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**BRAND PROMOTIONS IN MICROBLOGGING ENVIRONMENTS  
USING CELEBRITY AND COMPANY-GENERATED TWEETS**

On 1 March 2011, celebrity actor and self-proclaimed ‘winner,’ Charlie Sheen signed up for the popular microblogging site Twitter and posted his first Tweet – ‘Winning..! Choose your Vice...’ While this statement is not particularly informative or inspiring, what is interesting is the picture that was included with the Tweet. Embedded in the Tweet was a URL to a twitpic (Twitter Picture) that pictured Charlie and his friend Bree Olson. In this picture, Mr Sheen is seen holding a bottle of chocolate milk from Broguiere’s Dairy, and Ms Olson is holding a fruit smoothie from the Naked Juice Company. This promotional plug, or perhaps more accurately, endorsement, came as a surprise to both companies as it was unsolicited and uncompensated. Broguiere’s Dairy, a family-run business, claimed to be inundated with phone calls and media attention and even reported that it generated some new business from the post (Smith, 2011). Fast-forward 25 h and 17 min, and Charlie Sheen had set the Guinness World Record for ‘Fastest Time to Reach 1 Million Followers’ (Castillo, 2011). Overnight, the world was ‘a Twitter’ with Charlie Sheen, and Sheen saw an opportunity to capitalize on his growing digital popularity by endorsing products on Twitter for a fee.

The use of celebrity endorsers is a common practice in traditional offline media. With the growing popularity of digital media, marketers and advertisers are exploring ways to harness the power of the celebrity using popular social networking technologies such as Facebook, FourSquare and Twitter. However, given that differences exist between communication models for traditional and interactive media (Bezjian-Avery et al., 1998) we have to question the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements in this environment. The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact and influence of celebrity endorsements via Twitter. We begin by discussing the popularity of social media in general and Twitter specifically. Next we examine the different Tweeting options for brands. From here, we synthesize the literature on celebrity endorsements that originates from offline environments. We then present the findings of a study exploring the impact of celebrity endorsements and company-sponsored messages via Twitter.

**TWITTER AND THE SOCIAL MEDIA REVOLUTION**

Companies appear to be steadily increasing their online spending and social media usage. According to a 2012 report prepared by the Society of Digital Agencies (SoDA), digital marketers throughout the world are investing a larger percentage of their marketing budget in online initiatives – one third expect to invest 60% or more of their ad budget digitally (Digital Marketers Shuffle Budget, 2012). Advertiser Perceptions’ semiannual survey of nearly 1200 decision makers revealed that 59% of subjects intend to increase social media-ad spending by the end of 2013. Social media advertising, they speculate, will account for approximately 27% of digital budgets over the next 12 months – an increase of 5% over the previous year (Advertisers Say, 2012). Social media usage is not limited to consumer-facing companies. B2B companies

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<sup>1</sup> Подготовлена на основе: Wood, N.T., Burkhalter, J.N. (2014) Tweet this, not that: A comparison between brand promotions in microblogging environments using celebrity and company-generated tweets // *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 20:1-2, pp. 129-146.

have been using social media to engage their customers longer than B2C companies have (9 in 10 Marketers Use Social Media, 2011). Social Media Examiner reports that the use of social media has helped many businesses to increase their exposure, improve web traffic and create a rise in search engine rankings (9 in 10 Marketers Use Social Media, 2011). Among the social media outlets, commonly used are Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and Foursquare (Balwani, 2009).

Twitter appeared on the social media landscape in July 2006. As a communication platform, it allows users to send (and receive) short bursts of communication known as Tweets. Each Tweet is limited to 140 characters.

Consumers use Twitter for a variety of reasons including: letting family and friends know what they are doing or thinking (I am sitting on the sofa watching Glee. I'm such a Gleek!), crowdsourcing (I'm putting together the menu for an Olympics themed party – what should it include?), sharing information (Midnight screenings tonight for the new movie The Avengers!) and forwarding news articles to others (Study shows social media isn't always child play).

In turn, brands can use Twitter as an efficient way of target marketing, to gather real time market intelligence and as a customer service tool. As an example, Whole Foods Market (with 2.9 million Twitter followers) uses Twitter to investigate what their customers like to read and watch, recommend new food podcasts and invite their customers to upcoming events. Consumers who follow Banana Republic (80,000 followers) receive invitations to exclusive preview events, as well as coupons they can redeem at the event. Zappos (2.6 million followers) and Best Buy (276,000 followers) have been recognized for their use of Twitter to provide exceptional customer service (Balwani, 2009; Fauscette, 2009).

Similar to other social media technologies such as Facebook, the success of Twitter is dependent upon the willingness of users to 'follow' others and to allow others to 'follow' them. Therein lies the appeal of this platform – consumers have the ability to engage with whomever they choose, including their favorite brands and celebrities. In doing so, it may be argued that consumers are more receptive to communications originating from people or brands that they choose to follow. This may be accounted for by the concept of engagement.

Engagement has been presented as a subconscious, emotional construct (Heath, 2007) and may be associated with a variety of objects including brands, advertisements and entertainment content (Burns, 2006). The Advertising Research Foundation (ARF) has broadly defined engagement as: 'turning on a prospect to a brand idea enhanced by the surrounding context' (Elliott, 2006). Hollebeek (2011, 6) defines it as 'the level of a customer's motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity in brand interactions.' In the online context, Mollen and Wilson (2010, 5) define 'brand engagement' as 'the cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value'. Engagement, then, may be used in reference to an active, motivated consumer who has some emotional connection to or interaction with media content that is relevant to his daily life (Heath, 2007).

In the world of social media research, Sashi (2012) suggests that the engagement process comprises seven stages: connection, interaction, satisfaction, retention, commitment / loyalty, advocacy and engagement. *Connection* occurs when the brand and the consumer connect with each other, while *interaction* occurs when consumers interact with the brand and other consumers using the available technologies. The *satisfaction* stage involves consumers' pleasure with interactions and when appropriate with purchases / product performance. *Retention* indicates an enduring relationship between the consumer and the brand. The fifth stage, *commitment / loyalty*, focuses on a consumer's affective (emotional) and calculative (rational) commitment to the brand. *Advocacy* occurs when consumers spread the word about positive brand-related experiences. Finally, *engagement* occurs when consumers have completed all the stages and develop strong emotional bonds with the brand; they become co-creators of value and remain with the brand through trials and tribulations. Consumers may engage with brands via Twitter through these very stages.

Consumers may develop a *connection* by first following a brand on Twitter. Next, the *interaction* occurs when consumers reply to Tweets distributed by the brand and/or click on links to web pages, photos or videos that may be embedded in the Tweet. *Satisfaction*, the third stage, may take place as consumers provide positive feedback to the brand via Twitter or bookmark a Tweet as a ‘favorite’. As consumers enter the fourth stage, *retention*, they continue to follow the brand. *Commitment / loyalty* occurs as a consumer chooses to accept all Tweets distributed by the brand in their timeline rather than blocking the brand messages. *Advocacy* may occur as consumers retweet brand messages and create their own Tweets about the brand. Finally, *engagement* is reached as consumers complete stages one through six, maintaining their relationship with and becoming an advocate for the brand.

In June 2012, Twitter reached the 500 million user mark, with the US representing the largest number of users – 27.4% (Koetsier, 2012). On a typical day, Twitter fields 400 million Tweets – or over one billion Tweets every 72 h (Farber, 2012). Twitter usage among teen and college students continues to grow at a rapid pace – as of February 2012, 31% of US internet users aged 18–24 use Twitter, a 13% increase from May 2011. Twenty percent of this age cohort use Twitter on a daily basis (Smith & Brenner, 2012). It has been reported that as many as 20% of Americans get their news via Twitter, and 90% of people follow one or more brands (White, 2011). Given these statistics, it is not surprising that marketers are captivated by this platform and hope to cash in on its popularity. Analysts predict that Twitter advertising revenue could reach \$1 billion by 2014 (Indvik, 2012).

In general, online advertising has been found to positively impact consumers’ brand attitude, attitude toward the ad, brand memory and purchase intention (Lee & Cho, 2010; Yaveroglu & Donthu, 2008), and it is considered to be more informative and trustworthy than traditional advertisements (Tsang et al., 2004). As such, advertisers are drawn to the online environment as a communications vehicle because it ‘has been shown to be more interactive and have greater capability compared to traditional media to encourage one-on-one interaction,’ (Campbell & Wright, 2008, 65). However, we cannot assume that advertising online (e.g., on websites) and via other forms of digital communication, including social media, work the same way and can have the same success. For instance, in a study on mobile advertising, Tsang, Ho, and Liang (2004) found that consumers have negative attitudes toward unsolicited advertising unless they previously consented to receiving the messages. The same attitude may exist for commercial messages sent via Twitter. A consumer’s decision to follow a celebrity on Twitter does not imply that he consents to receiving commercial messages from the celebrity. Based upon the above discussion, the following research question is proposed:

**RQ1:** What impact does a commercial message sent via Twitter have on consumer opinion of the brand?

### **TWEETING OPTIONS**

A company has a number of options for marketing via Twitter. The firm can send its own Tweet or have a celebrity do the Tweeting. A celebrity can be compensated for the Tweet (paid Tweet) or may Tweet for free – referred to hereafter as an organic Tweet. This results in four possible scenarios:

*Company organic:* A brand can encourage consumers to follow it on Twitter. This enables the brand to send commercial message via Tweets to its followers at no cost.

*Company paid:* A brand can pay for promoted Tweets. Here, a company will pay to have a Tweet inserted in consumers Twitter feed. This effort is coordinated via Twitter, and these promoted Tweets are primarily targeted at people who do not currently follow the brand on Twitter. A promoted Tweet is identifiable by a colored arrow and the words ‘Promoted by’ followed by the company name positioned below the actual message. Promoted Tweets can be charged either on a cost per engagement event or a cost per thousand impressions model. In the case of Twitter, engagement refers to clicks, favorites, retweets and @replies and starts at \$0.10.

*Celebrity paid:* The third option is for the brand to pay a celebrity to Tweet on its behalf. If readers of the Tweet are aware that the celebrity is a paid endorser for the brand, then regulators require no disclosure. However, if a significant number are unaware of this connection, disclosure is needed. Determining the percentage of followers that are aware of a relationship between the celebrity and the brand can be tricky. For that reason, the FTC recommends disclosure in the actual message (FTC, 2010). The most common method of disclosure is through the inclusion of hashtags at the end of the Tweet. A hashtag is the symbol # followed by the name of a group. Commonly used hashtags by celebrity Tweeters include *#spon* which is short for sponsored Tweet, *#paid* which implies the Tweeter is being paid for his/her Tweet and *#ad* indicating that the Tweet is an advertisement (Dickinson & Russell, 2011). Prior research on consumer understanding of hashtags revealed that *#ad* is the tag that provided the most clarity (Wood & Burkhalter, 2012). This approach can cost of tens of thousands of dollars per Tweet.

*Celebrity organic:* Another possibility is that the celebrity Tweets about the brand without being compensated. This usually occurs when a celebrity has had a positive experience with a brand and feels compelled to share it with others. Whereas on the surface this may appear to be the more desirable option – a free endorsement – in reality, this can pose some problems largely associated with the lack of control the marketer has over the association with the celebrity Tweeter as well as the content and timing of these Tweets. For this reason, marketers may be reluctant to encourage this activity.

Based upon the above discussion, the following research question is proposed:

**RQ2:** What impact does the communication type (company organic, company paid or celebrity paid) have on consumer engagement with the brand?

**TWEETING CELEBRITIES**

Some of the early adopters and the most successful at attracting Twitter followers have been celebrities. In 2009, actor Ashton Kutcher challenged CNN to a popularity contest – who would be the first to attract one million followers. Kutcher won and has been credited as the first account to reach the million follower mark (Kutcher, 2009). In fact, there are a large number of celebrities who have significantly more followers than major brands. However, it is important to note that brands may have multiple Twitter accounts for different purposes (or product lines) with followers spread across different accounts and, in some cases, following multiple accounts. Celebrities on the other hand typically have only one official account (and numerous fan-created accounts) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Tweeting brands and celebrities (as of 2 August 2012).

Brand official account	Followers	Celebrity official account	Followers
Nike	560,659	Lady Gaga	27,866,891
Nike Football	744,833	Chad Ochocinco (New England Patriots)	3,625,793
Nike Basketball	320,844	Carmelo Anthony (New York Knicks)	2,359,405
Nike Soccer	351,649	Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid)	12,086,403

Given consumers’ infatuation with celebrities and their insatiable appetite for a behind the scenes peek into celebrities’ private lives, these numbers are not all that surprising. By following celebrities on Twitter, fans get a glimpse into the daily lives of their favorite celebrities, and they have a way to directly communicate with celebrities, all in real time. Although this communication is often one-way, it is not uncommon for celebrities to respond to followers’ Tweets.

In an effort to harness this potential, a number of boutique agencies have been created to forge relationships between celebrities and brands. One example is Los Angeles-based Ad.ly, an

advertising agency that pays actors, athletes and musicians to promote products through Twitter. Since its launch in late 2009, Ad.ly has successfully created more than 20,000 endorsements for over 150 brands, including Best Buy and Old Navy. The company represents more than 5000 A-list to D-list personalities who are willing to Tweet for cash. Tweeting packages typically start in the tens of thousands of dollars with many in the six-figure range. For their Tweeting services, celebrities earn a flat fee per Tweet. For celebrities represented by Ad.ly, this can range 'from \$1000 to mid-five figures,' depending upon the celebrity (Grover, 2011). The reality star Kim Kardashian earns somewhere in the vicinity of \$10,000 per Tweet, and as her popularity increases, so too does her rate. It is not uncommon for some celebrities to earn six figures per year, and in some cases, six figures per quarter (Grover, 2011). Rather than use an agency, however, some celebrities choose to negotiate directly with the sponsors, and their Tweeting arrangements often go beyond Twitter to include postings on their fan pages and in display ads on Facebook (Grover, 2011).

### **THE CASE FOR FAMOUS FACES (AND TWEETS)**

The traditional marketing communications hierarchy of effects, or AIDA (attention / awareness, interest, desire, action), helps us understand the series of events that occurs when a consumer comes into contact with a commercial message. First developed in 1920, several variations of AIDA exist (see Smith & Swinyard, 1982, for a review). The model contends that for an advertising campaign to be successful, the communication must break through the clutter and capture consumer attention. After capturing the consumer's attention, the goal is to generate interest in the product, create a desire and subsequently move the consumer to action (e.g., purchasing the product).

When developing a communication strategy, one of the most important decisions an advertiser needs to make involves the selection of the source of the communication. An advertisement message may be delivered by the company itself, by a well-known individual (e.g., celebrity) or by an unknown person (e.g., 'Average Joe' representing the typical consumer). The premise behind the use of celebrity endorsers is that these individuals will not only draw attention to the product/service being advertised, but the image values associated with them will also be transferred to the product (Englis et al., 1994; O'Mahony & Meenaghan, 1997; Till & Shimp, 1998). The use of celebrities is believed to increase the likelihood that consumers will gravitate toward the celebrity-endorsed brand, generating higher believability, greater receptivity and higher propensity to purchase (Friedman & Friedman, 1979; Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins et al., 1989).

Typically advertisers seek a person who is (a) one with whom the target market can identify, (b) attractive and (c) perceived as credible (Belch & Belch, 2012). Source credibility is the extent to which the communicator / source possesses positive characteristics influencing the degree to which the receiver will accept the message. This is widely accepted as an important variable in source selection (Dholakia & Sternthal, 1977; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990). For a source, credibility is often described as comprising three elements: expertise, objectivity and trustworthiness. Expertise considers factors such as the source's level of knowledge, skill and experience with the product / service category. Objectivity implies that the individual is open-minded and unprejudiced. Trustworthiness refers to issues such as honesty, reliability and sincerity. The 'match-up hypothesis' suggests that endorsers are more effective when there is a good 'fit' between the endorser and the product (Kamins, 1990). Given that a good fit can translate into millions of dollars in sales, companies are eager to secure the services of celebrities.

According to Crutchfield (2010), an estimated \$50 billion is invested globally each year in corporate sponsorships and endorsement deals. In the US, famous faces appear in more than 15% of advertisements. This number pales in comparison to other markets, such as India and Taiwan where as many as 24% and 45%, respectively, of all advertising campaigns include a celebrity. Sales for some brands have increased upwards of 20% upon commencing an endorsement deal

with a famous face. Some companies have seen their stock increase by one quarter of one percentage point on the day the deal was announced (Crutchfield, 2010). As consumers spend more and more time engaging with social media, marketers are turning to these newer popular forms of communication while still engaging celebrities.

However, social media is different from traditional media. In traditional media, such as television advertising, the process is largely based on mass communication – a one to many approach, in which a communication message is designed to appeal to the majority. The online format, however, provides an opportunity for a one-to-one approach where messages can be calibrated for individuals, thereby allowing for greater personalization of the message and, in theory, greater effectiveness. Social media takes this one step further by allowing the message to take on a spontaneous conversational format with the communicator and the receiver interacting directly. In fact, this is one of the major appeals of many social media platforms – the message often appears less commercial, more organic and therefore may be perceived to be more authentic and credible.

Celebrity appeal is especially important to consider in such an environment, as approximately one-third of Americans follow celebrities online (Friel, 2011). Information justifying the expense of celebrity Tweeters in general and the impact they have on a brand's bottom line is scant. One report indicated that when Kim Kardashian Tweeted for Armani (for \$25,000), it generated 40,000 visits to Armani's website in less than 24 h (McKay, 2011). Whether the initial visit translated into repeat visits, enhanced brand opinions or increased sales has not been made public. Though not directly paid for her Tweets, Demi Moore's Tweets regarding products on fab.com resulted in the company's top three performing sales in July of 2011 (The Fab.com, 2011). The website that Moore Tweeted about, fab.com, was relatively new and therefore likely unfamiliar to many (Stewart, 1992).

A familiar brand is one with which consumers have experiences that they can draw from (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Kent & Allen, 1994). These brand-related experiences create associations upon which consumers can draw when subsequently confronted with the brand. Unlike familiar brands, unfamiliar brands have minimal brand equity and must therefore seek ways to build familiarity in order to be competitive (Campbell & Keller, 2003).

Brand familiarity influences consumers' decision making processes as well as the effectiveness of marketing communications (Tam, 2008). It is associated with greater recall, positive product evaluations and greater consumer confidence – all potential antecedents to purchase (Laroche et al., 1996; Mikhailitchenko et al., 2009; Zajonc & Markus, 1982). Attitudes toward advertisements and brands may also be impacted by brand familiarity. For example, the attitude toward an advertisement has a more positive impact on brand attitudes for familiar, as compared with unfamiliar, brands. Additionally, consumers tend to process communications regarding unfamiliar brands more extensively than those for familiar brands (Campbell & Keller, 2003).

In terms of the relationship between brand familiarity, brand evaluations and consumer age, research is scant. A recent nationwide study of 130,411 French female consumers sought to explore the relationship between consumer age and brand preference for perfume (Lambert-Pandraud & Laurent, 2010). The authors assert that compared with older consumers, young consumers are more innovative, have a greater propensity to adopt novel products and tend to change their preferences frequently. Their findings revealed that younger consumers are more likely than older consumers to be drawn to relatively recent (new) brands of perfume, although they caution that this attraction may be shortlived. This finding may at least partially explain the success of the Tweet by Demi Moore for the new/unfamiliar website <http://www.fab.com>. In light of this, the following research questions are proposed:

**RQ3:** What impact does the familiarity with the brand have on consumer response to the Tweet?

**RQ4:** What impact does the gender of celebrity have on consumer response to the Tweet?

## RESEARCH STUDY

There is a distinct lack of academic research exploring the receptiveness of consumers to commercial Tweets in general and those originating from celebrities specifically. This study is a preliminary step at filling this void.

### *Stimulus generation*

For this experiment, we needed to identify an appropriate celebrity endorser and a product category to test.

A group of 35 undergraduate students were asked to name the first five musicians / recording artists that came to mind. They were then asked to indicate whether or not they felt if each of these artists were likely to endorse products and if so, what products they might endorse. The top five artists mentioned were Lady Gaga, Britney Spears, Lil Wayne, Drake, and Katy Perry. The five most frequently mentioned product categories were athletic shoes, apparel, cosmetics, cars and beverages (alcoholic and nonalcoholic). The top product category listed was casual athletic shoes. With the exception of beverages, it is perhaps the most gender-neutral product category and was therefore deemed most suitable for our experiment.

From here, a new sample of 149 undergraduate students was asked to record their familiarity (5 point scale) with each of the five artists and also to rank these artists in order of whom they are most to least likely to follow on Twitter. The respondents were then presented with a list of major and minor athletic shoe brands and asked to record their level of familiarity with each brand (5 point scales). Finally, the participants were asked to assess the likelihood of each artist endorsing an athletic shoe (7 point scale). From the results of exercise, due to high a level of familiarity ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) and the likelihood of endorsing a brand of casual athletic shoes ( $M = 5.20$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ), the artist Lil Wayne was selected as the appropriate celebrity<sup>2</sup>. For the experimental brands, Vans was selected as the familiar brand ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) and R. Mac was chosen as the unfamiliar brand ( $M = 1.33$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ )<sup>3</sup>. Coupled with ample news coverage about Lil Wayne's relationship with and acceptance among the youth and skateboarding subcultures (with which Vans is associated) (Markman, 2012) and the positive celebrity-brand fit, Lil Wayne was deemed an appropriate connection.

Next, we reviewed Lil Wayne's personal Twitter account to identify a recent Tweet that he had posted regarding a product / service. We then took this Tweet and modified it to include our experimental brands. The company Tweets (Organic and Promoted by) contained identical messages. The only difference was the profile picture used for each of the Tweets – Lil Wayne's picture was replaced with an image of a footprint for R. Mac and a skateboard for Vans (see Table 2).

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<sup>2</sup> Statistics: M – mean, SD – standard deviation.

<sup>3</sup> Both Vans and R. Mac are real brands that have been mentioned and/or appeared in hip hop media, music and music videos.

Table 2. Experimental Tweets.

	Brand	
Type of Tweet	Familiar (Vans)	Unfamiliar (R.Mac)
Celebrity: Paid	 <p><b>Lil Wayne</b> <small>Lil Wayne</small> Another cool pair of Vans. Awesome!!!! Limited quantity <a href="http://bit.ly/vOwzZb">http://bit.ly/vOwzZb</a> #ad 15 mins ago</p>	 <p><b>Lil Wayne</b> <small>Lil Wayne</small> Another cool pair of R.Macs. Awesome!!!! Limited quantity <a href="http://bit.ly/vOwzZb">http://bit.ly/vOwzZb</a> #ad 15 mins ago</p>
Brand: Paid	 <p><b>Vans</b> <small>Vans</small> Another cool pair of Vans. Awesome!!!! Limited quantity <a href="http://bit.ly/vOwzZb">http://bit.ly/vOwzZb</a> 15 mins ago Promoted by Vans</p>	 <p><b>R.Mac</b> <small>R.Mac</small> Another cool pair of R.Macs. Awesome!!!! Limited quantity <a href="http://bit.ly/vOwzZb">http://bit.ly/vOwzZb</a> 15 mins ago Promoted by R.Mac</p>
Brand: Organic	 <p><b>Vans</b> <small>Vans</small> Another cool pair of Vans. Awesome!!!! Limited quantity <a href="http://bit.ly/vOwzZb">http://bit.ly/vOwzZb</a> 15 mins ago</p>	 <p><b>R.Mac</b> <small>R.Mac</small> Another cool pair of R.Macs. Awesome!!!! Limited quantity <a href="http://bit.ly/vOwzZb">http://bit.ly/vOwzZb</a> 15 mins ago</p>

### *Measures*

Brand opinion was measured pre and post exposure to the experimental Tweet, using Till and Busler's (2000) set of three nine-point semantic differential scales (positive anchors: strongly like, favorable and positive). Brand familiarity was reported on a single five-point semantic differential scale (unfamiliar / familiar). To measure the subjects' engagement (i.e., the likelihood of clicking on the URL contained within the Tweet), we used Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) set of nine seven-point semantic differential scales for behavioral intention (positive anchors: probably, certain, possible, definitely would, certain chance, probable, likely, very frequent, existent). To evaluate previous behaviors related to brand-related Tweets, Morton and Friedman's (2002) five-item, nominal (yes/no) scales were utilized (the word 'movies' was replaced with 'Tweet'); 1. 'I have searched for information about brands after hearing about them in a Tweet'; 2. 'Looked for brands in the store after seeing a Tweet about them'; 3. 'Learned new information about brands after seeing a Tweet about them'; 4. 'Started using brands after seeing a Tweet about them'; and 5. 'Wanted to try brands after seeing a Tweet about them'.

For those individuals assigned to the celebrity Tweet conditions, we employed a number of additional measures. First, as in the stimulus generation exercise, celebrity familiarity was reported on a single seven-point semantic differential scale (very familiar / not at all familiar). We also used Till and Busler's (2000) two nine-point semantic differential scales (positive anchors: appropriate, effective) to determine how appropriate Lil Wayne was as an endorser for each of the brands (Vans and R. Mac). Celebrity and brand image congruency were measured on a single item seven-point semantic differential scale, 'How congruent / similar is the image of Lil Wayne with brand X' (incongruent / not similar, congruent / similar) (Kamins & Gupta, 1994). Source credibility was measured using Ohanian's (1990) 15-item scale measuring trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise. Basic demographic information was collected along with social media participation and usage.

### *Procedure*

The subjects were told that the purpose of the study was to determine the effectiveness of microblogging as a form of marketing communication. The subjects logged into a secure website where they were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions with each condition showing one of the six possible Tweets. They were asked to review the assigned Tweet and subsequently complete the questions relating to their attitudes and behavioral intentions. The entire exercise took between 4–17 min to complete, depending upon the assigned condition.

### *Subject sample*

The subjects were drawn from introductory business courses for the undergraduate population of two universities located in the east and northern parts of the United States. While the majority of the students in these courses were business students, others majored in Art, English, Psychology, Political Science, Economics or Communications. Participation was voluntary, and the answers were recorded anonymously.

## **RESULTS**

Scale reliability results indicated high reliability as all scales reported Cronbach alphas between 0.86 and 0.98 (Table 3).

Table 3. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for dependent measures.

Measures	Source	Cronbach's alpha's	
		Pre	Post
Brand opinion	Till and Busler (2000)		
Vans		0.966	0.969
R.Mac		0.982	0.959
Behavioral intention	Ajzen and Fishebein (1980)		0.976
Source credibility	Ohanian (1990)		
Attractiveness			0.865
Trustworthiness			0.903
Expertise			0.957
Overall			0.946
Celebrity endorser appropriateness	Till and Bulser (2000)		
R.Mac			0.877
Vans			0.866

A total of 216 completed surveys were utilized for the analysis, and the sample size in each condition ranged from 34 to 37. The sample comprises 49% (105) females and 51% (111) males. The subjects' ages ranged from 18 to 27 with an average age of 20 years.

Sixty-eight percent of the subjects (150) had a Twitter account, of which almost 74% reported that they check their account regularly (47.6% several time per day and 27.2% once per day). When asked what impact Tweets have on their behavior, 73% agreed with the statement that Tweets provide them with new information about brands; 55% indicated that Tweets have, in the past, motivated them to search for additional information about the brand; 49% have wanted to try a brand as a result of a Tweet they received. However, only 40% have sought out the brand in a store, and an even smaller 26% claimed that they subsequently used the brand.

Subjects revealed a greater propensity to follow celebrities in social media than to follow brands (Celebrities: Facebook  $M = 7$ , Twitter  $M = 21$ ) (Brands: Facebook  $M = 5$ , Twitter  $M = 5$ ).

#### *Celebrity and brand congruity*

An independent sample *t*-test performed to measure the perceived congruity between the celebrity and each of the brands came close to significance. The results suggest that Lil Wayne's image was perceived to be more congruent with R. Mac ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) than with Vans ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ );  $t(67) = 2.007$ ,  $p = 0.051$ .

#### *Appropriateness as an endorser*

There was no significant difference in the familiarity and source credibility of Lil Wayne between the subjects in both celebrity conditions ( $p > 0.05$ ). The subjects in these conditions indicated that they were somewhat familiar ( $M = 4.5$ ,  $SD = 2.77$ ) with Lil Wayne, and, as a source, they feel that he is attractive ( $M = 6.52$ ,  $SD = 1.6$ ), somewhat trustworthy ( $M = 5.73$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ) and somewhat of an expert ( $M = 5.08$ ,  $SD = 2.01$ ).

As an endorser, Lil Wayne was considered to be more appropriate for R. Mac ( $M = 5.03$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) than Vans ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 2.24$ ),  $t(67) = 3.153$ ,  $p = 0.004$ . However, a posttest evaluation failed to find any perceived difference in his effectiveness as an endorser. Subjects felt that he was equally effective as an endorser of Vans ( $M = 4.65$ ,  $SD = 2.11$ ) as he was of R. Mac ( $M = 5.26$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ )  $p > 0.05$ .

### ***Brand familiarity and opinion***

As expected, a pretest measure indicated that the subjects were more familiar with Vans ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) than they were with R. Mac ( $M = 1.25$ ,  $SD = 0.648$ );  $t(105) = 25.87$ ,  $p = 0.000$ . Despite the lack of familiarity with R. Mac, however, the subjects overall had a higher pretest opinion of that brand ( $M = 5.28$ ,  $SD = 2.29$ ) than they did of Vans ( $M = 4.2$ ,  $SD = 2.13$ );  $t(90) = 4.48$ ,  $p = 0.000$ .

There was no significant difference between the pre- and posttest opinions of both brands for those in the celebrity conditions ( $p > 0.05$ ). There was, however, a significant difference for the Vans' company-initiated Tweets overall ( $M_{pre} = 4.19$ ,  $SD = 1.9$ ;  $M_{post} = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 2.0$ ;  $t(232) = 2.563$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ). A closer look revealed that being exposed to the paid / 'Promoted by' Tweet from Vans lowered the subjects' opinion of the brand ( $M_{pre} = 4.25$ ,  $SD = 1.99$ ;  $M_{post} = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ );  $t(16) = 2.137$ ,  $p = 0.048$ . For those exposed to the organic Tweet, there was no significant difference ( $p > 0.05$ ). No significant differences between the pre and post evaluations were found for the R. Mac brand ( $p > 0.05$ ).

### ***Behavioral intentions***

Next we examined the intention to click on the Tweeted URL among all conditions. A significant difference was observed between the two Vans company Tweet conditions. Subjects who received the Vans organic company Tweet were more likely to click on the URL ( $M = 5.15$ ,  $SD = 2.99$ ) than those who received a promoted Tweet from the company ( $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 2.68$ );  $t(70) = 2.01$ ,  $p = 0.048$ . There were no significant differences observed in the R. Mac conditions, nor the celebrity conditions.

There was a significant difference between Twitter ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 2.79$ ) and Non Twitter users ( $M = 3.6$ ,  $SD = 2.64$ );  $t(214) = 2.92$ ,  $p = 0.02$ . Those subjects that have a Twitter account are more likely to click on the URL than those who do not. However, a one-way ANOVA to test for behavioral intention based on the frequency of Twitter usage (daily, weekly, etc.) failed to find any differences,  $F(7, 142) = 0.917$ ,  $p = 0.495$ .

Not surprisingly, those subjects who had interacted with brands in the past as a result of Tweets were more likely to click on the URL ( $M = 5.20$ ,  $SD = 2.79$ ) than those who have not ( $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 2.57$ );  $t(148) = 3.480$ ,  $p = 0.001$ . Similarly, those who had previously searched for brands in stores ( $M_{search} = 5.26$ ,  $SD = 3.07$  vs.  $M_{notsearch} = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 2.49$ ;  $t(148) = 2.749$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ) admitted to learning new information about brands ( $M_{search} = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 2.81$  vs.  $M_{notsearch} = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 2.53$ ;  $t(148) = 2.531$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ) or wanted to try products after hearing about them on Twitter ( $M_{search} = 5.37$ ,  $SD = 2.87$  vs.  $M_{notsearch} = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 2.45$ ) compared with those who had not ( $t(148) = 3.90$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). However, we did not observe a difference based on whether or not they started using the promoted brand ( $M_{search} = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 2.87$ ;  $M_{notsearch} = 4.29$ ,  $SD = 2.74$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). There was no significant difference based on gender and condition, or condition and Twitter usage.

There was no significant difference in the willingness to click on the URL based on feelings toward or familiarity with Lil Wayne ( $p > 0.05$ ). A closer look at the data revealed only three outliers, preventing us from performing an analysis of the extreme values.

## **DISCUSSION**

In interpreting the findings of this study, it is important to remember that only one celebrity and one product category was tested. This limits the generalizability of these findings. However, since this study represents early work in this area, we believe that the findings do offer a valuable contribution and provide a variety of topics for future research.

From our data, we can see that, in general, Tweets are good at capturing attention, providing consumers with new information about products (73%), motivating consumers to search for additional product information (55%) and creating a desire to try the product (49%). As is the case with traditional media, we can see that with Twitter there is a 'filtering' process where consumers filter out as they proceed through the stages – only 40% were sufficiently

motivated to seek the product out in the store and only 26% purchased the Tweeted product. These findings suggest that the real value of Twitter is its ability to draw attention to and educate consumers about brands as well as to encourage consumers to seek out additional information from other sources (e.g., websites, stores, etc.).

Although our pretest measure indicated that the subjects were more familiar with Vans than they were with R. Mac, they actually had a higher opinion of R. Mac, the unfamiliar brand. From prior research, we know that young consumers may be attracted to newer brands (Lambert-Pandraud & Laurent, 2010). Whereas R. Mac is not a new brand, our subjects were unfamiliar with it – therefore, the R. Mac brand was new to them. Previous experiences with the familiar Vans brand would have helped to shape the subjects' evaluation, whereas lack of experience with the unfamiliar (new) R. Mac may have made this brand more appealing and contributed to a higher evaluation. Further research is required to explore this.

The celebrity's image was also perceived to be more congruent with, and his role as an endorser more appropriate for, the unknown brand. Despite this, his effectiveness (measured by the subjects' intention to click on the URL) was similar for both the familiar and the unfamiliar brand, and he failed to change the subjects' opinions of either of the brands. It appears, at least from the findings of this study, that celebrity Tweets do little beyond communicating product information and encouraging some online search. They also have little impact on brand opinions.

Individuals who are exposed to a marketing communication for an unfamiliar brand only have the information provided in that advertisement to draw upon in forming brand attitudes (Machleit & Wilson, 1988). Greater processing is thus required (Tam, 2008), and consumers may elaborate on the marketing communication – in this case a Tweet – more than they would for a familiar brand (Mikhailitchenko et al., 2009). This highlights the importance of a carefully crafted message to help formulate the initial opinions.

In the familiar brand company conditions, we found that subjects were more likely to click on an organic Tweet than they were to click on a promoted Tweet. We did not observe this with the unfamiliar brand. Furthermore, opinions of the familiar brand were lowered after being exposed to a promoted Tweet. It may be that subjects believed that the established (i.e., familiar) brand, Vans, or perhaps more precisely, the established brand for which the subjects have a neutral opinion was 'trying too hard,' when it used the 'Promoted by' Tweet and therefore lacked authenticity (Holt, 2002). This also raises an interesting question regarding credibility – is it possible that utilizing Twitter to distribute blatant marketing messages can have a negative impact on the credibility of familiar brands, particularly brands that consumers do not have a strong opinion of? Whereas, for unfamiliar brands (where the credibility has yet to be established), there is nothing to be lost from openly promoting the brand via Twitter. While our findings are insufficient to explore this, future research may pursue this area.

There was no significant difference between the pre and post opinions of the unfamiliar brand. It appears that a promoted Tweet, one which the company pays to have distributed, can hurt opinions and the likelihood of further engagement, specifically interaction (e.g., click through) if consumers are already familiar with the brand. If it is a lesser or unknown brand, it does not hurt opinions, but it does not help either.

A low click-through rate for the embedded URL indicates lack of engagement. More specifically, according to the work of Sashi (2012), it indicates a lack of interaction. The reason for poor interaction may include a variety of factors, including those that are consumer related (e.g., fatigue, non-Twitter user who has no experience with this form of marketing communication), brand related (e.g., the subject may not be interested in the product / brand), or message related (e.g., a poorly crafted message). Beyond the need for careful target marketing so that Tweets are distributed to those most likely to be interested in them, this finding again highlights the need for the careful creation of marketing messages.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study is not without its limitations. As previously mentioned we only examined one celebrity, one message and one product category, therefore limiting the generalizability of our findings. Our subject sample was also young and educated. These limitations alone make it difficult to draw clear conclusions about the influence of celebrity Tweets. Additionally, the message utilized in our experiment was an existing message altered to include the names of our experimental brands. We did not pretest this message to determine the subjects' attitudes toward it. Each of the Tweeting conditions (Lil Wayne, Vans, R. Mac) contained a different profile picture. As a result, we cannot discount the potential impact the profile picture has on subjects' attitudes and behaviors. In the development of our study, we choose to use existing validated scales in their original form. In some cases, these were five-point scales, and in others they were seven- or nine-point scales. Whereas this is not an uncommon practice in marketing scholarship (e.g., Roedder John et al., 1998), it is not entirely desirable. Finally, the issue of brand and platform (credibility) is something that we did not explore and warrants future exploration. It is not clear from the findings of this study how credible Twitter is as a communication channel in the eyes of our subjects and how the utilization of this channel impacts or interacts with a brand's credibility. With this in mind, we make the following recommendations for future research.

We recommend expanding the existing study to include a wider range of products / services and celebrities as well as a more diverse subject pool. The relationship between consumer age, brand familiarity and brand evaluation is an area that requires further exploration in both online and offline communications. Given the 140 character constraints of a Tweet, we recommend exploring how the content of the message and the profile picture of the Tweeter can facilitate engagement and influence attitudes and opinions, with a view to develop a set of guidelines for how to create an engaging and persuasive message. Perceptions of platform (Twitter) credibility require further exploration as well as how the use of Twitter for marketing communications influences a brand's image, credibility and perceived authenticity. Another area to examine is how the usage of Twitter (number of accounts followed, frequency of reading posts, etc.) impacts the persuasiveness of Twitter-based marketing communications. Obviously the potential of celebrity endorsers should be explored in other social media platforms, such as Facebook and FourSquare.

### **SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS**

We have decades of research on marketing communications using traditional media (television, print, etc.), but there is a lack of research to guide our actions in emerging social media environments. From this preliminary study, we can conclude that, given their large following on social media, celebrities can be an effective way of quickly reaching a large audience. However, beyond breaking through the clutter, capturing attention and sharing product information, their impact on brand engagement and enhancing brand opinion, at least from the findings of this study, is minimal. Similar to traditional offline media, what influence celebrities do exert may be best served with unfamiliar (new or lesser known) brands by helping to raise awareness.

Our results also suggest that firms with established / familiar brands should be cautious about paying to seed their own Tweets using Twitter's 'Promoted by' option. Those companies who adopt this approach run the risk of lowering consumers' opinion of the brand. Instead, these companies should strive to increase their number of followers so that they can Tweet organically and/or engage celebrities to Tweet on their behalf, with the understanding that the celebrities' usefulness is largely limited to creating awareness and providing information. For unfamiliar or new brands, company 'Promoted by' Tweets can help to promote a brand but do not necessarily influence brand opinion.

The very nature of social media allows the consumer to read or hear what he wants and to discard with one keystroke that which does not interest him so that he may move on to the next

piece of information. The amount of control that the consumer wields in these digital spaces cannot be ignored. Coupled with the high speed by which social media platforms grow and evolve, it is evident that ongoing research aimed at understanding how consumers use social media, as well how they feel about and respond to marketing messages in these spaces is necessary.

**Questions for your consideration**

1. What research questions were investigated in the article? What scientific methods were applied to investigate each of these questions? What propositions are well or poorly reasoned in the article? Please, explain your opinion.

2. Do you think there are differences between the communication models used in marketing communication campaigns in traditional media as opposed to marketing communication campaigns in Internet and social media? Please, substantiate your point.

3. What communication theories and advertising models do you know? Which of them you find relevant for the use of celebrity endorsers? Which of them you find relevant for social media promotion campaign analysis and planning?

4. What measures of marketing communication effectiveness do you know? What impact marketing communications via social media can and cannot have on brand performance?

5. Do you know the opposition of three types of marketing communication media: owned, paid and earned media? What is your understanding of this opposition? Explain what relation this opposition has to the subject of the article?

6. What type (or types) of advertising strategy in terms of ‘type of involvement / type of attitude’ would be suitable for brands in the category “casual athletic shoes”?

