002	−0.471	0.638	0.002	−0.716	0.474
Gender	0.044	−0.810	0.419	0.043	−1.071	0.285	0.043	−0.407	0.685	0.042	−0.639	0.523
R^2	0.379***	—	—	0.419***	—	—	0.402***	—	—	0.425***	—	—
Indirect effect of IV on DV												
Hypothesis 2. PSR → CBL→ BL	0.035	—	—	0.040	—	—	0.034	—	—	0.035	—	—
Moderated mediation effect												
Hypothesis 3. Index of moderated mediation	—	—	—	0.034	—	—	0.038	—	—	0.033	—	—

Note. ATT = attractiveness; BL = brand love; CBL = consumer brand learning; DV = dependent variable; EXP = expertise; IV = independent variables; PSR = parasocial relationship; TRU = trustworthiness.