

The celebrity athlete endorser: A theoretical examination of inter-related theories

Sydney Hosey, Indiana University

Sanghak Lee, Indiana University

Tywan Martin, Indiana University

Kimberly Miloch, Indiana University (Advisor)

**Marketing
Session 14**

**Friday, May 30, 2008
2:00 PM - 2:25 PM**

**Presentation (25-minute)
Abstract 385**

Previous sport management literature has suggested three main theories when discussing product/service endorsements and the celebrity/athlete endorser. These theories include the Source Attractiveness Model (Chebat, Laroche, Badura, & Filiatrault, 1995 and McGuire, 1985), the Source Credibility Model (Cutler & Javalgi, 1993 and Ohanian, 1991) and the Meaning Transfer Model (Batra & Homer, 2004 and McCracken, 1989). These models explain how celebrity attractiveness, credibility, and cultural meaning transfer to the product and brand image, therefore, influencing consumer buying intention. However, while these models have touched upon the importance of sport, there is a greater need for more extensive research in the area of sport endorsers. It is imperative to integrate these models into sport due to the significance to not only sport commerce but to the economy as a whole. According to Shank (2005), the estimated endorsement value of the top 75 athletes has surpassed a half a billion dollars with an estimated two-thirds of all endorsements coming from sport. Additionally, in recent past, one of the most well recognized sports figures and endorsers has been Michael Jordan. Jordan's global impact alone has caused marketing experts to consider the impact of sport figures in commercial advertisement. According to industry experts, Jordan during his National Basketball Association (NBA) career contributed approximately \$10 billion to the United States economy (Fortune, 1998). In addition, current athletes such as Tiger Woods, Maria Sharapova, and LeBron James have reached outside of their athletic prowess to endorse mainstream products and services resulting in sponsorship deals totaling \$70 million, \$22 million, and \$100 million, respectively ("Payoff Pitches", 2003 and Thomaselli, 2005). The purpose of this research is to correlate these three existing models into the sport world as well as to incorporate a new and unique model useful to sport marketers and advertisers.

The Source Attractiveness Model explains that the source, in this case, a celebrity endorser, adds value to the product because they are well received by the general public. Their attractive physical features increase the products appeal, and as a result, persuades consumers to purchase the product and/or service. In fact, Chebat et al. (1995), has proven that source attractiveness not only affects positive perception of a product, but it also increases recall and recognition of a product. Additionally, the Source Credibility Model describes the correlation between the celebrity endorser to the product through the celebrity's perceived credibility. In turn, this either enhances or detracts from the product in which the athlete represents. According to Lafferty et al. (2002) and Ohanian (1990), the most important aspects of source credibility are expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness of the endorser. If the endorser can convince the consumer they are an expert, trustworthy and attractive, they will have a higher likelihood that the product or service will be purchased. The Meaning Transfer Model suggests that positive or negative characteristics shift first from the celebrity endorser to the product and then from the product to the consumer (McCracken, 1989). Research has shown that this transfer of perception will eventually lead to the success or failure of the product (Charbonneau and Garland, 2005).

While the previous models have explored the relevance of The Source Credibility Model, The Source Attractiveness Model and the Meaning Transfer Model through a general context, they have not specifically been applied to sport. This conceptual model applies the aforementioned theories in the context of sport and will be beneficial to companies when utilizing athlete endorsers and to athletes when choosing to endorse a product. The key components of this model are interrelated and include aspects of credibility, attractiveness, product-athlete fit, meaning transfer, and the athlete's sport. The level of credibility is established through the consumer's perception of the athlete's level of performance, expertise, and trustworthiness. Attractiveness is based on the consumer's level of familiarity and the athlete's likeability. The product-athlete fit and meaning transfer implications are linked to credibility and must be maximized to be effective and to generate significant return on investment. In addition to these features, the culture and rules of an athlete's respective sport should be considered. The dynamics of each respective sport have a direct impact on credibility, attractiveness, and the product-athlete fit. This model highlights the inter-relationship between these components and provides a framework for evaluation of celebrity endorsements.