

## Urban Transformation in Cirebon: Celebrity Endorsement, Global Pop Culture, and Youth Consumption

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### ABSTRACT

In the era of global pop culture and digital media proliferation, celebrity endorsement has become a key strategy in marketing communication, particularly for engaging youth consumers who are deeply embedded in fandom communities. This research examines celebrity endorsement as a communication management practice by analyzing how the global K-pop group Blackpink functions as a brand ambassador for Oreo among teenage consumers in Cirebon City, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research draws on semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation of Instagram-based promotional materials. The findings demonstrate that Blackpink performs three interrelated communicative roles: visual testimonial provision, endorsement and symbolic reinforcement, and narrative centrality within brand communication. Rather than relying on informational persuasion, Oreo strategically manages meaning through visual symbolism, fandom-oriented engagement, and platform-specific narratives that enable teenagers to co-create brand meaning. Conceptually, the study advances communication management scholarship by positioning celebrity endorsement as a process of meaning management, stakeholder engagement, and strategic narrative construction, particularly within secondary urban contexts shaped by global media flows.

**Keyword:** Communication Management; Celebrity Endorsement; Meaning Management; Strategic Narrative; Youth Stakeholders; Qualitative Case Study

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### INTRODUCTION

Celebrity endorsement has become a central strategy in contemporary marketing communication, particularly in campaigns targeting young consumers embedded in digital and popular culture ecosystems (Audrezet et al., 2020). Brand ambassadors act as symbolic carriers of brand meaning, transferring attributes such as credibility, attractiveness, and lifestyle associations to the endorsed product (Erdogan, 1999; Cornelissen, 2023). Prior research highlights that effective brand ambassadors do not merely promote products but actively shape brand narratives and consumer identification processes (Erdogan, 1999; Macnamara, 2018).

The global diffusion of Korean popular culture (the Korean Wave or Hallyu) has intensified the strategic value of K-pop idols in international branding (Meng et al., 2021). Groups such as Blackpink command transnational fandoms, high social media visibility, and strong emotional attachment among youth audiences. As a result, their endorsement power extends beyond traditional source credibility, functioning instead as a form of cultural capital embedded in global youth identity (Park, 2020).

Several previous studies have examined the phenomenon of celebrity endorsement in the context of K-pop and youth consumption. Lee and Lee (2021) investigated the impact of K-pop idol endorsements on brand attitude and purchase intention among Korean and international fans, finding that parasocial relationships significantly mediated the endorsement effect. Similarly, Kim and Kim (2022) explored how Blackpink's endorsement of various global brands influenced brand loyalty among Southeast Asian youth, highlighting the role of social media engagement in amplifying endorsement effectiveness. More recently, (Nurfalalah et al., 2024) examined the role of global ambassadors and brand ambassadors for Indonesian and Malaysian youth, demonstrating that global ambassadors play a major role in shaping lifestyle image and identity, encouraging consumption of international products, and shaping global trends, while young people retain local cultural values that influence their perception of products and brands (Argo & Dahl, 2020).

Oreo's collaboration with Blackpink represents a strategic intersection between global pop culture and localized urban markets (Simon, 2025). In Indonesia, and particularly in secondary cities such as Cirebon, which are experiencing urban transformation, teenagers constitute a digitally literate consumer segment highly responsive to celebrity-driven communication (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Despite the growing body of research on K-pop endorsements, a significant gap remains in understanding how celebrity endorsement functions as a communication management practice in secondary urban contexts. Most existing studies focus on metropolitan or national-level consumer responses, overlooking how youth in smaller cities interpret and engage with global celebrity endorsements through localized cultural lenses (Bazi et al., 2023). Furthermore, previous research has predominantly examined endorsement effectiveness through quantitative measures of brand attitude and purchase intention, with limited attention to the qualitative processes of meaning management, stakeholder engagement, and narrative construction that underpin celebrity endorsement as a strategic communication practice (Casaló et al., 2020). This study addresses these gaps by investigating the communicative roles of Blackpink as Oreo's brand ambassador and examining how teenagers in Cirebon co-create brand meaning through their engagement with the campaign (Han & Eisingerich, 2023).

The novelty of this research lies in its conceptual and contextual contributions. Conceptually, the study advances communication management scholarship by reframing celebrity endorsement from a tactical marketing activity into a strategic process of meaning management, stakeholder engagement, and symbolic governance (Macnamara, 2018). Contextually, the research extends understanding of celebrity endorsement to secondary urban contexts, demonstrating how global pop culture symbols are interpreted and negotiated within local youth cultures in cities like Cirebon, which are undergoing urban transformation yet remain underrepresented in communication research (Belanche et al., 2021).

This study, therefore, addresses two research questions: (1) How does Blackpink perform its role as a brand ambassador for Oreo among teenagers in Cirebon? and (2) How do Oreo's Instagram-based marketing communication strategies influence teenagers' purchase interest? The primary objective of this research is to analyze the communicative functions of Blackpink as a brand ambassador and to understand the mechanisms through which Oreo's

strategic communication engages youth stakeholders in secondary urban contexts (Zhou et al., 2021). The benefits of this study include providing empirical insights for marketing practitioners seeking to design culturally resonant endorsement strategies in emerging urban markets and contributing theoretical advancements to communication management literature by illustrating how meaning management and stakeholder engagement operate beyond metropolitan centers.

## **METHOD**

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to enable an in-depth exploration of marketing communication practices and consumer interpretations within a specific socio-cultural context (Yin, 2018). A case study approach is appropriate for examining contemporary, particularly in communication and branding research.

### **Research Design and Context**

The case selected for this study is Oreo's collaboration with Blackpink as a brand ambassador, focusing on teenage consumers in Cirebon City, Indonesia. Cirebon represents a secondary urban area experiencing ongoing urbanisation and increased exposure to global media, making it a relevant context for examining how global celebrity endorsement is interpreted at the local level (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023).

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through three complementary techniques to ensure methodological rigour. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four teenage consumers aged, selected using purposive sampling. Informants were chosen based on two criteria: (1) familiarity with Blackpink as a K-pop group (Spry et al., 2011), and (2) prior exposure to or purchase of Oreo Blackpink-edition products. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility to explore personal interpretations, emotional responses, and purchasing motivations while maintaining consistency across participants.

Second, non-participant observation was carried out to examine Oreo Blackpink-edition packaging, in-store displays, and promotional materials disseminated via Instagram. Observations focused on visual elements, narrative cues, and the positioning of Blackpink within marketing content.

Third, documentation analysis was conducted on official Instagram posts, posters, and promotional videos released as part of the campaign. These materials were treated as strategic communication artefacts that reflect organisational messaging and branding intentions.

### **Data Analysis**

All interview data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following established procedures, analysis involved familiarisation with the data, initial coding, theme identification, and interpretative refinement. Codes and themes were developed inductively, with particular attention to the roles of the brand ambassador and the nature of persuasive communication.

### **Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations**

To enhance trustworthiness, methodological triangulation was employed by comparing findings across interviews, observations, and documentation. Reflexive memo-writing was used throughout the analysis to minimise researcher bias. Ethical considerations included

obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring anonymity, and using interview data solely for academic purposes.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Role of Blackpink as Brand Ambassador for Oreo Products**

(Poirier et al., 2024) The findings reveal that Blackpink fulfils three interrelated brand ambassador functions: providing testimonials, offering endorsement and reinforcement, and acting as the central figure within advertising narratives. These roles operate primarily at a symbolic and emotional level rather than through explicit informational persuasion.

#### **Providing Testimonials through Visual Representation**

Blackpink's testimonial function is predominantly expressed through visual forms, including product packaging, posters, and short promotional videos. Unlike traditional testimonial advertising, the campaign does not rely on verbal claims or explicit statements about product quality. Instead, the presence of Blackpink members visually signals approval and desirability. Informants interpreted these visuals as implicit confirmation that Oreo is a product aligned with global trends and youth culture (Beheshti et al., 2023).

This visual testimonial strategy resonates strongly with teenagers, who are accustomed to image-based communication on social media platforms. The absence of verbal explanation does not reduce persuasive impact; rather, it enhances interpretive flexibility, allowing consumers to project their own meanings and emotional attachments onto the brand.

#### **Providing Encouragement and Reinforcement (Endorsement)**

Blackpink's endorsement functions as a powerful reinforcement mechanism that strengthens initial interest and motivates purchase. Informants consistently associated Oreo's collaboration with Blackpink with popularity, prestige, and excitement. As one informant stated, "Oreo and Blackpink are both well-known, so it made a boom."

Being fans of Blackpink intensified emotional engagement with the product. The endorsement did not merely encourage trial but reinforced a sense of participation in global fandom culture. Purchasing Oreo products was perceived as a symbolic act of affiliation with Blackpink, illustrating how endorsement operates through identification rather than rational evaluation. (Nurfalah et al., 2024) Global ambassadors play a major role for Indonesian and Malaysian youth, especially in shaping their lifestyle image and identity, encouraging consumption of international products, and shaping global trends. However, young people retain local cultural values that influence their perception of products and brands

#### **Acting Roles in Advertising Narratives**

Beyond testimonials and endorsement, Blackpink occupies a central narrative role in Oreo's advertising executions. Promotional visuals and Instagram content are structured around the members as focal points, with the product positioned as part of their lifestyle

imagery. This narrative positioning integrates Oreo into a broader story of youthfulness, fun, and global modernity, making the brand relevant to teenagers' self-concepts.

This study advances communication management theory by reframing celebrity endorsement from a tactical marketing activity into a strategic process of meaning management, relationship-building, and symbolic governance (Macnamara, n.d.); Sandhu, 2009). Rather than functioning merely as advertising appeal, Blackpink's presence in Oreo's campaign operates as a communicative resource through which meanings, identities, and stakeholder relationships are actively managed.

### **Meaning Transfer and Meaning Management**

The empirical findings strongly support meaning transfer theory while extending it into a broader meaning management perspective (Coombs, 2019). Blackpink embodies a set of globally recognisable cultural meanings—youthfulness, trend leadership, cosmopolitanism, and emotional intensity associated with fandom culture. Through visual testimonials, packaging design, and Instagram narratives, these meanings are systematically transferred to Oreo, it is managed through symbolic cues that invite interpretation and emotional projection by teenage consumers.

From a communication management standpoint, it curates communicative conditions under which audiences co-create brand meaning. This illustrates a shift from message transmission to meaning orchestration, that conceptualise organisations as managers of meaning within complex cultural environments.

### **Strategic Communication and Organisational Intent**

The findings also demonstrate celebrity endorsement as a form of strategic communication that aligns organisational objectives with socio-cultural resources. Oreo's collaboration with Blackpink reflects deliberate strategic intent: leveraging global popular culture to position the brand as culturally relevant within youth digital spaces. Instagram functions not simply as a promotional channel but as a strategic communication arena where visual logic, repetition, and symbolic consistency reinforce brand positioning.

This strategic alignment highlights how communication management integrates long-term reputation building with short-term engagement outcomes. Blackpink's endorsement strengthens Oreo's symbolic capital, enabling the brand to maintain relevance amid intense competition for youth attention in fragmented media ecosystems (Donthu et al., 2021).

### **Stakeholder Engagement and Relational Dynamics**

Consistent with stakeholder engagement theory, the study shows that teenagers are not passive message recipients but active stakeholders who interpret, negotiate, and emotionally invest in brand communication (Macnamara, 2018; Sanderson, n.d.). Informants' identification as Blackpink fans significantly shaped their engagement with Oreo products, transforming consumption into a relational act rather than a transactional one.

Blackpink operates as a relational bridge between the organisation and its youth stakeholders, facilitating emotional proximity and perceived shared identity. This finding underscores emphasis on relationship management, demonstrating how celebrity ambassadors can

function as intermediaries that humanise corporate brands and foster affective bonds with stakeholders.

### **Strategic Narrative and Visual Communication**

The role of Blackpink as the central figure in Oreo's campaign illustrates the strategic use of narrative and visual communication. Rather than positioning the product as the narrative focus, Oreo embeds the product within a broader story of global youth culture and modern lifestyle. Visual storytelling through packaging aesthetics, Instagram visuals, and collectible photocards enables the brand to circulate a coherent narrative across multiple touchpoints.

This narrative strategy allows for both consistency and interpretive flexibility, a hallmark of effective communication management. Teenagers are able to integrate Oreo into their own identity narratives, particularly within fandom practices such as collecting, sharing, and displaying branded items.

### **Conceptual Contribution and Secondary City Context**

Conceptually, this study contributes to the Journal of Communication Management by demonstrating how meaning management and stakeholder engagement operate within secondary cities. While much communication management research focuses on global or metropolitan contexts, the findings from Cirebon reveal that secondary urban spaces are deeply embedded in global media flows. Teenagers in Cirebon actively engage with transnational symbols and narratives, suggesting that strategic communication grounded in global popular culture can be effective beyond primary urban centres.

This insight extends communication management theory by highlighting the need to consider urban hierarchy and spatial context in strategic communication planning. Meaning management practices are not confined to global cities but are negotiated locally through digital platforms that collapse geographical boundaries.

In sum, the study positions celebrity endorsement as a strategic communication practice that manages meaning, cultivates relationships, and mobilises symbols across cultural and spatial contexts.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that Blackpink's role as Oreo's brand ambassador extends beyond promotional visibility to function as a strategic communication mechanism for managing meaning, relationships, and symbolic value. Through visual testimonials, endorsement reinforcement, and narrative centrality, Blackpink enables Oreo to align its brand with global youth culture while fostering emotional engagement among teenage stakeholders in Cirebon. The findings underscore that effective celebrity endorsement operates through meaning management rather than message transmission. Oreo's communication strategy illustrates how organizations curate symbolic resources and narrative coherence across digital platforms to facilitate stakeholder identification and co-creation of brand meaning. From a communication management perspective, this reinforces the view of brands as relational and cultural constructs embedded in broader socio-media environments.

Importantly, the study contributes conceptually by extending communication management theory to secondary urban contexts. Teenagers in Cirebon actively participate in global fandom cultures and interpret transnational brand symbols through localized experiences, suggesting that strategic communication practices are not limited to primary metropolitan centers. This insight highlights the relevance of spatial context in understanding how meaning management and stakeholder engagement unfold across different urban settings.

Overall, the study positions celebrity endorsement as a strategic communication practice central to contemporary communication management, offering implications for scholars and practitioners seeking to design culturally resonant, relationship-oriented brand communication in digitally connected societies.

Future research is recommended to conduct comparative studies across multiple secondary cities in Indonesia and examine celebrity endorsement effectiveness on other digital platforms such as TikTok and YouTube. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable to understand how fandom-based brand engagement evolves over time. For marketing practitioners, the findings suggest the importance of developing fandom-centric engagement strategies that authentically connect with youth culture, while also preparing crisis communication protocols to address potential reputational risks associated with celebrity endorsers. Additionally, brands should consider the specific characteristics of secondary urban markets when designing endorsement campaigns, ensuring that global celebrity appeal is balanced with localized cultural sensitivity.

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