Consumers' Comparative Evaluative Judgment of Athlete Endorsers

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Introduction
Celebrity endorsement literature has examined the persuasiveness of celebrity endorsers by measuring perceived credibility (Ohanian, 1990; 1991). Oft-cited research has regularly focused on the absolute values of their persuasiveness by measuring the credibility of endorsers in isolated research circumstances (Fink, Parker, Cunningham, & Cuneen, 2012). However, consumer judgment is never free from contextual information (Bless & Schwarz, 1999, 2010). Consumer evaluations of endorsers can be influenced by the presence of other endorsers. In this sense, prior endorsement research applying the source credibility model has not sufficiently examined the effect of contextual information on consumer judgments. Influenced by contextual information, the evaluative judgment of a target can be pulled toward a standard of comparison (i.e., assimilation effect; Martin, Seta, & Crelia, 1990). Likewise, other groups of consumers may evaluate an athlete more critically, and the evaluation of the athlete can be pulled away from the standard of comparison (i.e., contrast effect; Martin et al., 1990).

The purpose of the current study was to examine the mechanisms of this comparative evaluative judgment process by focusing on how the initially presented representative endorser’s credibility influences a subsequently presented target endorser’s credibility. Drawing on the inclusion/exclusion model (IEM; Schwarz & Bless, 1992b; Bless & Schwarz, 2007), the current study focused on assimilation and contrast effects in athlete endorsement.

Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development
The IEM explains that an assimilation (contrast) effect manifests when targets are included in (excluded from) the mental category to which the representation belongs. A representation is usually activated in people’s mind (Schwarz & Bless, 1992), and it is often used as contextual information for making a comparative judgment (Wanke et al., 2001). After a representation is activated, whether assimilation/contrast effects manifest depends on how consumers categorize it and the corresponding evaluative target (Nam & Sternthal, 2008). Assimilation (contrast) is observed when evaluative targets are included in (excluded from) the same mental category of activated representation (Schwarz & Bless, 1992). It is postulated that when two focal athletes endorsers represent the same brand (e.g., NIKE), this brand category membership plays an important role as a relevant cue for including or excluding the target endorser in the mental category of the representation. Based on the aforementioned argument, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1: In representation activation conditions, relative to no activation conditions, target athlete endorsers will receive more positive evaluations when they share brand category with a representative athlete who possesses high expertise (assimilation).

H2: In representation activation conditions, relative to no activation conditions, target athlete endorsers will receive less positive evaluations when they do not share brand category with the representative athlete (contrast).

Methods of Study 1
Study 1 employed a 2 (representative endorser activation: present vs. absent) × 2 (brand category membership: membership vs. non-membership) between-subjects experiment. A total of 141 subjects was recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mturk; 39.7% female, $M_{age} = 34.6$). For the representative endorser activation conditions, each participant was given a scenario that introduced a highly expert basketball player who is the most influential endorser of a brand. In the no-activation condition, this information was not provided. For the brand category membership conditions, the scenario clearly explained the target athlete was an endorser of the brand that the previously presented representative athlete endorsed while only general information, not a brand description, was provided in the brand category non-membership conditions. To avoid confounding effects, a fictitious brand, Equinox, was selected as the endorsed brand (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). Accordingly, fictitious athletes, Phil Johnson (i.e.,
representative endorser) and Ted Franklin (i.e., evaluative target), were adopted from Till and Busler (2000). In the sport management realm, expertise of athlete endorsers is an exceptionally important credibility component because of its association with their profession (Fink et al., 2004). Therefore, after being exposed to the stimuli, participants rated perceived expertise of Ted Franklin using Ohanian’s (1990) five-item scale ($\alpha = .89$ in this study).

Results of Study 1
The results indicated both representation activation ($p < .001$) and brand category membership manipulations ($p < .001$) were successful. With regard to the perceived expertise of Ted Franklin, the results of ANOVA revealed a significant interaction of representation activation and brand category membership ($F(1, 137) = 15.01, p < .001$). Simple effect tests revealed a marginal significant difference between representation activation ($M = 5.82$) and no-activation conditions ($M = 5.47; F(1, 137) = 3.21, p = .07$) when brand category membership was activated, which provided support for H1. When brand category membership was not activated, the representation activation condition ($M = 5.02$) showed lower perceived expertise than the no-activation condition ($M = 5.73; F(1, 137) = 13.66, p < .001$). Therefore, H2 was also upheld.

Methods of Study 2
Study 2 replicated the findings from Study 1 using real athletes (i.e., LeBron James and Markel Brown) and two equally reputable brands (i.e., Nike and Adidas). This design offered the potential to increase the external validity of the assimilative and contrasting judgment findings in Study 1. A total of 63 subjects, recruited from Mturk, participated in the experiment (30.2% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 30.6$). The perceived expertise scale indicated adequate reliability ($\alpha = .87$).

Results of Study 2
Manipulations regarding representation activation ($p < .001$) and brand category membership ($p < .001$) were successful. The results of ANOVA revealed a significant interaction ($F(1, 59) = 9.27, p < .001$). Simple effect tests indicated a significant difference in perceived expertise between the representation no-activation condition ($M = 5.51$) and the activation condition ($M = 6.23, p < .01$), supporting H1. Accordingly, when brand category membership was not activated, subjects in the representation no activation condition reported the perceived expertise of Markel Brown ($M = 5.90$) as significantly higher than those from the activation condition ($M = 5.42, p < .09$), providing evidence that the expected contrast effect was upheld.

Discussion
The results of the two experiments supported both assimilation and contrast effects. When the representative endorser was initially presented, subsequent endorsers received positive perceptions when they were included in the same brand category as the first representative endorser. Contrarily, this was not the case when the representation and target endorsers did not belong to the same brand. These findings are consistent with research conducted on social comparison (Mussweiler, 2003; Wanke et al., 2001). Together, the two experiments also yielded a significant contrast effect, indicating that endorsers receive negative impacts from the representative endorser’s tremendous expertise level if they do not endorse the same brand. This contrasting pattern of consumer judgment has also been documented elsewhere (Chien, Wegner, Hsiao, & Petty, 2010; Nam & Sternthal, 2008). Further theoretical and managerial implications will be discussed in the presentation.