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Abstract

This study aimed to examine two key research objectives: (i) the impact of sports celebrity endorsements on the consumer buying behavior and their involvement in sports, and (ii) the role of consumer purchase intention as a mediator between sports celebrity endorsements, consumer buying behavior, and sports involvement. This study adopted an explanatory approach, utilizing a self-administered questionnaire to gather data. Participants included a diverse group from Lahore, such as students, local athletes, business professionals, and other working-class individuals, with a total sample size of 350. The study employed non-probability convenience sampling. For data analysis, SPSS-Amos software was used, applying structural equation modeling (SEM) to explore the relationships between the proposed hypotheses. The results revealed that (i) sports celebrity endorsements had a positive and significant effect on both consumer buying behavior and sports involvement, and (ii) consumer purchase intention acted as a partial mediator in the relationship between sports celebrity endorsements, consumer buying behavior, and sports involvement. Future research could expand on these findings by conducting similar studies in other regions and cities within Pakistan, using a longitudinal approach to data collection. Additionally, future studies could target specific demographic groups, such as particular age ranges, genders, or consumers of different product categories.

Keywords: Sports' celebrity endorsement, consumer buying behavior, consumer purchase intention, consumer sports involvement, soft drinks

1. Introduction

Soft drinks are harmful to human health and the body (Shahid, 2020) but are considered highly consumed food items around the world (Tahmassebi & BaniHani, 2020). Therefore, the research hypothesis was to analyze the increasing consumption of soft drinks among youth⁵ in Pakistan (Datta & Husain, 2020) because more than 60% of the population is young people (Shakeel Ahmad, 2018). In 2021, the soft drinks' worldwide per-person revenue was \$125.75 and the collective revenue was \$945,037 million (Ward, 2021). Currently, the sales revenue of soft drinks was \$2100⁶ and gathered revenue by using different strategies in Pakistan. Different brands of soft drinks were using various types of promotional techniques to attract customers to purchase their products⁷. Consequently, different brands of soft drinks generated revenues and contributed to the local as well as the world economy and this research focused only on sports celebrity endorsement.

In Pakistan, almost 50% population is suffering from obesity, heart problems, diabetes, the human immune system, early puberty, tooth decay, pre-mature birth, skin allergies, breathing problems, liver diseases, premature ageing, cancer, altered protein levels in the brain, and kidney diseases. Therefore, the regulatory authorities restricted the buying and selling of soft drinks in educational institutions because it wouldn't be wrong to accept that people consume harmful drinks for their health and life. Still, the problem exists and a large number of soft drinks are used by people due to celebrity endorsement (Shahid, 2020). Therefore, it is the need of time to highlight the burn on the shoulders of these celebrities who are promoting these products at the cost of human health and life.

The fans' courteous attachment to the sports celebrity directly endorsed their customers' attitudes and behaviors. Sports or games had great importance worldwide but sports celebrities had an opportunity to connect activism and opposition. An athlete could influence his audience with a simple gesture or verbal message via an advertisement (Cunningham et al., 2021). Such involvement might help in understanding consumption, motivation, and behavior (Yu et al., 2020). Sports and physical activities could adjust the anxiety in daily life especially at the workplace (S. H. Liu, 2019). Athletes were the main pillars in defining the achievement of a sport (Kucharska, Confente, & Brunetti, 2020) in all hardships, e.g., they faced several problems; time management, long travel, emotional control, etc. Likewise, a student did not have enough time to complete all given tasks in time which restricted them from getting involved in sports (Nemeth, 2019).

(i) To examine the effect of sports' celebrity endorsement on consumer buying behavior and consumer sports' involvement. (ii) To investigate the mediating effect of consumer purchase intention between sports' celebrity endorsement, consumer buying behavior, and consumer sports' involvement.

Does sports' celebrity endorsement effect consumer buying behavior and consumer sports' involvement? Does consumer purchase intention mediate the relation between sports' celebrity endorsement, consumer buying behavior, and consumer sports' involvement? Almost, the rare investigation was done with the combination of four variables (i.e., (i) sports' celebrity endorsement, (ii) consumer purchase intention, (iii) consumer buying behavior, and (iv) consumer sports involvement). The major theoretical contribution was no model test with mediation (i.e., consumer purchase intention). It means the mediation relationship between sports' celebrity endorsement, consumer buying behavior, and consumer sports' involvement had not been yet before in one model. The model was used very first time with the above-mentioned variables. This study was helpful for policymakers (government), management of the soft drinks industry, sports celebrities and ad agencies. The management of soft drinks hired the sports celebrity and ad agency and paid both parties. Sports celebrities and ad agencies promoted the brands to seek customer attention. In this way, companies generated revenue and the policymaker gained revenue in the form of tax.

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⁵ Retrieved dated:9-5-2022 www.oganalysis.com

⁶ Retrieved date:7-5-2022 <https://amcollective.sg/reads/5-marketing-strategies-we-can-learn-from-pepsi>

⁷ Retrieved dated:9-5-2022 <https://amcollective.sg/reads/5-marketing-strategies-we-can-learn-from-pepsi>

2. Theory and Hypotheses

2.1. Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The TPB is perceived as one of the most important patterns that support the researcher in clarifying and understanding human behavior in an extensive variety of fields especially buying behavior (Quoquab et al., 2017). TPB observed the relative influence of customers' rules. The theory's basic variables included socio-psychological attitudes, subjective rules, and perceived behavioural influence on cooperative usage (Roos & Hahn, 2019). In this research, the customer's rules mean a self-expansion of a particular action in a special situation. TPB suggested that behaviour was forecast by behavioral intention and anticipated by three mechanisms: (i) attitude towards the behavior, (ii) subjective norms regarding the behavior, and (iii) perceived control over the behavior. This theory involves all these three mechanisms to influence the consumers' intentions solely in one direction (Sussman & Gifford, 2019). TPB followed the social identity approach as a new look at group processes and social norms in the context of student "binge drinking". TPB study's social identity performed as a driver for consumer buying behavior. It also supported clarifying how intellectual groups were attached to soft drinks and their drinking behavior (Willis et al., 2020). The theory of planned behavior represents the model of the current research. This theory explains the relationship between sports' celebrity endorsement, consumer buying behavior, consumer purchase intention, and consumer sports involvement. Sports celebrity endorsement positively affects consumer buying behavior, consumer sports involvement, and consumer purchase intention.

2.2. Sports Celebrity Endorsement and Consumer Buying Behavior

Various industries were using different innovative ideas to affect the attention of customers and their intentions towards the purchase of a product. Celebrity endorsement has an awesome effect on the purchase behavior of the endorsed brand of different companies (Uche, Otika, & Eke, 2021). Celebrity endorsement was extensively used in print media, radio, TV slots, and website advertisements to influence consumer buying behavior. In advertisements, celebrities act as motivators to modify the buying behavior of consumers (Wadhwa, 2020). In Goa, a study checked customer buying behavior and the impact of celebrity endorsement on their purchase behavior (Gauns et al., 2018). Sports' celebrity endorsement was first used in India where Indian Cricketers acted as models in a commercial for Bryl cream. Consequently, the Indian Cricket team earned Rs. 100 crore through sports endorsement (VASITA & GEHLOT, 2020). The fans paid more courtesy to the communication about the sports which ultimately endorsed the customers' attitudes and behaviors (Cunningham et al., 2021).

H1: "Sports celebrity endorsement is a positive and significant effect on consumer buying behavior".

2.3. Sports' Celebrity Endorsement and Consumers' Sports Involvement

Sports activities had their status in the world and had a chance to link activism and opposition. The integrity of a sportsman is to encourage his/her audience by transmitting a message (Cunningham et al., 2021). Highly involved fans paid more courtesy to the communications about the sports than those ideas ultimately endorsed the customers' attitudes and behaviors (Cunningham et al., 2021). Branding a sportsman was currently an effective technique in the promotion campaigns. Different sports channels and websites were offering various programs, i.e., sports news, and coverage of sports events which could play a strong role in branding a sportsman and celebrity endorsement (Hameed, Madhavan, & Arumugam, 2020). Superstar endorsement was a type of promotion, used by the executive brand. The sports celebrity endorsement had an advantageous effect, therefore, people involved in sports activities became loyal customers of different brands (Hameed, Madhavan, & Arumugam, 2020). The relationship between customers and a sports team could be defined as a customer's capital source for engagement with a sports team (Hollebeek, Srivastava, & Chen, 2019).

H2: "Sports celebrity endorsement has positive and significant effects on consumer sports involvement".

2.4. Mediated Role of Consumer Purchase Intention 1

Consumer's purchase intention had a major outcome on their buying behavior towards purchasing. This was because customers who had a high purchase intention would raise their consumer buying behavior (Bashir, 2019). The main objective was the power of purchase intention to expect the actual behaviours of clients. Purchase intention could thus either be positive or negative, depending on the intensity of the experiences (Eqwubo, 2020). Humour appealed more because people like humor and accept user control behavior in a lighter and indirect tone. Therefore, ads were posted on social media by companies with humour appeal to control and lead the consumer purchase intention (Eqwubo, 2020). For example, the overseas Muslim customers were living in different settings and non-muslim countries so they were highly conscious of the 'Halal' food products. Therefore, their concerns about the 'Halal' products revealed their purchase intention and buying behavior (Bashir, 2019) which ultimately could change their willingness to buy (Kumar et al., 2020).

H3: "Consumer purchase intention mediates the relationship between sports celebrity endorsement and consumer buying behavior".

2.5. Mediated Role of Consumer Purchase Intention 2

The properties of consumer sports' involvement were directly attached to the community by considering the game followers' and sponsor's product purchase intention Sports' involvement of fan followers was significant for the achievement of any sports events (Trivedi, 2020). Different brands or companies could push customers' intention to buy their products by encouraging sports participation. The part of self-perception connected a relationship between increased sports participation and the customer's purchase intention (Wu, 2019). Difficulties in sports participation such as time, prolonged travel, and emotional likes; for example, a scholar did not have sufficient time to finish all given activities in a limited time and, therefore, faced difficulty in getting involved in sports (Nemeth, 2019).

H4: "Consumer purchase intention mediates the relationship between sports celebrity endorsement and consumer sports involvement".

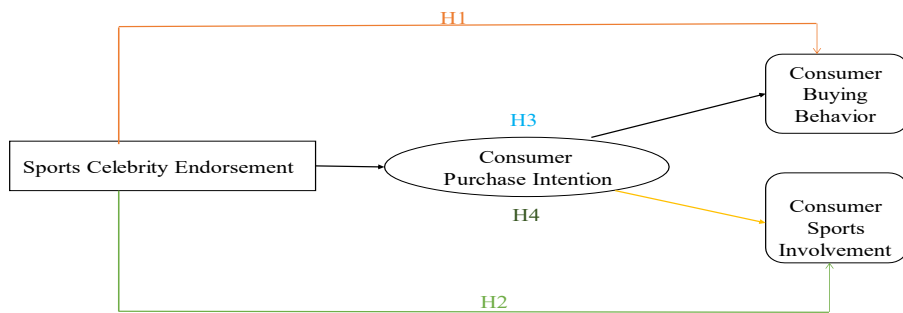


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Instrument Development

In this study, a questionnaire method was used for data collection and analysis. As the research followed an explanatory approach, a questionnaire was designed to gather data and explore the relationships between variables, particularly cause-and-effect dynamics. Data was initially collected from 365 respondents, but eight participants only partially completed the questionnaire, and seven did not return it. Therefore, the final analysis was based on responses from 350 participants. The accuracy of the survey results heavily relied on the quality of the questionnaire, which was carefully structured to minimize response errors (Krosnick, 2018). Although many questionnaires were available, the selected one was deemed the most appropriate because its language was specifically adapted for the target audience. The questionnaire included the best-suited question items and utilized a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. The scale was as follows: 1 for strongly disagree (SD), 2 for disagree (D), 3 for neutral (N), 4 for agree (A), and 5 for strongly agree (SA). The adapted questionnaire consisted of four main variables, measured using a total of 31 questions, referred to as scales. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure these variables. The sources of the adapted question items are outlined in Table 1. The scale adopted from different studies e.g., (Ghani & Kakakhel, 2011), (Somavarapu & Mubeena, 2017), (Khalid & Siddiqui, 2018), (Shahram G., 2011) and (Yoshida, 2014).

Table 1

Measures with Sources

Type of Variables	Variables	items	Sources
Independent	Sports' Celebrity Endorsement	9	(Ghani & Kakakhel, 2011)
Mediating	Consumer Purchase Intention	6	(Somavarapu & Mubeena, 2017)
Dependent	Consumer Buying Behavior	8	(George A., 2012) (Khalid et al., 2018)
Dependent	Consumer Sports' Involvement	8	(Shahram G., 2011; Yoshida et al., 2014).

3.2. Sampling Technique

There were many sampling methods available for gathering the research data and information from the respondents. In this investigation, *non-probability convenience sampling* was used as we selected participants depending on the accessibility comfort level at the period of study (Lavrakas, 2008). It was a type of convenience sampling because of the targeted audience depending on multiple factors; availability, given period, demographical nearness, or keenness by the respondent (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Demographic Variables

In this research, four types of demographic variables were used, i.e., gender, age, education level, and occupation. Details are given in Table 2.

Table 2

Demographic Statistics for Gender

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid 1	191	56.2	56.2	56.2
2	149	43.8	43.8	100.0
Total	340	100.0	100.0	

The demographic test was carried out to determine the categories of participants according to their gender. In Table 2, males were identified with 1 and females were with 2. In this study, the total number of male and female respondents was 191 and 149 respectively.

Table 3
Demographic Statistics for Age

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid 1	40	11.8	11.8	11.8
2	172	50.6	50.6	62.4
3	116	34.1	34.1	96.5
4	12	3.5	3.5	100.0
Total	340	100.0	100.0	

The demographic statistics for the frequencies test were carried out to know the categories of participants according to their age. The age of the participants was divided into four categories. In Table 3, the category identified the age of those participants whose age ranged between 18-24 years, category 2 indicated the age limit of those respondents who were between 25-30 years, the Category three showed the age limit of those respondents who were 31-36 years and the fourth category mentioned the participants who age limit was more than 36 years.

Table 4
Demographic Statistics for Education

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid 1	80	23.5	23.5	23.5
2	164	48.2	48.2	71.8
3	88	25.9	25.9	97.6
4	8	2.4	2.4	100.0
Total	340	100.0	100.0	

The demographic statistics for the frequencies test were carried out to know the categories of participants according to their education. The education of the respondents was divided into four categories. In Table 4, category one identified those respondents who belonged to intermediate education. In the second category, the respondents belonged to BS education. In the third category, the respondents belonged to MBA/MS education. The fourth category identified those respondents who belonged to PhD education.

Table 5
Demographic Statistics for Occupation

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid 1	196	57.6	57.6	57.6
2	80	23.5	23.5	81.2
3	64	18.8	18.8	100.0
Total	340	100.0	100.0	

The demographic statistics for the frequencies test were carried out to know the categories of participants according to their occupation. The occupation of the participants was divided into three categories. In table 5, category one belonged to students who had different types of education, the second category belonged to business persons who were doing different types of businesses and the last category of this table was working professionals who were doing different types of jobs.

4.2. Confirmatory Factor Analyses (CFA)

In AMOS for the Confirmatory Factor Analyses (CFA) all the latent variables were combined in a single measurement model to perform CFA in one step. That was a good method suggested by many researchers for assessing the measurement models. There were four latent variables, i.e., sports' celebrity endorsement, consumer purchase intention, consumer buying behavior, and consumer sports' involvement. These four variables had 31 question items.

To assess the model's suitability, various estimates were conducted, and the values of different indices were analyzed. The primary goal was to determine the standard estimations, such as factor loadings and other relevant metrics. Each item's standardized factor loading was required to be greater than 0.60; otherwise, the items needed to be removed. In this measurement model, only one item was excluded due to a factor loading below 0.60, specifically, SCE1, which had a loading of 0.21. Additionally, the modification indices in this model should not exceed 15, as higher values could cause issues. After identifying any necessary modifications, the estimates were recalculated to analyze other indices. If these values fell within acceptable limits, the model was deemed fit for analysis. The CMIN/DF value was used to evaluate the discrepancy between the model and the data. A value between one and two

was considered acceptable, representing a good fit for the Chi-square test. In this study, the Chi-square (CMIN) value was 1824.071, with a degree of freedom (DF) of 1000, resulting in a CMIN/DF value of 1.824, which was within the acceptable range. Table 6 reported a CFI value of 0.961, an SRMR value of 0.075, an RMSEA value of 0.059, a P-Close value of 0.070, and a TLI value of 0.932. All these values were considered within the recommended range, as outlined by Hair et al. (2014).

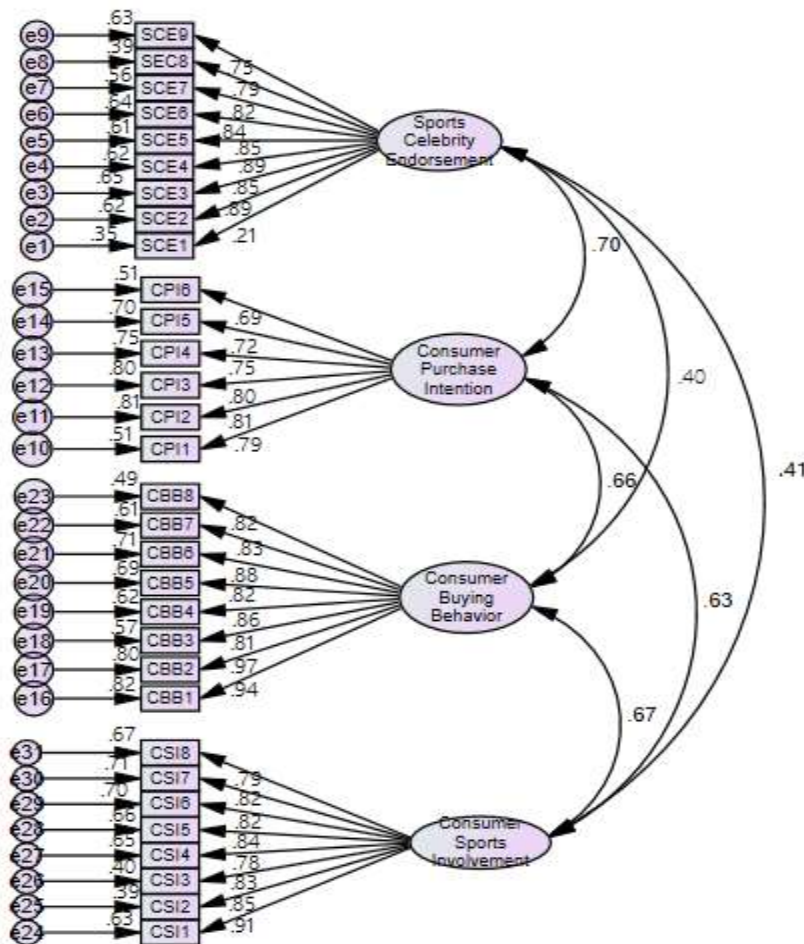


Figure 2: Measurement Model

Table 6
Model Fit Parameters

Measure	Estimate	Threshold	Interpretation
CMIN	1824.071	--	--
DF	1000	--	--
CMIN/DF	1.824	Between 1 and 3	Excellent
CFI	0.961	>0.95	Excellent
SRMR	0.075	<0.08	Excellent
RMSEA	0.059	<0.06	Excellent
PClose	0.070	>0.05	Excellent

The model of this study was considered a perfect fit because all the parameters fulfilled the Cutoff criteria (Gaskin, & Lim, 2016).

Table 7
Standard Cutoff Criteria

Measure	Terrible	Acceptable	Excellent
CMIN/DF	> 5	> 3	> 1
CFI	<0.90	<0.95	>0.95
SRMR	>0.10	>0.08	<0.08
RMSEA	>0.08	>0.06	<0.06
PClose	<0.01	<0.05	>0.05

*(Hu & Bentler, 1999) “Cutoff Criteria for Fit Indexes in Covariance Structure Analysis: Conventional Criteria Versus New Alternatives”) recommend combinations of measures. In this study, a combination of CFI>0.95 and SRMR<0.08, the addition of RMSEA<0.06 was used to further solidify the evidence.

4.3. Convergent Validity

In convergent validity, the rate of closeness was measured between indicators of the same variables. These indicator variables should support the same construct and their measurements must be highly correlated, therefore, an Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value was used and calculated with the help of the formula is $\sum K^2/n$. The standard value of AVE was 0.50 or more. Further, the Composite Reliability (CR) value was calculated with the numeric formula $(\sum K)^2 / [(\sum K)^2 + (\sum 1-k^2)]$ and the standard value was 0.60 or more. On the other hand, discriminant validity measured the constructs. Those were not supported and the correlated values were unrelated. In discriminant validity, we calculated the square root of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and the square root of AVE

required to compare with the correlation among all the variables of the research. The discriminant validity was achieved if the square root of AVE amounts of individual constructs were more than the amounts of correlation between two constructs (Sabir et al., 2022).

Table 8
Convergent Validity

Constructs	Items	Factor Loading	CR > 0.60	AVE > 0.50	$\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$
Sports Celebrity Endorsement	SCE2	0.89			
	SCE3	0.85			
	SCE4	0.89			
	SCE5	0.85			
	SCE6	0.84			
	SCE7	0.82			
	SCE8	0.79			
	SCE9	0.75	0.99	0.69	0.83
	Consumer Purchase Intention	CPI1	0.79		
	CPI2	0.81			
	CPI3	0.8			
	CPI4	0.75			
	CPI5	0.72			
	CPI6	0.69	0.98	0.57	0.76
Consumer Buying Behavior	CBB1	0.94			
	CBB2	0.97			
	CBB3	0.81			
	CBB4	0.86			
	CBB5	0.82			
	CBB6	0.88			
	CBB7	0.83			
	CBB8	0.82	0.99	0.65	0.81
	Consumer Sports Involvement	CSI1	0.91		
	CSI2	0.85			
	CSI3	0.83			
	CSI4	0.78			
	CSI5	0.84			
	CSI6	0.82			
	CSI7	0.82			
	CSI8	0.79	0.99	0.60	0.77

In table 8, the value of AVE and composite reliability for convergent validity and the value of square root for discriminant validity were calculated. The AVE value of four constructs of this research were more than 0.50 and were acceptable collectively. Means that all the items were correlated for each of their constructs, therefore, the convergent validity was achieved.

Table 9
Discriminant Validity

Latent variables	(SCE)	(CPI)	(CBB)	(CSI)
Sports Celebrity Endorsement (SCE)	0.83			
Consumer Purchase Intention (CPI)	0.70	0.76		
Consumer Buying Behavior (CBB)	0.40	0.66	0.81	
Consumer Sports Involvement (CSI)	0.41	0.63	0.67	0.77

In Table 9, the bold values in the table were discriminant validity. There was a need to identify the covariance amounts between the variables. In this research, all four bolded values of discriminant validities were more than the covariance between the interested variables. Hence, the discriminant validity was also achieved.

4.4. Structure Equation Modeling (SEM) Analysis

In the current study, structure equation modelling (SEM) analysis was used for the acceptance or rejection of the proposed hypotheses. This analysis gave us a clear, understandable, and testable statistical analysis with the graphical interface. It was different from the traditional methods as it estimated multiple equations simultaneously. The AMOS software was used in the SEM method. The focus of the hypothesized model was the standardized estimations (i.e., standardized regression weights).

4.5. Standardized Estimations

In this study, the standardized estimations model was applied, i.e., a relationship between the variables of sports' celebrity endorsement, consumer purchase intention, consumer buying behavior, and consumer sports' involvement were developed in the AMOS analysis. The below output diagram of SEM analysis expressed the yield of path analysis by showing the results of exogenous variables caused on endogenous variables.

The standardized estimations had shown the standardize factor loading and R^2 amount for sum of the variables. The standardized regression estimations of entire independent variables were associated with the dependent variables. In figure 4, the amount of R^2 remained 0.85 of consumer buying behavior and, the value of R^2 was 0.75 of consumer sports' involvement. The standard value of R^2 was 0.4 or more and indicated 85% change happened in endogenous variable (i.e., consumer buying behavior) with the involvement of exogenous variables. Similarly, it was also determinant that 75% changes occurred in the consumer sports'

involvement was due to exogenous variables (Ayesha et al., 2020). Various output indices were used in order to check the model was fit or no to the Structure Equation Modeling analysis.

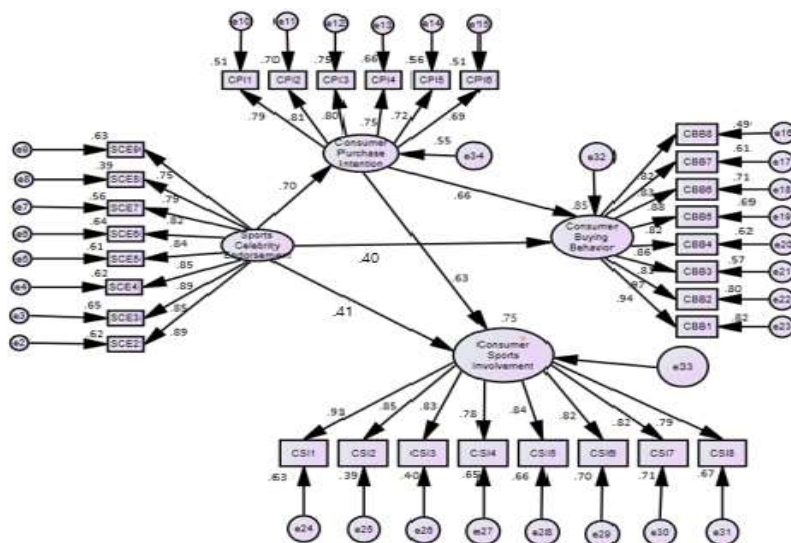


Figure 3: SEM Standardized Estimations

Table 10

SEM Regression Weights (Standardized Estimations)

Causal Paths	Estimates (β)	S.E.	C.R (t)	P	Hypotheses
CBB ← SCE	0.40	.077	2.81	***	Accepted
CSI ← SCE	0.41	.096	3.16	***	Accepted

In Table 10, the regression weights were shown in standardized weights. The path analysis expressed the acceptance and rejection of the projected postulates. The acceptance and rejection of the hypothesis were confirmed with the help of beta value (estimates) and p-value (significant level). The significant p-value was given in Table 10 with the sign of three stars (***). The p-value was considered significant when it was 0.05 or less.

The analysis explained that;

H1: Measures that sports’ celebrity endorsement (SCE) had a significant and positive effect on consumer buying behavior (CBB) and considered **accepted**. H1: β (beta value) = 0.40, t (C.R) = 2.81, p = (***) which means that positive and significant relationship between sports’ celebrity endorsement and consumer buying behavior.

H2: Measures the sports’ celebrity endorsement (SCE) had significantly and positively affected the consumer sports’ involvement (CSI) and considered **accepted** as H2: β (beta value) = 0.41, t (C.R) = 3.16, p = (***) . This means that there was a positive and significant relationship between the sports’ celebrity endorsement and consumer sports’ involvement.

4.6. Mediation Analysis

For checking the mediation analysis, five paths were formed as mentioned in Table 11. Moreover, beta and p values were identified here in Table 11.

Table 11

SEM Regression Weights

Causal Paths	Estimates (β)	S.E.	C.R (t)	P-value	Hypotheses
CBB ← SCE	0.40	.077	2.81	***	Accepted
CSI ← SCE	0.41	.096	3.16	***	Accepted
CPI ← SCE	0.70	.080	7.75	***	Accepted
CBB ← CPI	0.66	.101	5.45	***	Accepted
CSI ← CPI	0.63	0.059	4.16	***	Accepted

4.7. Mediation Analysis with DV1

For the 1st mediating hypothesis, three paths were formed. For instance, the first path was between Sports’ celebrity endorsement (SCE) as an independent variable and consumer purchase intention (CPI) as a mediating variable that remains as “path A”. The second path was formed between the Consumer Purchase Intention (CPI) as a mediating variable and Consumer Buying Behavior (CBB) as a first dependent variable and this path was denoted by “Path B”. The third path was created between the independent variable (SCE) and the first dependent variables (CBB) and this path was called “path C”.

The first mediating hypothesis is;

H3: Consumer purchase intention mediated the significance and positive relationship between sports’ celebrity endorsement and consumer buying behavior.

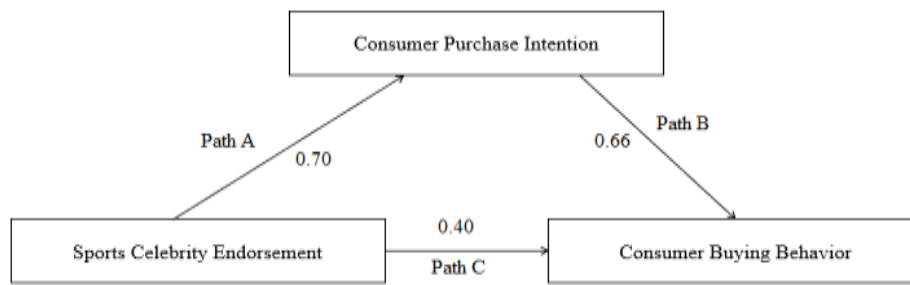


Figure 1: Mediation Relationship with DV1

The indirect effect 1 “Path A” = 0.70 (Significant)
 The indirect effect 2 “Path B” = 0.66 (Significant)
 The direct effect 3 “Path C” = 0.40 (Significant)

Table 12

Path Analysis

Relationship Paths	Standardized (β)	P	Outcomes
Path A = SCE \rightarrow CPI	0.70	***	Significant
Path B = CPI \rightarrow CBB	0.66	***	Significant
Path C = SCE \rightarrow CBB	0.40	***	Significant
A*B (0.70*0.66) A*B > C	0.46		Partial mediation because, direct effect of Path C is significant.

To exam the mediation association maximum was put in 1000 bootstrap samples, 95% bootstrap interval, and 95% bias-correlated confidence (Rehman et al., 2021).

In Table 12, the mediation indirect regression line was shown, β (beta value) = 0.46 (0.70 * 0.66) with p-value = (***) that was significant. The presence of Path A and Path B should be significant. Both path A and path B were significant and identified the mediation. Moving toward path C, if it was significant then there would be partial or incomplete mediation and if it was insignificant then there would be complete mediation (Awang, 2015). The results of the three paths (A, B, and C) were significant, consequently, partial mediation was proved. Consumer purchase intention partially mediated the direct and significant association between sports celebrity endorsement (SCE) and consumer buying behavior (CBB).

4.8. Mediation Analysis with DV2

For the 2nd indirect postulate, three paths were prepared. For instance, the first path was between sports celebrity endorsement (SEC) as an independent variable and, consumer purchase intention (CPI) as a mediating variable that is represented as “path A”. The second path was made between consumer purchase intention (CPI) as a mediating and consumer sports involvement (CSI) as a second dependent variable and, this path was denoted by “Path B”. The third path was developed between sports celebrity endorsement (SEC) as an independent variable and, consumer sports involvement (CSI) as a dependent variable (CSI) and this path was called “path C”.

The second mediating hypothesis is;

H4: Consumer purchase intention mediated the significance and positive relationship between sports’ celebrity endorsement and consumer sports’ involvement.

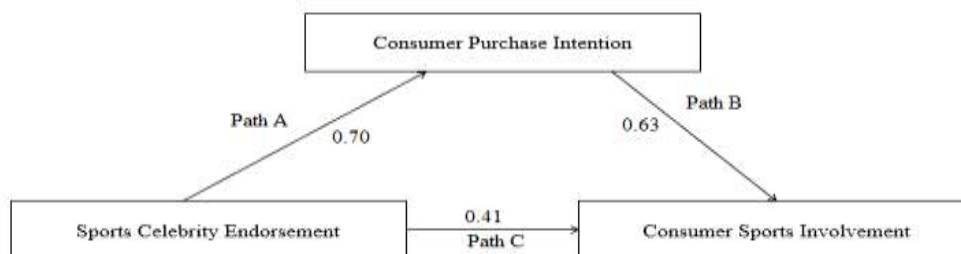


Figure 2: Mediation Relationship with DV2

The indirect effect 1 “Path A” = 0.70 (Significant)
 The indirect effect 2 “Path B” = 0.63 (Significant)
 The direct effect 3 “Path C” = 0.41 (Significant)

Table 13

Path Analyses

Relationship Paths	Standardized (β)	P-value	Results
Path A = SCE \rightarrow CPI	0.70	***	Significant
Path B = CPI \rightarrow CSI	0.63	***	Significant
Path C = SCE \rightarrow CSI	0.41	***	Significant
A*B (0.70*0.63) A*B > C	0.44	Partial mediation because, direct effect Path C is significant	

To verify the mediation relationship, bootstrapping was applied using 1000 bootstrap samples. Consequently, the maximum likelihood estimation was achieved, i.e., 95% bootstrap interval and 95% bias-correlated confidence (Rehman et al., 2021). In Table 13, the mediation indirect regression line was identified; β (beta value) = 0.44 (0.70 * 0.63) and p-value = (***) which was considered a significant value. The presence of Path A and Path B is required to be significant. In the current study, both path A and path B were significant and identified the presence of mediation. Moving toward path C, if it was significant then there would be partial or incomplete mediation and if it was insignificant then there would be complete mediation (Awang, 2015). Likewise, the results of three paths (A, B, and C) were significant which confirmed the partial mediation in the current data analysis. Consumer purchase intention partially mediates the positive and significant connection between sports' celebrity endorsement (SCE) and consumer sports' involvement (CSI).

5. Discussion

This research initially proposed four hypotheses, which were tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The study focused on the soft drink industry, with results applicable in a cross-sectional context. The study examined how sports celebrity endorsements influence consumer buying behavior and sports involvement. White, Goddard and Wilbur (2009) highlighted that celebrity endorsements are one of the most effective factors in encouraging consumers to purchase a product. Similarly, Khan and Lodhi (2016) noted that celebrity endorsements are widely used across industries as a successful marketing strategy that raises awareness and elicits positive feedback. According to Khalid and Siddiqui (2018), consumers are often influenced by the lifestyles of their favorite celebrities, which impacts their purchasing behavior, leading to increased profitability for brands. The presence of celebrities in advertising significantly affects customer preferences, which can result in higher sales (Choi & Rifon, 2007). Therefore, this study aimed to explore the role of consumer purchase intention as a mediator between sports celebrity endorsement, consumer buying behavior, and sports involvement. To ensure reliability and validity, the best possible items were selected, and various tests were conducted. SEM results indicated that the first hypothesis, examining the direct relationship between sports celebrity endorsement and consumer buying behavior, was accepted. Both variables showed positive beta values, and the p-value was less than 0.05. The study found that sports celebrity endorsements in the soft drink sector had a significant impact on consumer buying decisions. Cronbach's alpha values were calculated for four variables: sports celebrity endorsement, consumer purchase intention, consumer buying behavior, and sports involvement. The results confirmed that all values met the acceptable threshold of 0.60 or higher, indicating internal consistency between the variables (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1978). This means that the questionnaire items effectively measured the relevant constructs. The data was analyzed using AMOS software to assess the model fit. The software evaluated parameters such as the Chi-square test, degrees of freedom, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and P-Close values. All values fell within the acceptable range (Hair Jr et al., 2014). The factor loadings of all items exceeded 0.60, except for one item (SCE1), which had a loading of 0.21 and was removed. The remaining 30 items were considered stable, as their factor loadings were above 0.60 (Afthanorhan, Ahmad, & Mamat, 2014). The second hypothesis, examining the direct relationship between sports celebrity endorsement and sports involvement, was also accepted, with significant beta and p-values ($p < 0.05$). Previous research has demonstrated a positive and significant relationship between celebrity attractiveness and high consumer involvement in products (Arora et al., 2019). Sports sponsorship and fan involvement were also found to be strong indicators of sports-related consumer behavior (Shank & Beasley, 1998). A direct link was established between sports involvement and purchasing behaviour, where greater involvement led to a higher likelihood of purchasing the endorsed product (Shuart, 2007). Mediation analysis revealed interesting findings. Using bootstrapping and maximum likelihood techniques, consumer purchase intention was tested as a mediating variable between sports celebrity endorsement, consumer buying behavior, and sports involvement. This framework made the study unique. The third hypothesis tested the mediating role of consumer purchase intention between sports celebrity endorsement and consumer buying behavior. The result was partially accepted, with a positive beta value and significant p-value. Similarly, the fourth hypothesis, testing the mediating effect of purchase intention between sports celebrity endorsement and sports involvement, was also partially accepted. Both the third and fourth hypotheses were considered partial mediations due to significant path C. Previous research indicated that consumer involvement partially mediated the relationship between celebrity attractiveness and purchase intention (Arora et al., 2019). Other studies have shown that celebrities generate positive responses toward purchase intentions, with less consumer involvement potentially reducing this effect (Atkin & Block, 1983). Sports attachment also positively and partially mediates the relationship between involvement and purchase intention, as well as between brand image and purchase intention, and word of mouth and purchase intention (Dalangin et al., 2020). These findings suggest that consumer purchase intention as a mediator can help managers increase sales of soft drink brands, provided they understand and utilize its role effectively. The mediation analysis highlighted the importance of paths A, B, and C.

5.1. Managerial Implications

In this study, the investigation was done with the combination of four constructs, i.e., the sports' celebrity endorsement, consumer purchase intention, consumer buying behavior, and consumer sports' involvement. This type of research work was rarely done with mediation (i.e., consumer purchase intention). This study would be helpful for the policymakers, and soft drinks management; (i) to select different types of policies, (ii) decisions to improve their promotional campaign to seek the attention of customers, and (iii) the improve soft drinks contents for the sack of customers' health. The government should impose more tax on the soft drinks

industry to gain double benefits; firstly, by generating high revenue for the country, and secondly by preventing a layman's life from the direct threat of different types of diseases.

6. Conclusion

In Pakistan, the consumption of soft drinks is increasing day by day. Soft drinks have high sugar and acidic content both regular and diet products which directly cause harmful impacts on the human body. Presently, the sports celebrity endorsement has changed the nature of advertisement and has become one of the most important tools of advertising companies. Such endorsements can help the marketer to understand consumer reactions towards a particular celebrity. This study proved that sports celebrity endorsement had positive and significant effects on the consumer buying behavior and consumer sports involvement but consumer purchase intention partially mediated the relationship between sports celebrity endorsement, consumer buying behavior, and consumer sports involvement. This study has contributed theoretically and practically. However, the regulatory authorities have restricted the buying and selling of soft drinks in educational institutions, because energy drinks have a bad impact on human health. But the problem still exists in our country and a large rate of consumption was observed among the youth. The major reason was the role of celebrity endorsement.

6.1. Limitations

The results of this study could be generalized to the soft drinks sector and Lahore city. The study was limited to cross cross-sectional time horizon; meaning that, the data was collected in a one-time period. In this research, the non-probability convenient sampling technique was used. The study was only limited to the soft drinks sector. The data was collected from the general public of Lahore. The theoretical framework was limited to four variables, i.e., sports' celebrity endorsement, consumer purchase intention, consumer buying behavior, and consumer sports' involvement. This research only used the quantitative methods, i.e., Confirmatory Factor Analyses (CFA) and Structure Equation Modeling (SEM).

6.2. Future Directions

In the future, similar studies could be carried out in other regions and cities of Pakistan, such as Karachi, Islamabad, Rawalpindi, and Multan. A longitudinal time frame could be used for data collection to observe trends over time. Researchers might also consider different sampling techniques, such as purposive sampling, quota sampling, or snowball sampling. Future studies could focus on specific groups of respondents, such as particular age groups, genders, or users of specific products. Additionally, similar research could be applied to other sectors, including tea, energy drinks, flavored milk, and the mineral water industry. New variables could be incorporated into the proposed framework, such as athlete activity level, emotional attachment, commodity value, purchase intention awareness, purchase intention consideration, consumer sports behaviour, and consumer engagement. A mixed-methods approach could also be employed for future studies to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

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