The Effectiveness of Fit between an Athlete Celebrity and a Non-Sport Product: The Moderating Role of Product Involvement and Mediating Role of Attachments to Human Brands

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Introduction
Sport stars often endorse non-sport brands by using their popularity or physical attractiveness. However, advertisers should give careful consideration when they employ an athlete celebrity endorser since endorser-product fit plays an important role in advertisements (Till & Busler, 2000). Moreover, product involvement and human brand attachments need to be taken into account, since product involvement may moderate the relationship between endorser-product fit and behavioral intentions and the latter may play a mediating role in this relationship. As such, the current study aims to investigate how product involvement and human brand attachments act in the match-up effect.

Literature Review
Petty et al. (1983) examined the moderating role of involvement and showed that an advertisement endorsed by a celebrity influenced consumer responses in low involvement condition via a peripheral route. However, a celebrity endorser delivers product-relevant messages via a central route, so that celebrity endorsement may be effective in the high involvement condition if an image of a celebrity fits well with an endorsed product’s image (Lee & Koo, 2016; Till & Busler, 2000). Athlete endorsements for sport-relevant products were evaluated more highly than athlete endorsements for non-sport products; however, some non-sport products fit better with athlete endorsements than do other non-sport products since there is a difference in the degree of athlete-product congruence (Martin, 1996). Thus,

H1: The effectiveness of fit between an athlete celebrity endorser and a non-sport product on purchase intention will be moderated by product involvement.

Heider’s (1958) attribution theory explains people tend to find reasons why a certain situation has occurred based on commonsense explanations. In addition, more attributional process is generated when people view unexpected or incongruent behaviors than when they view expected or congruent actions (Hastie, 1984). Accordingly, incongruence between a celebrity and an endorsed product elicits an attributional process including cognitive evaluation and elaboration. This elaboration process generates resistance to a positive message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Therefore, an elaboration process stimulated by incongruence between a celebrity endorser and its cause may encourage consumers to resist an ad message. Thus, athlete celebrities’ human brands may be damaged when endorser-product incongruence occurs. Human brands refers to any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communication efforts (Thomson, 2006). Since celebrities’ human brands are accumulated by their endorsement portfolios (Kelting & Rice, 2013), the conflict between athletes’ unique attribute of “sport-relevance” and their endorsement portfolios may negatively influence fans’ attachments to human brands, defined as the intensity of a person’s target-specific emotional bond with a human brand (Thomson, 2006). In this sense, human brand attachments may play a key role in the relationship between endorser-product fit and consumers’ behavioral intentions when athlete celebrities endorse non-sport products. Thus,

H2: The moderating effect of product involvement predicted in H1 will be mediated by attachments to athlete celebrities’ human brands.

Method
Through MTurk, 228 (male 57.5%) respondents in the U.S. participated in the online survey. The participants’ average age was 34.7 and 59.6% 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). To avoid any bias caused by a certain brand or product category, a fictitious brand was created and one of the ten non-sport 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 (Till & Busler, 2000) attachments to an athlete celebrity (Thomson, 2006), product involvement (Zaichkowsky, 1994) and purchase intention (Yi, 1990) were asked.

Results
Cronbach’s α values for all measurement items indicated acceptable internal reliability (α > .70). Since VIF values of all regressions ranged from 1.09 to 3.39, less than the cutoff point of 10 suggested by Hair et al. (1998), there were no multicollinearity issues.

Moderated regression analyses were used to test H1. The predictor and moderator were centered to reduce multicollinearity (West et al., 1996). The predictor and moderator were entered in the first step, and the interaction term was entered in the second step. The first order effects accounted for 68.2% of variance (p < .001). The interaction term showed significant change in explaining variance (ΔR² = .01, β = .11, p < .01), thereby supporting H1. To test mediated moderation (H2), we used Model 8 in the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2012). The moderation effect of product involvement in H1 was mediated by attachments to athlete celebrities’ human brands since the bootstrap results (re-sample = 10,000) showed the 95% CI for the interaction did not include zero (ab = .02, CI = .002 to .037). Thus, H2 was supported.

Discussion and Conclusion
Advertising campaigns employing celebrity endorsements have been considered merely as a strategy to attract consumers’ attention through the peripheral route. The result of the current study, however, indicate that celebrity endorsement may operate via the central route by delivering a strong argument regarding the endorsed product when the congruence between athlete celebrities and non-sport products occurs. More importantly, the result identified the mediating role of athletes’ human brand attachment in the interaction effect. The research findings therefore show the importance of endorser-product fit and product involvement in aspects of product management and human brand management. Detailed implications of the findings, limitations, and directions for future research will be discussed in the presentation.