Strategic Match of Athlete Endorsement in Global Markets

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Athlete endorsement is considered an effective promotional tool by marketers worldwide (Silvera & Austad, 2004). However, not all athletes reap similarly lucrative benefits from the endorsement contracts. In the global marketplace, for example, the same endorsement may be considered successful or unsuccessful due to varying consumer responses toward the endorsement contracts across different cultures or nations. Accordingly, when it comes to the global marketplace, it is necessary to re-evaluate not only the mechanism of image transfer from a celebrity to an endorsed product or brand, but also consumers’ perceptions and attitudes toward celebrity endorsements and brand attitudes in light of their socio-cultural backgrounds. However, despite the substantial amount of endorsement research, little is known about consumers’ responses toward athlete endorsement, particularly focused on strategic match, in the context of global market (Westerbeek & Smith, 2003). Therefore, the current study seeks to: (1) examine the image match between selected athlete endorsers and their endorsed products by using a three-dimensional visual map; and (2) compare image perceptions towards athlete endorsement among consumers in three countries (i.e., American, Japanese, and Korean).

For the purposes of this study, we developed the Model of Strategic Match in Athlete Endorsement (MSMAE), a systematic evaluation tool for assessment of strategic match between athlete celebrities and product brands. The model suggests that athlete endorsers are evaluated based on Athletic Expertise, Attractiveness, and Popularity. Similarly, three parallel product dimensions of Product Quality, Design, and Popularity evaluate product brands. Combinations of these three dimensional mirror images of endorsers and brands can create three different types of endorsement deals: (1) Athlete-merited deal (i.e., AMD: athlete branding), (2) Product-merited deal (i.e., PMD: product branding), (3) Athlete-product-merited deal (i.e., APMD: both athlete and product branding). The comparative visual mapping approach using the MSMAE not only contributes to theory building in endorsement studies, but also allows systematic evaluation of strategic match in the global markets.

Theoretical Background

Source credibility (Pornpitakpan, 2004) and attractiveness (Trampe, Stapel, Siero, & Mulder, 2010) models have been dominant in celebrity endorsement studies. The models offer insights into how specific characteristics of a celebrity (e.g., expertise) can positively influence the persuasiveness of the message. However, these approaches mainly focus on the athlete’s characteristics and thus provide a limited understanding of endorsement effectiveness. Therefore, even if a celebrity endorser has ideal characteristics (e.g., credibility); the endorsement effectiveness may not be guaranteed when there is an image mismatch between the celebrity and the endorsed product.

In marketing literature, scholars applied the Matchup hypothesis (Kamins, 1990; Till & Busler, 2000) and the Associative Network Memory Model (ANMM: Till & Shimp, 1998) based on the Schema Congruity Theory (SCT: Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989) to provide a comprehensive understanding why developing connections between athlete celebrities and endorsed products is important in celebrity endorsement. Although these two approaches (i.e., Match-up Hypothesis and ANMM) are interchangeably used in the literature, ANMM is more frequently used in the context of celebrity endorsement studies because it explains a microscopic mechanism of congruity (i.e., node level) between celebrity endorser and endorsed product brand. To provide a comprehensive understanding of endorsement effectiveness, it is necessary to consider both macroscopic (i.e., SCT and matchup hypothesis) and microscopic (i.e., ANMM) viewpoints of a matching.
Method

The 2010 World Cup soccer was chosen as the context of this study. As targets of evaluation, four athletes (e.g., Lionel Messi) were selected based on their popularity as a brand or amount of media coverage. Two actual endorsed products (e.g., Gillette) were matched for each athlete and evaluated; a total of eight currently endorsed product cases were evaluated. The online survey was conducted by using student samples (N = 647) of selected universities in Japan (N = 250), South Korea (N = 160), and United States (N = 237). A student sample is suitable to this study and strengthens the study's practical contribution because this age group is frequently a target market for the product brands used in this study.

We adapted and modified existing scale items including celebrity dimensions of expertise (Ohanian, 1990), attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990), and popularity (Yakimova & Beverland, 2005), and product dimensions of quality (Garvin, 1984), design (Luo et al., 2008), and popularity (Yakimova & Beverland, 2005). The format for the instrument was a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). Measurement invariance test was conducted to examine whether the same constructs (i.e., athlete and product brand images) has been measured across three different cultural groups using multiple group confirmatory factor analysis. A series of paired-samples t-tests was then employed to examine the image match between athlete endorsers and the products they endorse. The data was analyzed using SPSS 18.0 and AMOS 18.0.

Results

The scale items fitted the three cultural groups adequately (configural invariance: $\chi^2$/df = 43.84/24 = 3.05, RMSEA = .08, CFI = .96, SRMR = .04). Testing measurement invariance using a series of hierarchically nested models indicated that all factor loadings and factor covariances were equivalent ($\chi^2$ difference = 9.61, df difference = 4, p = .05), suggesting that there was consistency in response patterns to items across countries (Netemeyer et al., 2003). To evaluate the strategic matches, the ratings of the athletes and their endorsed products were compared on the three-dimensional scale using t-test. In terms of MSMAE, the results suggested that for the American respondents, the majority endorsement was APMD (i.e., 13 cases), followed by six AMD and five PMD. For the Asian respondents, 17 cases were PMD, followed by five APMD and two AMD.

Discussion

The results indicate that there were significant differences between American and Asian (Japanese and Korean in this case) cultures in their perceptions toward the athlete endorsement. For example, American and Asian consumers showed different perceptions largely in hedonic dimensions (i.e., matching between physical attractiveness and product design). However, there were relatively small perceptual differences in the utilitarian aspects of matching (i.e., matching between expertise and quality). Based on the Consumer Style Inventory (Sproles & Sproles, 1990), these results may reflect that consumers with individualistic cultural values (i.e., Americans) tend to be more sensitive to unique, fashionable, and hedonistic aspects of a brand in their consumption decision-making process, when compared to the consumers in collectivistic culture (i.e., Asians).

At the conference, the authors will discuss further theoretical implications as well as practical applications in regard to the associative learning processes (e.g., Van Osselaer & Janiszewski, 2001) and cultural influences on consumer cognition (e.g., Briley, Morris, & Simonson, 2000) by offering systematic insights into strategic athlete endorsement in the context of global market.