Reconsidering the Role of Fit in Athlete Endorsement: New Evidences from the Single–Target Implicit Association Test (ST–IAT)

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"The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors that servant and has forgotten the gift"—Albert Einstein

Introduction

In the recent consumer behavior literature, several scholars suggest that consumer attitude research should be further extended through the joint application of both conscious and unconscious levels of judgment, because these two often display incremental validity in explaining actual behavior (Dempsey & Mitchell, 2010; Greenwald et al., 2009; Petty, 2006). Cornwell et al. (2005) concurred and suggested that consumers’ implicit memory might play a major role in processing sponsorship information. To date, a majority of endorsement and sponsorship research predominantly focused on consumers’ deliberate levels of evaluative judgments (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989; Rice et al., 2012; Till & Shimp, 1998). Accordingly, to fill the explanatory gap, the current study investigated the interplay of the dual processes of associative evaluation (implicit attitudes) and propositional reasoning (explicit attitudes) in the context of athlete endorsement.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

The fit between celebrity endorsers and endorsed brands has been identified as one of the most important determinants in endorsement effectiveness (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989; Rice et al., 2012; Till & Busler, 2000). It is believed that consumers would automatically evaluate an attitude object (e.g., endorsed brands) favorably due to enhanced fluency when the object was previously primed with consistent information to existing knowledge, and then the favorable implicit attitudes would be further confirmed explicitly through propositional reasoning.

H1-1: High fit, rather than moderate fit, induces more favorable implicit attitudes.

H1-2: The favorable implicit attitudes are likely to be confirmed through propositional reasoning. Thus, high fit, rather than moderate fit, induces more favorable explicit attitudes.

At the same time, inconsistent information with preexisting consumer knowledge also may trigger intensive associative evaluation since this type of information tends to induce cognitive biases, which often results in involuntary attention and elaboration (bottom-up attentional control; Theeuwes, 2010). The strength of associations relevant to the attitude object may become reinforced in consumers’ memory through the biased attention and elaboration. Then, in a subsequent judgment, the reinforced association strength helps process the attitude object with ease since previously elaborated information tends to be more accessible in memory to the activation of associated information (Dimofte & Yalc, 2011; Janiszewski, 1993).

H2-1: Low fit, rather than moderate fit, induces more favorable implicit attitudes.

In propositional reasoning, however, in spite of the enhanced fluency and favorable implicit attitudes, consumers may experience cognitive dissonance since the information is still explicitly inconsistent with their existing knowledge. Given that favorable associative evaluation is likely to add favorable propositions (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006), consumers may either explicitly: (1) adjust their existing propositional beliefs or (2) confirm their existing expectations.

H2-2: To resolve the dissonance, consumers explicitly accept the favorable propositions, disconfirming their existing explicit knowledge (i.e., dual attitudes with a same valence).
H2-3: Alternatively, they explicitly reject the favorable propositions, confirming their existing explicit beliefs (i.e., dual attitudes with a different valence).

Experiment

Three pretests, including two qualitative studies (five faculty members and 15 graduate students for pretest 1 and 36 undergraduate students for pretest 2) and one field study (72 undergraduate students) were conducted to identify potential endorsement deals, which differ in perceived fit between endorsers and brands and involvement levels, controlling for confounding variables. As a result, 12 potential endorsements identified through a series of pretest were deemed appropriate for hypothesis testing in the main experiment. For example, the results of pretest 3 revealed that fit was significantly different, $F(1, 70) = 69.47, p < .001$, among the high ($M = 4.68$), moderate ($M = 3.48$), and low conditions ($M = 2.28$).

The main experiment was a 3 (fit: high vs. moderate vs. low; between subjects) × 2 (athlete and brand involvement level: high vs. low; between subjects) × 2 (replicate target: athlete endorser and product brand; within subjects) design with a between subject manipulation of the 12 hypothetical endorsements. One hundred and eighty undergraduate students were recruited from a large university, and they received course credits for their participation. The researchers employed the single target-implicit association test (SA-IAT; Bluemke & Friese, 2008; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) to measure implicit attitudes toward both endorsers and brands, which was programmed by the INQUISIT millisecond software package (Inquisit 4 Lab 4.0.8.0). Stimuli of the two ST-IATs include: (1) six stimuli describing the target brand by using logo, images, and emblems; (2) six stimuli describing the target athlete by using the athlete’ facial images; (3) six positive words describing favorable associations; and (4) six negative words describing unfavorable associations. Two separate ST-IATs include a total of five blocks of trials. Participants were asked to categorize the presented stimulus by pressing keys ("e" or "t") corresponding to the category labels on screen (i.e., favorable vs. unfavorable). The order of the two targets was randomly counterbalanced over participants.

Results and Implications

The researchers followed existing algorithm of ST-IAT scoring (Bluemke & Friese, 2008). Mean error rates in both IATs were low (4.69% for athlete blocks and 4.61% for product blocks). Explicit attitudes obtained through multiple items were averaged to form single scales, and then were z-transformed to directly compare with implicit attitudes assessed through ST-IAT. In sum, the results of a series of analysis of variance in R 3.1.1 yielded significant fit × involvement interactions for implicit ($F(2, 174) = 5.03, p = .007$) and explicit attitudes ($F(2, 174) = 6.53, p = .002$) toward endorsers. Follow-up univariate analyses indicated that in the low involvement group, both low and high fit, rather than moderate fit, induced favorable implicit ($F(2, 85) = 2.39, p < .10$) and explicit attitudes ($F(2, 85) = 5.25, p = .007$). On the other hand, highly involved consumers showed relatively more favorable implicit and explicit attitudes, and they were also less susceptible to fit manipulation (e.g., $\eta^2$ of the main effect of fit on explicit attitudes = .14 vs. .03). Similar results were found for endorsed brands.

In spite of substantial studies available, only a handful of scholars have examined consumers’ associative-propositional processes beyond the existing matching principles in the endorsement context. The key finding of the current study is that in addition to high fit, the low fit condition also induced consumers’ favorable implicit and explicit attitudes. In this respect, this study may shed new lights on the existing endorsement literature by providing new evidences. At the conference, the authors will further discuss theoretical implications of fit and implicit attitudes as well as practical applications of metacognitive and automatic/unconscious/associative consumer learning (e.g., Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Petty, 2006) in the context of athlete endorsement.