Explicit and Implicit Solutions for Measuring Racial Variables: Consumer Attitudes Toward Athlete-Spokespersons in South Korea

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In South Korea, western sports (e.g., baseball, soccer, basketball) are very popular and a substantial number of foreign athletes are currently playing in Korean professional leagues. Because mass media in the country cover almost all prominent sport events worldwide, Korean consumers are routinely exposed to high-profile sporting events in which athletes of different races compete with each other. Such extensive media coverage interacting with preexisting cultural dynamics within the region likely develops or influences Korean consumers’ attitudes toward ads represented by athletes of different racial groups. Despite the significance of the racial identity in advertising and remarkable growth of sport marketing practices in the region, there is a paucity of empirical research on dynamics of racial variables in advertising focusing on Asian countries such as South Korea. Therefore, the current study was conducted to investigate the extent to which race of athlete-spokespersons influences consumer attitudes toward ads in Korea. Specifically, it examines the impacts of a spokesperson’s race (Korean vs. foreign athletes; White vs. Black athletes) on the attitudes of consumers toward ads represented by the athletes of different racial groups by using two different measurement platforms, i.e., explicit and implicit measurement solutions.

Donthu and Cherian (1992) asserted that a consumer’s connection to his or her group membership would likely elicit favorable attitudinal responses to ads that predominantly resonate with the self-identity of the consumer. Investigations of samples of Asians (Butt & Run, 2010), Blacks (Schlinger & Plummer, 1972) and Hispanics (Cano & Ortiz, 2012) have supported such assertion. Likewise, advertising research has suggested that ethnic matching between spokespersons and target audiences is a critical element for creating persuasive advertising messages (Whittler & Spira, 2002). In spite of such magnitude of ethnic and racial variables in advertising contexts (Sierra, Hyman, & Torres, 2009), sport management research has not produced enough information about the relationship between race of athlete-spokespersons and overall advertising effectiveness (Kim & Cheong, 2011).

Specifically, previous studies have not addressed inherent problems of explicit measurement schemes (e.g., survey) in dealing with racial variables. Although an explicit measure demands that respondents activate their memory associations connected to given stimuli and consciously evaluate them in conjunction with situational information (Wilson & Hodges, 1992), most contextual cues that have significant impacts on real world consumer behavior, such as racial connotations, would likely trigger automatic information processing (Fitzsimons et al, 2002) that is irrelevant to the consciously performed evaluation. Moreover, people tend to reserve their opinions when asked to reveal biases toward specific racial groups because of social pressure to provide politically acceptable or desirable responses (Kihlstrom, 2004; Oskamp & Schultz, 2005). To overcome these limitations, researchers have devised the Implicit Association Test (“IAT” hereafter) to access the attitudinal valences predominantly associated with the automatic process (Greenwald & Nosek, 2001) such as underlying race-oriented attitudes (Fazio & Olson, 2003). The IAT procedure consists of a series of multiple sessions where subjects are asked to group words of racial connotations (e.g., Ebony/Molly) and positive/negative feelings (e.g., joyful/annoying) together. The reaction time to complete such tasks is measured and used as a proxy of the attitude toward different racial groups. Given the inherent shortcomings of explicit measurement schemes, the current study employed both a survey (explicit measurement solution) and the IAT (implicit measurement solution) to examine attitudes toward ads represented by spokespersons of different racial groups.

Study 1: Attitude to Athlete-Spokesperson

Seventy-nine undergraduate students enrolled in a South Korean University voluntarily participated in this study. Explicit attitudes toward two target classifications (Korean vs. foreign athletes; White vs. Black athletes) were assessed with a web-based survey. For the IAT test, the researchers introduced a set of 24 photos of athletes...
consisting of six Korean, six foreign (three White and three Black), six white and six black athletes. A set of protocols was administered to control various extraneous variables. The first IAT measured implicit attitudes toward Korean and foreign athlete-spokespersons (target classification) and words of pleasant and unpleasant feelings (attributes). The second IAT measured implicit attitudes toward Whites and Blacks (target classification) and words of pleasant and unpleasant feelings (attributes). The survey (explicit measure) indicated that subjects have explicit preferences for foreign athletes ($M = 5.37$) over Korean athletes ($M = 4.06$), $t(78) = -4.727, p < .001$. The explicit measure presented no statistical difference between White and Black athletes, $t(78) = .498, p = .621$. In contrast, the IATs (implicit measure) showed that subjects have implicit preferences for Korean athletes ($M = 831.17$ m-sec) over foreign athletes ($M = 1054.97$ m-sec), $t(78) = -8.92, p < .001$, and implicit preferences for White ($M = 758.62$ msec.) over Black athletes ($M = 883.37$ msec.), $t(78) = -6.82, p < .001$.

Study 2: Attitude to Advertisement with Athlete-Spokesperson

Study 2 attempted to extend the concept of racial bias into an advertising context in which consumers are asked to evaluate ads with athlete-spokespersons of different racial groups. A total of 108 undergraduate students at a South Korean college voluntarily participated in Study 2. The researchers used hypothetical ads featuring the different racial groups and measured explicit and implicit attitudes toward the ads. Korean consumers were expected to have different attitudes toward ads based on the race of athlete-spokesperson and that their attitudes toward ads were likely affected by different measurement protocols, i.e., explicit and implicit. In the first half of the study, participants completed a survey containing explicit attitudes toward ads featuring Korean and foreign athlete-spokespersons, and explicit measurement of attitudes toward White and Black athlete-spokespersons using a web-based questionnaire. In the second half of the study, participants completed the IAT sessions on desktop computers as implemented in Study 1. The analysis of explicit attitudes revealed a significant difference between ads featuring Korean and foreign athletes, $t(107) = -2.654, p < .01$. The explicit attitude scores for the ads with foreign athletes ($M = 2.81$) were higher than those for Korean athletes ($M = 2.72$) as expected. The explicit attitudes to ads featuring White athletes ($M = 2.92$) were higher than ads featuring Black athletes ($M = 2.79$), $t(107) = 3.605, p < .001$, which was different from Study 1 where there was no statistical significance in attitude difference. Conversely, the implicit attitude measurement indicated that ads with Korean athletes ($M = 783.12$ msec.) were more favored than those with foreign athletes ($M = 977.07$ msec), $t(107) = -8.92, p < .001$. The IATs showed that subjects have more favorable feelings to ads featuring White athletes ($M = 668.65$ msec.) than Black athletes ($M = 809.88$ msec.), $t(107) = -9.942, p < .001$.

Given the results, the presentation explores implications for the discrepancy between the implicit and explicit measurement schemes, usefulness of implicit measures in the context of racial bias research, role of cultural colonialism, and sociocultural dynamics in South Korea that presumably influenced such ethnocentrism. Additionally, limitations of the study and some managerial implications are discussed along with suggested future research.