Human Brand Extensions: Investigating Consumer Attitudes toward Athlete Endorsement of Non-sport Brands

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Introduction

Brand extensions, the use of an established brand to launch a new product, are one of the most frequently employed branding strategies for leveraging brand equity by marketing managers (Völckner & Sattler, 2006). In marketing, the term “brand” is typically applied to companies, products, and services; however, celebrities can also be considered brands since they have additional associations and features of a brand (Thomson, 2006). Athlete celebrities endorse sport-related brands more frequently than non-sport brands. On the other hand, many sport stars endorse the brands which do not belong to the sport product category such as fashion, watches, electronics, and so forth. Likewise, athlete celebrities’ human brands that originally contain the sport-related image are extended to the non-sport domain. Even though this situation could be explained by previous works relevant to brand extensions (Aaker & Keller, 1990) and human brands (Thomson, 2006), lack of empirical research regarding athlete celebrities’ human brand extensions limits our understanding of endorsement studies in the context of sports. Attitude toward the brand extension is influenced by perceived product class fit (Aaker & Keller, 1990), attitude toward the parent brand (Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994), and quality of the parent brand (Völckner & Sattler, 2006). The present study intends to examine how these predictors in brand extension studies are applied to human brand extension, especially in the context of athlete endorsement.

Theoretical Backgrounds

Since Aaker and Keller (1990) examined consumer evaluations of brand extensions, many subsequent studies have examined brand extension effects. Previous literatures have mainly suggested that three predictors (i.e., perceived product class fit, attitude toward the parent brand, and quality of the parent brand) affect attitude toward the brand extension. Thomson (2006) argued that a celebrity might also be regarded as a brand since he or she had attributes of a brand. In addition, consumers view athletes as human brands with unique personalities (Carlson & Donavan, 2013). Although athletes have their unique specialization in sports, their human brands reach the domain of non-sport brands. This reasoning allows us to apply the concept of brand extension to athletes’ human brand extension. Perceived product class fit influences attitude toward the brand extension (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Völckner & Sattler 2006). Product class fit refers to the fit in the product category between a parent brand and an extended brand. An athlete’s original human brand in sport-related product category can be considered a parent brand, whereas his or her human brand in non-sport product category can be regarded as an extended brand. Accordingly, fit between an athlete and an extended brand can be considered a predictor of attitude toward the human brand extension. According to McCracken’s (1989) meaning transfer theory, the meaning attributed to celebrities moves from the celebrity endorser to the product when the two are paired in an advertisement. In addition, image transfer from a parent brand to an extended brand plays an important role when product class fit influences attitude toward the brand extension (Aaker & Keller, 1990). Thus,

H1: Athlete endorser-brand fit positively influences the image transfer from the endorser to the brand.
H2: The image transfer positively affects attitude toward the extension.
H3: Athlete endorser-brand fit positively affects attitude toward the extension.

Broniarczyk and Alba (1994) argued that attitude toward the parent brand had a positive impact on consumers’ evaluation of the extension. When attitude toward the athlete endorser is considered attitude toward the parent brand in brand extension research, the following hypothesis is possible:

H4: Attitude toward the athlete endorser positively affects attitude toward the extension.

Völckner and Sattler (2006) asserted that quality of the parent brand had a significant effect on success of the
extension. Athletes’ quality can be estimated by their expertise regarding the sports they play. Thus, H5: An athlete’s expertise positively influences attitude toward the extension.

Methods
Participants were recruited from MTurk, the largest online labor marketplace where registered members conduct human-related tasks for micro payments (Wu, 2013). 229 (male 58%) respondents in the United States participated in the online survey. The participants’ average age was 34.83 and 60% of the participants were Caucasian. Respondents randomly received one of the two versions of the instrument. They were asked to write an athlete celebrity toward which they had positive (or not positive) attitudes. The two conditions (i.e., “positive” and “not positive”) were designed to create variance in responses (Thomson, 2006). Thereafter, attitude toward the athlete and the athlete’s expertise were asked. To avoid any bias caused by a certain brand or product category, a fictitious brand, TOV was created and one of the ten product categories which were most frequently endorsed by athlete celebrities was randomly given to respondents. Respondents were then informed that the athlete celebrity they had written in the first question endorsed TOV. Thereafter, endorser-product fit, image transfer, and attitude toward the extension were asked.

Seven point semantic differential scales were used to measure attitude toward the athlete with four items (Silvera & Austad, 2004), athletes’ expertise with five items (Ohanian, 1990), endorser-product fit with five items (Till & Busler, 2000), and attitude toward the extension with two items (Aaker & Keller, 1990). In addition, a two-item seven point Likert scale was used to measure image transfer (Carrillat, Harris, & Lafferty, 2010). Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted to test the measurement and structural model using Mplus 5 (Muthén & Muthén, 2007).

Results
The fit of the hybrid model combining the measurement and structural model was satisfactory (Normed $\chi^2 = 2.62$; CFI = .97; TLI = .96; SRMR = .046; RMSEA = .084) according to Bollen’s (1989) and Hu and Bentler’s (1999) suggestions.

All factor loadings were significant in the positive direction ($p < .001$; loadings ranging from .83 to .98). All AVE values were greater than .50, ranging from .87 for athletes’ expertise to .92 for athlete endorser-product fit. All composite reliability values were higher than the recommended criteria of 0.70 (Klein, 2005). Thus, convergent validity of the measurement model was supported. No interfactor correlation was greater than the suggested criterion of .85 for discriminant validity (Kline, 2005). No squared correlation between two variables was greater than the AVE value of either variable (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Therefore, discriminant validity was also supported.

The direct path from athlete endorser-product fit to image transfer (H1) was significant (standardized $\gamma = .66$, S.E. = .04, $p < .001$), explaining 44% of the variance. The direct paths from image transfer to attitude toward the extension (H2; standardized $\beta = .13$, S.E. = .05, $p < .01$), from athlete endorser-product fit to attitude toward the extension (H3; standardized $\gamma = .43$, S.E. = .06, $p < .001$), and from attitude toward the athlete endorser to attitude toward the extension (H4; standardized $\gamma = .47$, S.E. = .06, $p < .001$) were significant. However, the direct path from expertise to attitude toward the extension was not significant (H5; standardized $\gamma = .03$, S.E. = .05, $p > .05$). The presented model accounted for a total of 88% of variance in attitude toward the extension.

Discussion
Implications for the current research are as follows. First, the findings fill gaps in the literature and extend the body of knowledge of brand extensions to human brand extensions in sport contexts. Second, the present research found that attitude toward the extension was influenced by athlete endorser-product fit, but not by athlete’s expertise. This finding is in line with the brand extension research conducted by Aaker and Keller (1990). Third, the current research also found that attitude toward the athlete endorser was a crucial factor to enhance the attitude toward the extension. This finding is in accordance with Broniarczyk and Alba’s (1994) brand extension study. Fourth, the conceptualized model explained 88% of variance in attitude toward the extension. Fifth, the findings also provide important information for sport marketing managers that they should consider both endorser-product fit and consumers’ attitudes toward the athlete to maximize the efficacy of athlete endorsement of non-sport products. Detailed implications of the findings, limitations, and directions for future research will be discussed in the presentation.