

Persona Collapse and Brand Risk: A Case Study on the Emotional Identification Mechanism in Celebrity Endorsements

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Abstract. In the digital media era, the rapid development of the fan economy has made celebrities' "public persona" a core asset in brand endorsements. However, frequent incidents of persona collapse—such as tax evasion and moral misconduct—have posed serious reputational and operational risks to brands. This study focuses on the mechanism of emotional identification in celebrity endorsements and explores the chain effect of persona collapse on brand value. Through literature review and case analysis—with emphasis on high-profile incidents such as the tax evasion case of popular actress Fan Bingbing—the research examines how persona construction fosters consumers' emotional engagement, and how persona collapse triggers a three-stage risk transmission: "trust breakdown – value backlash – economic loss." The results indicate that while emotional identification enhances brand communication and conversion efficiency, it also accompanies high moral and reputational risks. The study proposes a "Persona Resonance – Risk Chain Reaction" dynamic model and recommends that brands establish a systematic risk prevention system, including persona background checks, real-time monitoring, and crisis response plans. This paper deepens the understanding of the double-edged sword effect of emotional marketing and provides practical references for brand risk governance.

Keywords: Persona collapse; brand risk; emotional identification; celebrity endorsement; risk transmission.

1. Introduction

The fan economy has experienced explosive growth in the digital media era, and the "public persona" of celebrities has become a core asset in the field of brand endorsements. In recent years, highly symbolic labels such as "academic genius," "warm-hearted man," and "independent woman" have been widely used in commercial endorsements, serving as important mediums for fans' emotional projection and identity recognition. According to industry data, the total scale of China's idol market continues to grow and is expected to reach 140 billion yuan by 2022, demonstrating the immense influence of the idol economy. At the same time, the bond between brands and celebrity endorsers is becoming closer. Many brands like to work with idols for endorsements, and they see value in the emotion-driven buying behaviors created by their public images. This way of working is an important part of brand communication, especially in areas like beauty, products for mothers and children, and fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG). But there are many cases where celebrities lose their good public image, like tax evasion or bad behavior. These problems can hurt the brand image.

This study is important for both theory and practice in brand communication and risk management. In theory, it helps to use brand co-creation and emotional identification ideas on social media. It looks at how public images are built and how emotions are used. In the current social media environment, the way fans and celebrities interact has changed a lot. It has moved from one-way admiration to two-way interaction and even co-creation. This change calls for new ideas to explain and guide practice. In practice, this research can give brands a clear way to check endorsement risks and handle crises. In recent years, many celebrity endorsements have failed. Examples include weight loss products with false ads, cosmetics with too much heavy metal, overhyped health supplements, and financial platforms with scandals. These problems cause money loss for consumers and also damage the trust that brands have built.

This study looks at two main parts. One is how celebrity personas are built. The other is the risks when these personas break down. It studies how personas push emotional connection and buying

motivation on social media. It also studies how brands can keep the benefits of endorsements and avoid risks. The research uses a literature review to look at academic papers, industry reports, and real cases. This way, it can clearly see what has been done and what is missing. It also shows how emotions are used and how risks spread in persona marketing. Additionally, this study incorporates case analysis to examine typical incidents of celebrity persona collapse in recent years, analyzing brands' response strategies and the evolution of public sentiment, thereby extracting actionable crisis management recommendations.

The ultimate goal of this research is to construct a theoretical model integrating the dual dimensions of "emotional identification–risk response" to provide decision-making support for brand endorsement management. To achieve this goal, the study will combine qualitative and case analysis methods to deeply analyze brands' response strategies and the evolution of public sentiment in typical persona collapse incidents, thereby proposing actionable risk governance recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Symbiotic Mechanism Between Celebrity Persona and Brand Communication

Celebrity persona is essentially a quantifiable emotional asset, constructed through a social media content matrix (e.g., documentaries, live streams, topic campaigns) to create an "immersive persona narrative [1]." This narrative approach not only strengthens fans' emotional connection but also provides an effective emotional medium for brand communication. For instance, Wang Yibo reinforced his "spirit of exploration" persona through the documentary "Into the Wild", deeply aligning with the Norwegian outdoor brand HELLY HANSEN's ethos of "Born for Remoteness." This collaboration contributed to a 210% sales growth for the brand in its first year in the Chinese market. Such a symbiotic relationship reflects the two-way value exchange between brands and celebrities: brands leverage celebrities to enhance exposure and emotional identification, as seen with Chanel using Wang Yibo to convey its "elegant rebellion" brand DNA, generating over 800 million topic views within 12 hours; celebrities, in turn, enrich brand value through their personas, such as a maternal and child brand leveraging a celebrity's "independent woman" persona to elevate product functionality into an emotional symbol, achieving a 48% quarter-on-quarter sales growth.

However, this highly symbiotic relationship also carries significant fragility. When a persona becomes overly intertwined with commercial interests, brands easily become "collateral" for the celebrity's personal risks. For example, the profit dispute between Li Ziqi and Weinian Company led to a 30% decline in the valuation of related consumer brands, underscoring the risk transmission effect of the "persona as brand" model. While existing research has revealed the value co-creation mechanism between persona and brands, it insufficiently addresses the risk mechanisms inherent in this asymmetrical dependency. Building on the work of Chen and Zhang, this paper introduces a risk perspective to systematically analyze the uncertainties in the value symbiosis between persona and brands, thereby supplementing the current gap in risk mechanism discussion.

2.2. The Consumption Conversion Path of Emotional Identification

The three-dimensional model of "projection-internalization-co-creation" proposed by provides a classical theoretical framework for understanding fan behavior [2]. This model suggests that fans project their self-expectations onto a celebrity's persona through emotional projection, internalize the values and lifestyles conveyed by the persona, and ultimately express their identity through consumption and content co-creation [3]. validated the conversion efficiency of this path through big data analysis on social media, demonstrating a significant positive correlation between the intensity of emotional identification and consumption motivation. For example, during the persona collapse incident of Kris Wu, the daily return rate for products of his collaborating brands exceeded 25%, reflecting the reversal effect of broken emotional identification on consumption behavior.

Although existing research has revealed the driving effect of emotional identification on consumption, the psychological mechanisms and emotional transition pathways during the collapse

of identification remain underexplored. Particularly in cases involving moral issues (such as tax evasion or illegal activities), how fans' perception of betrayal influences brand evaluation and behavioral responses requires further deconstruction. Based on the theories of Thomson, Zhou, and other scholars, this paper focuses on analyzing the psychological motivations behind the reversal of emotional identification and its negative impact on brand equity, thereby contributing to the study of the negative path from emotion to behavior.

2.3. Chain Reaction of Brand Risks from Celebrity Persona Collapse

Based on incidents involving the collapse of top celebrity personas in China over the past five years (e.g., Wu Yifan, Fan Bingbing, Li Yifeng), scholars have summarized a three-stage model of brand risk transmission: trust rupture, value backlash, and economic loss. In Fan Bingbing's tax evasion case, the lending platform she endorsed experienced a 65% plunge in user numbers due to its association with "illegal and untrustworthy" behavior, demonstrating the rapid breakdown of trust mechanisms. An international cosmetics brand, which failed to terminate its contract with her promptly, was accused by consumers of "encouraging tax evasion," leading to a long-term decline in brand favorability, reflecting the value backlash effect. A milk powder brand, in an attempt to restore its reputation, invested 150% of its original budget but still failed to curb user attrition, highlighting the severity and irreversibility of economic loss [4,5]. Industry reports indicate that over 90% of brands lack emergency response mechanisms for celebrity persona collapses, with crisis response delays typically exceeding 48 hours [6].

While existing studies have preliminarily categorized the stages of risk transmission, they largely remain confined to phenomenological descriptions and case-specific summaries, failing to propose systematic intermediate variables and moderating mechanisms. In particular, comparative research on the intensity and duration of impacts on brands across different types of persona collapses—such as moral violations, business disputes, and public-private image conflicts—is still lacking. Building on the existing three-stage transmission model, this paper will introduce three sets of variables—"persona type, collapse trigger, and brand attributes"—to construct a more explanatory risk diffusion model, addressing the current research gaps in theoretical abstraction and empirical comparison.

2.4. Research Gaps

Existing literature exhibits two major research gaps: First, there is insufficient research on psychological triggering mechanisms. Although it is known that ethical incidents (e.g., tax evasion) can deconstruct persona symbols, academia has yet to quantitatively reveal the psychological threshold between "illegal behavior" and "symbolic collapse"—specifically, the intensity of information and degree of moral deviation at which public identification reverses [7]. Second, the variable relationships within dynamic transmission pathways have not been fully elucidated. For instance, in the case of Li Ziqi's content hiatus, the imbalance in profit distribution between the IP party and brand partners accelerated the trust breakdown, yet this variable has not been incorporated into existing risk models [8].

To address these gaps, this paper proposes integrating big data methods with comparative case studies to construct a full-cycle database of "persona construction–collapse–brand crisis." By using Python to crawl social media comments for sentiment evolution analysis and tracking changes in brand sales and public opinion data, a dynamically updatable risk early warning algorithm will be established. This approach not only addresses the empirical and dynamic limitations of existing literature but also provides brands with actionable risk management tools.

3. Case Analysis

3.1. Case Background

As a once widely influential A-list actress, Fan Mou, through her team's meticulously crafted persona of an "independent woman" and "paragon of hard work," became a benchmark endorser in

multiple consumer sectors and was regarded by numerous fans as a "role model for the new-era woman." Between 2018 and 2021, her endorsement portfolio extensively covered core sectors such as cosmetics, maternal and infant care, and finance, demonstrating strong cross-industry commercial adaptability. For example, an international skincare brand deeply aligned with her using the theme of "The Power of Her"; a domestic milk powder brand transformed product functionality into a symbol of emotional support through the emotional narrative of "single mothers can also provide a high-quality life for their children"; and a financial lending platform leveraged her image to convey the value proposition of "women's economic independence," reinforcing the alignment between her persona and brand philosophy.

According to industry reports, the sales performance of related brands saw significant growth after Fan Mou's endorsement, with some brands achieving quarterly sales increases of 35% to 50% at one point. This reflects how the emotional identification triggered by her "independent woman" persona was translated into consumer motivation to some extent. However, this case also highlights the potential risks for brands that overly rely on celebrity personas—once the persona collapses, the endorsed brands may face widespread backlash.

3.2. Social Media Operation Strategy and Emotional Connection Pathway

Fan Mou's team employed a highly systematic social media content matrix to continuously construct and reinforce her "independent and hardworking" persona, thereby facilitating the conversion of commercial value. At the strategic level, the team released documentary-style vlogs (e.g., *A Day in the Life of Fan Mou*) showcasing her rigorous daily routine—such as "early morning workouts → back-to-back work schedules"—to shape a public image of self-discipline and diligence, enhancing the authenticity and relatability of her persona. Simultaneously, on platforms like Weibo, the team created and operated persona-related hashtags such as #FanMou FeminineGrowthQuotes, guiding fans to equate "purchasing endorsed products" with "supporting women's self-growth" through emotional resonance, thereby bridging the gap between emotional identification and consumer behavior.

This refined operational strategy gradually formed a conversion pathway of "persona construction → emotional resonance → community engagement → consumer purchase," wherein "authenticity" and "a sense of involvement" served as key entry points for fan emotional connections. According to consumer research conducted by a partnered cosmetics brand, nearly 80% of purchasers indicated that their buying behavior was directly driven by their identification with Fan Mou's "hardworking spirit." However, this deep emotional bonding also laid the groundwork for severe backlash in the event of a persona collapse.

3.3. Persona Collapse Process and Brand Risk Diffusion Mechanism

In October 2018, Fan Mou was penalized in accordance with the law by tax authorities for tax-related issues, triggering a chain of negative reactions among the brands she endorsed and comprehensively demonstrating the pathway of brand risk transmission resulting from persona collapse. In the short term following the incident, the endorsed brands urgently removed related promotional materials. A maternal and infant product brand faced significant consumer boycotts in its live streams, leading to a notable increase in return rates. A financial lending platform also experienced a decline in new user registrations due to its association with an "illegal and untrustworthy" image. More notably, an international cosmetics brand, which failed to terminate its contract with her promptly, was reported by some consumers to consumer associations for "value misguidance," casting doubt on its brand reputation.

Following the persona collapse, fans quickly transitioned from emotional "participants" to "adjudicators," redirecting their anger toward the brands and forming a chain reaction of "trust rupture → brand denial → collective boycott." The intensity of such emotionally driven boycotts often far exceeds the impact of product-related issues alone.

From the perspective of brand response, most related companies lacked public opinion early warning and crisis response mechanisms during the initial stages of the incident. Failure to promptly sever ties with the spokesperson or proactively address the issue led to an expanded perception of "shared downfall" between the brands and the spokesperson. The delay in crisis management further exacerbated user dissatisfaction.

In the long term, brand image recovery faced significant challenges. Some affected brands invested funds far exceeding their routine marketing budgets to rebuild consumer trust. However, third-party public opinion monitoring data indicated that the favorability of certain brands among female consumer groups failed to return to pre-incident levels for an extended period. This case demonstrates that the collapse of a celebrity persona triggers not only a temporary public opinion crisis but also a multidimensional, long-term systematic impact on brand equity.

4. Discussion

4.1. Model Construction

Based on a systematic review of relevant theories and typical cases, this study proposes a dynamic "Persona Resonance–Risk Fission" model to elucidate the complete evolution path from value co-creation to brand crisis in celebrity endorsement activities. The model follows a transmission logic of "Persona Construction → Emotional Identification → Brand Transformation → Persona Collapse → Emotional Backlash → Brand Crisis," emphasizing that endorsement benefits and potential risks are, in fact, a bidirectional evolutionary process under the same emotional mechanism.

In the persona building stage, celebrities use social media stories and simple symbols to make a strong public image. In the emotional stage, fans move from seeing themselves in the celebrity to feeling real emotions for them. This gives fans inner reasons to buy. In the brand stage, the link between the celebrity image and the brand values becomes very close. This makes fans buy more and create content.

When a persona breaks down, the emotional connection quickly turns around. Fans, with damaged identification, show strong negative emotions. This causes a crisis of trust for the brand and a loss of market value. This model moves past the limits of past studies, which only look at the good effects of endorsements or only at crisis events. It brings both good effects and bad effects together in one framework.

4.2. Deconstruction of Core Mechanisms

The model has two parts. One is positive empowerment. The other is negative fission. It explains how emotional identification can help or hurt brand endorsements. The positive part starts with "Persona Making Brand Stronger," where celebrities add to brand uniqueness and emotional pull with a fitting persona. Next is "Fan Projection Driving Purchases," where audiences see themselves in the persona and take in its values, then turn this into buying behavior. Then "User Collaboration in Content Co-creation" builds stronger brand communities and spreads the brand wider.

The negative part starts with "Persona Fracture," where moral scandals or image changes make fans feel "Identity Loss." This breaks down the self-image fans built from the persona. Then

"Identification Breakdown Triggers Brand Trust Crisis" happens. Fans pass their negative feelings to the brand because they feel emotionally betrayed. This leads to broken trust and boycott actions.

These two parts show that emotional identification can give strong power for brand growth. It can also cause big risks when it turns the other way. Its intensity and depth directly influence the stability of brand equity and the cost of recovery.

4.3. Theoretical Contributions and Managerial Implications

The theoretical contributions of this study are mainly reflected in three aspects: expanding the explanatory boundaries of emotional identification theory in brand communication, particularly in high-risk endorsement scenarios; proposing a three-stage reaction chain of "Emotional Entrapment

→ Trust Breakdown → Brand Transfer," which clarifies the internal mechanism of the negative evolution of emotional identification; and advocating for celebrity endorsement strategies to shift from "emotion-driven" to a dual-dimensional management approach that balances emotional appeal with risk mitigation, offering insights for both brand relationship and crisis communication theories. At the level of managerial practice, brands need to establish systematic persona screening and risk early warning mechanisms before signing contracts, integrating big data analytics to dynamically evaluate celebrities' public image, historical behavior, and public opinion trends. Contracts must explicitly include "reputation exit" clauses and detailed ethical constraints to provide legal basis for crisis response. In the event of a crisis, brands must swiftly initiate responses, rebuild trust through transparent communication and emotional remediation, and prevent the spread of negative sentiment to brand equity. The combination of the above theoretical and managerial recommendations provides brands with a decision-making framework that emphasizes both scholarly rigor and actionable strategies in high-emotional-projection endorsement environments.

5. Conclusion

This study systematically analyzes the construction, transformation, and collapse of Fan Bingbing's "independent woman" persona, revealing the internal mechanism through which celebrity personas empower brand value via social media narratives and emotional bonding, while also fully demonstrating the three-stage brand risk transmission path of "trust-values-economics" triggered by persona collapse. The findings indicate that while emotional identification can significantly enhance brand communication and conversion efficiency, it harbors high moral and reputational uncertainties. Once a persona collapses, originally positive emotions rapidly reverse into intense backlash, leading to multidimensional and long-term negative impacts on brands. Thus, the study concludes that when employing celebrity persona strategies, brands must simultaneously emphasize emotional resonance mechanisms and structured risk prevention, establishing a systematic management system including persona screening, contractual constraints, and crisis response to achieve sustainable value utilization in the fan economy.

This study offers several valuable references for research in brand communication and risk governance. Theoretically, it proposes an integrated "Persona Resonance-Risk Fission" model and a three-stage reaction chain of "Emotional Entrapment → Trust Breakdown → Brand Transfer," expanding the explanatory power of emotional identification theory in negative scenarios and laying the foundation for subsequent empirical research on related mechanisms. In practice, it gives a clear framework and simple advice for companies to find emotional bonding risks in endorsement work and build early management systems. It gives useful guidance for industries that depend a lot on persona marketing, like cosmetics, products for mothers and babies, and fast-moving consumer goods.

Future research could focus more on using big data and computer methods. These methods would measure and sort out the emotional effects and risk levels of different celebrity personas, like "positive energy youth," "traditional culture ambassador," or "scholarly idol." And, research could also use cross-cultural views. This would help to compare how China and other countries handle celebrity personas and deal with their downfalls. This work can help create better risk prediction tools and early warning systems.

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