

Exploring the Impacts of Self-Referencing on Endorsement Effectiveness: A Case of Female Athlete Endorsements

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Celebrity endorsements have been considered beneficial for achieving a favorable impact on product/brand images (Amos, Holmes, & Stratton, 2008) and, consequently, to influence consumers' buying decisions (Erdogen, 1999; Stafford, Spears & Hsu, 2003). Popular celebrity endorsers get more attentions from customers and are perceived as trustworthy because people think successful celebrities do not work for modeling fees, but simply for the genuine affection for the product (Atkin & Block, 1983). In particular, star athlete endorsements have been widely used for the effectiveness of advertisements. In 2009, Tiger Woods earned \$92 million, Phil Mickelson earned \$46 million, and LeBron James earned \$28 million in their endorsements (Freedman, 2009). However, female athlete endorsers are not yet perceived as effective as male athletes due to various negative barriers such as too much emphasis on sexuality and lack of visibility (Antil, Burton, & Robinson, 2012). For example, only 1.6 percent of women's sport events were broadcast in 2008 (Gray, 2012), and most of female endorsers are still portrayed in prejudicial gender roles that emphasize sexual image (Fink, Parker, Cunningham, & Cuneen, 2012).

Recent literature on the effects of endorsements has focused on the match-up hypothesis (Choi & Rifon, 2012). The match-up hypothesis originated from associative learning theory and it has been quite successful in predicting celebrity endorsers' effectiveness (e.g., Kamins & Gupta, 1994; Liu, Huang, & Jiang, 2007; Till & Busler, 2000). The match-up hypothesis posits that the effectiveness of advertisements depends on how well the endorser fits with the product (Kamins, 1990), and an appropriate match is more effective than an inappropriate match (Friedman & Friedman, 1979; Kamins & Gupta, 1994). Choi and Rifon (2012) pointed that the celebrity-consumer relationship should be also considered as a critical tenet for analyzing the effectiveness of advertisement. They examined the match between a celebrity endorser and a consumer, and found that consumers' self-concept is another important factor in advertising effectiveness.

The cognitive process wherein individuals connect self-related incoming information to stored information in memory is called self-referencing (Kuiper & Rogers 1979). Many studies revealed that self-referencing has an effect on generating favorable cognitive responses and positive attitudes toward the advertisements (Burnkrant & Unnava, 1995; Debevec & Iyer, 1988; Krishnamurthy & Sujana, 1999). When an individual has a higher extent of self-referencing with an advertisement, the person is more likely to evaluate the advertisement and brand positively (Debevec & Iyer 1988; Meyers-Levy & Peracchio 1996). Also, when an image of an endorser is congruent with a viewer's self-image, a significantly higher probability of purchasing exists among viewers (Marshall, Na, Sate, & Deuskar, 2008). However, despite the critical effect of the self-concept of consumers in advertisements, previous studies on celebrity endorsements merely focused on the fit between endorsers and products, but not on the consumer-endorser match (Choi & Rifon, 2012). Therefore, the present study tries to further explain the consumer-endorser relationship using self-referencing strategy.

Based on the proceeding commentary, the purpose of this study is four-fold: (1) to explore participants' perceived level of self-referencing with female athlete endorsers (2) to examine the influence of self-referencing on viewers' attitudes toward the advertisement and (3) toward the brand and consequently (4) future intent to consume advertised products. This study postulates that a higher extent of self-referencing with female athlete endorsers will increase the message's persuasiveness. A pretest will be conducted in order to determine appropriate female athletes and products. After selecting two female athlete endorsers and a product, the main study will be administered to a total of 300 participants at a major Southern university in the U.S and data collection will be

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finished by the end of January, 2013. Participants will be categorized into two different groups by their gender. It is assumed that female participants will report a higher level of self-referencing with a female athlete than male participants. Two different female athlete endorsers will be used to control the familiarity with the endorsers. In group settings, participants will randomly receive one of the two advertisements, review the advertisement and respond to the questionnaire.

The questionnaire will consist of four sections: (1) perceived extent of self-referencing with the female athlete endorsers, (2) attitude toward the advertisement, (3) attitude toward the brand, (3) purchase intent, and (4) demographic variables. In order to assess participants' extent of self-referencing with the female athlete, modified six-items of 5-point Likert scale will be used (i.e., I can easily form similarity judgments between myself and the advertising model and the ad made me think about my own experiences with the product) (Lee, Fernandez, & Martin, 2002). Attitude toward the ad and attitude toward brand will be assessed using five-items of 7-point semantic differential scale including "good/bad," "favorable/unfavorable," "good/bad," "like/dislike," and "pleasant/unpleasant" (Choi & Rifon, 2012; Graeff, 1996; Sirgy, 1985). The purchase intent will be assessed using two items asking how likely they would be to buy the advertised products for their next purchase by 7-point bipolar scales such as "extremely unlikely/extremely likely" and "strongly disagree/strongly agree" (Choi & Rifon, 2012). Data analyses will proceed in a series of steps. First, preliminary analyses will be conducted to reveal Cronbach's alpha scores in order to measure internal consistency of the study measures. Second, descriptive and frequency statistics will be analyzed to better understand the level of self-reference, attitude toward the advertisement, and purchase intent of participants. Finally, a path analysis using linear regression will be conducted to identify how participants' perceived self-reference and attitude toward the advertisement influence attitude toward brand and then purchase intent. The extent of self-referencing will be measured as an independent variable. Attitude toward the ad, and purchase intention will be measured to evaluate message persuasiveness.

The selection of appropriate celebrity endorsers is one of the most important decisions endorsees make in order to generate a satisfactory return on investments (Choi & Rifon, 2012). Therefore, understanding how customers perceive endorsers based on their self-reference level is critical for garnering more positive outcomes for providing appropriate endorsers for specific products. Results will be discussed based on related theory and literature on the effect of self-reference on consumer behaviors. This study will provide critical contributions to the existing literature related to athlete endorsers, especially on female athlete endorsers by assessing the effects of self-reference between consumer self-concept and celebrity image, attitudes toward the ad, and ultimately the influence on purchase intent. Further theoretical and practical implications and future directions for research will be presented.

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