

The Role of Endorser in Fitness Advertising: Examining the Effect of Fit between Endorser and Cause on Consumer Response

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Significance of the Study

In recent years, Cause-Related Marketing (CRM) has received attention from practitioners and academicians in sport. It has been recognized as a widely applicable marketing strategy that combines organizations' contributions to philanthropic causes while providing revenue exchanges that satisfy both organizational and individual objectives (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). While a substantial amount of literature has found that consumers' responses (e.g., attitude, intention, loyalty) to CRM tend to be positive (e.g., Kim et al., 2010; Nan & Heo, 2007; Webb & Mohr, 1998), scholars have also suggested that the impact of CRM can be varied. Moreover, its impact can be mediated by factors such as product type, brand-cause fit, cause familiarity and perceived motivation (e.g., Ellen et al., 2000; Hamlin & Wilson, 2004; Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998). Although previous studies have aided our understanding of CRM and consumer behavior, further investigation is needed in regard to the factors that elicit favorable responses.

Review of Relevant Literature

Sport industry have involved with various causes (e.g., health promotion and disease prevention) and deemed to have a greater advantage of CRM over other industries (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006). To date, much focuses have been put on spectator sport, but little is known about the CRM in the participatory sport (i.e., fitness). Since using detailed information (e.g., attributes, functions) of fitness brand in ads is not enough to persuade consumers, such a tactic (i.e., CRM) that transfers meaning above the utilitarian feature of the service/product would enhance the effectiveness of marketing initiatives (e.g., advertisement).

The endorsers and fit (e.g., endorser/product, brand/cause) are crucial factors in CRM (e.g., Fink et al., 2004; Van Heerden et al., 2008; Nan & Heo, 2007). Fit refers to the congruence of image/feature between the cause and the commercial partners (e.g., company, brand, endorser). Ang et al. (2006) noted that perceived fit influences the ease of meaning transfer, which would increase the effectiveness of CRM on consumers' responses. As visual imagery of endorser in the advertisement transfers information over and beyond the verbal cues (Kamins, 1990), fit between endorser and cause (ECF) would significantly influence on consumers' attitudes (i.e., Aad and Abr) and intention (i.e., FI).

Based on a comprehensive review of the literature, we hypothesized that people perceived high level ECF will show significantly higher amounts of attitude toward advertisement (H1), attitude toward brand (H2), and future intention (H3) than those who perceived low level of ECF. Since personal involvement on particular cause can influence the attitudes and intention (e.g., Conway & Rubin, 1991; McDaniel et al, 2007; Park, 1996), the hypotheses were tested controlling the impact of personal involvement on a particular cause (i.e., Breast Cancer Awareness).

Methodology

Data were collected from undergraduate students at a large Midwestern University in the U.S. (N= 119). The majority of participants were male (79%), white (83.2%), and 19-29 years of old (96%). Personal involvement on BCA, ECF, Aad, Abr and FI were measured using five-point Likert type scale and five-point semantic differential scales. All the scale were found to be reliable ($\alpha = .72 \sim .89$). Printed ads of fictitious fitness club were designed with two famous athlete endorsers (i.e., LeBron James and Peyton Manning) among 10 most influential athletes (Forbes report, 2011). The endorsers were chosen based on the pretest result of level of awareness and the response rates to the fit with Breast Cancer Awareness (BCA) question. BCA was given as a CRM cue in the ads, due to the prevalence of BCA in

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sport and the familiarity of the cause, which would increase the accuracy of participants' responses.

Results

A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) controlling for the personal involvement on the Breast Cancer Awareness was employed to examine the effect of degree of ECF on consumers' Aad, Abr, and FI. Three ECF groups were identified by using tertile range of ECF score (high-ECF: $n = 43$, $M = 3.87$; med-ECF: $n = 35$, $M = 2.78$; low-ECF: $n = 41$, $M = 1.67$) and was set as the independent variable. Consumers' responses (i.e., Aad, Abr, and FI) were set as dependent variables and CRM involvement was set as covariates. The significant differences were found between groups (Wilks' Lambda = .885, $F(6, 226) = 2.81$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .059$). The univariate results revealed significant differences among degree of ECF on all dependent variables (Aad: $F(2, 115) = 3.81$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .062$; Abr: $F(2, 115) = 4.628$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .074$; FI: $F(2, 115) = 3.47$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .057$). Differences on all of the responses (i.e., Aad, Abr, and FI) between high-ECF and low-ECF were significant ($p < .05$) and differences between high-ECF and mid-ECF on Abr and FI were significant ($p < .05$).

Discussion

As we expected, when people perceived high fit between endorser and cause, they showed more positive response to the advertisement (H1), more favorable Abr (H2), and stronger FI (H3). The result suggested that when CRM is given as a cue, use of celebrity endorsers (i.e., professional athlete) in fitness club advertisements enhances consumers' responses to the advertisement when the endorser is matched with the cause. One possible explanation to this result is that high ECF eased the participants to transfer the image of endorser and cause to the ad and brand (Ang et al., 2006). In addition, as noted by Van Heerden et al. (2008), when people adopt the information from ads, they are using cues to lessen the uncertainty of the brand/product and to form perceptions of products. Therefore, in our case, aligning fitness club brands with charitable causes may reduce consumers' uncertainty on the products and/or services provided by the fitness brand. This result implies how the fit between endorser and cause is important to maximize the effect of ads using CRM cues.

The implication of this result is substantial in two aspects. First, this study extends our understanding of factor that enhances the effectiveness of ad using CRM cues through examining the role of ECF in ads. Second, our result can provide the guideline for the fitness managers to improve their CRM initiatives in the process of choosing endorser. It is important to note that managers of fitness brand should consider how endorser's image matches with the cause that their brand involved with. Yet, our understanding of consumer responses to the CRM in participatory sport is in early stage. Therefore, more research is needed to reveal the effect of factors leading effective marketing and the possible interactions among those factors.