Athlete Endorsement, Attitudes, and Purchase Intention: The Interaction Effect between Athlete Endorser-product Congruence and Endorser Credibility

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Introduction
Extant literatures have primarily studied two important topics in the domain of celebrity endorsement: the match-up hypothesis and endorser credibility. These two topics have received heightened attention for decades because of their positive effects on advertising outcomes. The implementation of athlete endorsement requires careful understanding of the link between endorser credibility and endorser-product congruence that generates the forming of consumers’ attitudes and purchase behavior. This is especially important from marketing managers’ standpoint since celebrity endorsements significantly affect business outcomes (Tellis, 2003). It is also important for the academia since research findings may provide depth in understanding and extending the body of knowledge in this particular aspect.

In spite of the previous efforts, the lack of empirical research examining the interaction effect between endorser-product congruence and endorser credibility limits our understanding in celebrity endorsement studies in the sport context. In addition, there are limitations in terms of generalizability and realistic application in practice due to the fictitious athlete endorsers and brands used in prior research to examine the match-up effect (e.g., Koenig & Boyd, 2009; Till & Busler, 2000). The purpose of this study is to investigate the interaction effects between endorser-product congruence and endorser credibility on consumers’ attitudes and purchase intentions by using real figures and actual brands. The present study further investigates the indirect and direct paths from consumers’ attitude toward the advertisement to purchase intention via attitude toward the brand.

Theoretical Backgrounds
According to Till and Busler (2000), fit between athlete endorser and sport-related product positively affect attitude toward the brand. Interestingly, Koernig and Boyd (2009) found that athlete endorser-product fit positively influenced consumers’ attitude toward the advertisement and brand, and purchase intention. The effectiveness of endorser credibility on consumer responses was supported by Lafferty, Goldsmith, and Newell (2002). Further, Kim and Na (2007) found that the endorser credibility effect on product attitude was significant when the athlete endorser’s image and the endorsed product’s image were well-matched. This study, therefore, hypothesized that there would be an interaction between endorser-product congruence and endorser credibility on attitude toward the advertisement (H1), attitude toward the brand (H2), and purchase intention (H3). Further analyses were conducted to identify the indirect path from attitude toward the advertisement to brand attitude (H4), subsequently influencing purchase intention (H5) (Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989).

Methods
Prior to the main experiment, a series of pretest was conducted to select two appropriate athlete endorsers with the largest difference in endorser credibility and two endorsed brands with the largest difference in endorser-product congruence. The pretest results identified LeBron James as the most credible figure whereas Michel Vick was rated as the least credible. Gatorade for high congruence and Colgate for low congruence were chosen as appropriate brands for the stimuli.

The subjects for this study were 143 college students. The research model conducted a 2 x 2 experiment; congruence between the endorser’s image and the product (High congruence vs. Low incongruence) and credibility of a celebrity endorser (High credibility vs. Low credibility). The participants were randomly assigned to each condition. All items in the questionnaires were presented on a seven-point semantic differential scale. Three items were adapted from Rifon et al. (2004) to measure endorser-product congruence. Fifteen items were used to measure endorser
Credibility (Ohanian, 1990). Three items were employed to measure attitude toward the advertisement (Mackenzie & Lutz, 1989). Three items were adapted from Mackenzie and Lutz (1989) to measure attitude toward the brand. Three items were used to measure purchase intention (Yi, 1990).

Results
Cronbach’s α test generated .89 to .98 values for all measurement items. Thus, reliability of each item was confirmed according to the standard (.70) suggested by Murphy & Davidshofer (2001). Manipulation was successfully confirmed by one-way ANOVAs, showing significant differences between the two operationalized endorser-product congruence levels and between the two operationalized endorser credibility conditions.

Data analysis involved two-way MANOVA to test hypotheses 1 to 3 to identify the interaction effects between endorser-product congruence and endorser credibility. The result was statistically significant (Wilks’ Lambda = .942, F = 2.79, p < .05), allowing separate use of ANOVAs for the three dependent variables with the protection of the Type 1 error rate. The results indicated that there were significant interaction effects between endorser-product congruence and endorser credibility on attitude toward the advertisement [F(1, 139) = 4.52, p < .05], attitude toward the brand [F(1, 139) = 4.01, p < .05], and purchase intention [F(1, 139) = 7.75, p < .01], supporting hypotheses 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

The mediating role of attitude toward the brand between attitude toward the advertisement and purchase intention was investigated. Potthoff (1966) analysis allowed joint estimation among the different conditions created by the 2 x 2 factorial design, showing insignificant difference among the conditions. To test the mediation effect of brand attitude, four steps were conducted on the basis of Baron and Kenny’s (1986) guideline. The regression analyses indicated significant relationships between attitude toward the advertisement and attitude toward the brand (β = .69, p < .001, R² = .48), between attitude toward the advertisement and purchase intention (β = .55, p < .001, R² = .30), and between attitude toward the brand and purchase intention (β = .61, p < .001, R² = .37). After controlling for brand attitude, the effect of advertisement attitude on purchase intention was still significant (β = .25, p < .01); however, the effect of advertisement attitude on purchase intention was significantly reduced (z = 7.12, p <.001) by Sobel’s (1982) test. Thus, the mediating effect of attitude toward the brand was partially supported.

Discussion
Implications for the current research are as follow. First, the interaction effects between endorser-product congruence and endorser credibility were significant on attitude toward the advertisement, brand, and purchase intention. These results are consistent with Kim and Na’s (2007) research. This entails that advertisers need to consider both endorser-product congruence and endorser credibility to enhance consumers’ attitudes and purchase intentions. Second, the regression analysis result supported the partial mediating effect of brand attitude between attitude toward the advertisement and purchase intention. This finding is consistent with antecedent studies (Goldsmith et al., 2000; La Ferle & Choi, 2005; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). Third, the present study used actual athlete celebrities and brands in an effort to enhance generalizability of the match-up effect. Detailed implications of the results, limitations, and directions for future research will be discussed in the presentation.