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Fine-Tuning Brand Endorsements

Exploring Race-Sport Fit with Athlete Endorsers

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Michael Sagas

Abstract

The present study examines the effect of an athlete endorser's race-sport fit in the decision-making process of athlete endorsed product selection. The results of this study reveal that the race of athlete endorsers can influence endorsement strategies depending on the sport associated with the athlete endorser. Perceived race-sport fit was also a key factor in creating both positive sport consumer attitudes and increased purchase intentions toward an athlete endorsed product. The findings of this study should be beneficial to athletes and sport business professionals when considering endorsement strategies for sport-related products and brands.

Keywords: *Culture, identification, marketing, sponsorship, sport fans*

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Introduction

Though previous athlete endorsement research (e.g., Fink, Cunningham, & Kenix, 2004; Till & Busler, 2000) has focused on endorser characteristics, such as expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, the area of race-sport fit has been underexplored. Race-sport fit represents the level of relevance (in the minds of consumers) between an athlete endorser and this individual's chosen sport of competition. The present study examines race-sport fit. Specifically examined are whether perceptions of race-sport fit have a more powerful influence on endorser-product fit than an endorser's expertise. Also examined is whether sport identification moderates the relationship between perceived race-sport fit and sport fans' attitudes and purchase intentions toward athlete endorsed products.

Theoretical Foundations and Research Hypotheses

An appropriate fit (or match) between an endorser and product will influence the strength of the endorser-product relationship (Till & Busler, 2000). The described dynamic between an endorser and product can be understood by way of a marketing concept known as the match-up hypothesis (Kamins, 1990). According to the match-up hypothesis, "the message conveyed by the image of the celebrity and the message about the product should converge for an advertisement to be effective" (Kamins & Gupta, 1994, p. 570). The effects of the match-up hypothesis can be explained further via associative learning theory (Till & Busler, 2000).

Associative learning theory offers a useful theoretical lens for exploring the match-up hypothesis because, according to this viewpoint, associations of two different concepts or images can be created and linked to one another. The human brain is not designed to recall information in isolation; instead, the brain integrates information to generate one associative memory. The newly generated associations then constitute an incorporated configuration of memory (Anderson, 1983). Thus, if consumers perceive strong race-sport fit in athlete endorsed advertising, they may develop positive evaluations of the endorsed product. Positive evaluations are then expected to strengthen both the image of the athlete and the brand in the mind of consumers (Martin, 1996). Perceptions of fit also can be influenced by levels of sport identification (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Kim, Trail, & Magnusen, 2013; Wann & Branscombe, 1995). More precisely, individuals who are highly identified with sport may better perceive fit between a sport product and athlete endorser than individuals less identified with sport.

Several hypotheses were developed with the goal of better understanding race-sport fit with athlete endorsed products. These hypotheses were examined across three studies. The research hypotheses include the following:

H1: Athlete endorsers with a strong race-sport fit will have a more positive influence on endorser-product fit than those with a weak race-sport fit.

H2: Perceived race-sport fit will have a stronger influence than expertise of an endorser in determining endorser-product fit.

H3: Athlete endorsers with a strong race-sport fit will more positively influence attitudes and purchase intentions toward an athlete endorsed product than those with a weak race-sport fit.

H4: Sport consumers with high sport identification will have a more positive attitude and a higher level of purchase intentions toward an athlete endorsed product than those with low sport identification under a strong race-sport fit.

Study 1

A race-sport fit pre-test was conducted prior to the start of Study 1. Pre-test data were collected from undergraduate students at universities in the Northeastern and Southeastern United States. Pre-test participants ($n = 252$) were asked to associate athletes with sports (e.g., “Which sport do you most commonly associate with Asian athletes?”). These individuals were randomly assigned an open-ended question about sport and African-American athletes or Asian athletes. A total of 129 participants were asked about sport and African-American athletes; of those participants, 107 (82.9%) most associated African-American athletes with the sport of basketball. A total of 123 participants were questioned about sport and Asian athletes; of those participants, 90 (73.2%) most associated Asian athletes with martial arts (e.g., sport of taekwondo).

Procedure and participants. Race-sport fit was manipulated via a series of fictional athlete endorsed advertisements to examine the influence of perceived race-sport fit on endorser-product fit (H1). Race of the endorsers was presented as African-American or Asian in the advertisements. Basketball and the martial art of taekwondo were presented as the endorsers’ sports. Thus, a 2 (Race: African-American and Asian) \times 2 (Sport: basketball and taekwondo) factorial design was implemented.

Each athlete endorsed advertisement included a close-up photo of a generic (non-celebrity) African-American or Asian athlete. Athlete endorsers were wearing uniforms respective of either basketball or taekwondo. The product, a hypothetical sports drink, remained consistent regardless of athlete race or sport.

Study 1 consisted of 155 undergraduate students at universities in the Northeastern and Southeastern United States. Fifty-eight percent of the sample was Caucasian ($n = 90$), followed by Asian ($n = 29$, 18.7%), Hispanic ($n = 19$, 12.3%), and African-American ($n = 17$, 11%). Sixty-one percent of the participants in Study 1 were male ($n = 95$).

Till and Busler’s (2000) endorser-product fit scale was adopted to measure endorser-product fit. Their scale, which represents a reliable measure ($\alpha = .96$) of endorser-product fit, includes five-items measured on a seven-point, Likert-type

scale. Example items from the scale include: “I think the athlete is an appropriate endorser of the product,” and “I think the combination of this athlete and the product goes together well.”

Manipulation Check

A validation check for the athlete endorsed advertisements was conducted prior to Study 1. A total of 16 graduate students at a large Southeastern university in the United States were recruited to validate the manipulation. The participants were given a multiple-choice question (i.e., “Please write in the letter of the athlete endorsed advertising below that best describes the advertisement you just viewed”). The answer options included: (A) a sports drink advertisement with an African-American basketball player, (B) a sports drink advertisement with an African-American taekwondo competitor, (C) a sports drink advertisement with an Asian basketball player, and (D) a sports drink advertisement with an Asian taekwondo competitor. All participants gave correct answers for the manipulation check.

Results

A 2 (African-American and Asian) x 2 (basketball and taekwondo) factorial ANOVA provided the main effects of race-sport fit. Participants reported a significantly higher level of endorser-product fit after seeing an advertisement with an African-American basketball player ($M = 4.64, SD = 1.54, n = 41$) than with an Asian basketball player advertisement [$(M = 3.2, SD = 1.48, n = 35); F(1, 74) = 17.23, P < .001; \eta^2 = .19$]. Participants also reported a significantly higher level of endorser-product fit after seeing an advertisement with an Asian taekwondo competitor ($M = 4.47, SD = 1.64, n = 39$) than with an African-American taekwondo competitor [$(M = 3.79, SD = 1.17, n = 40); F(1, 77) = 4.55, P < .05; \eta^2 = .06$] (See Table 1)]. Thus, H1 was supported because study participants perceived the sport advertisements represented by an African-American basketball player and Asian taekwondo competitor as possessing stronger race-sport fit than the sport advertisements with an Asian basketball player and African-American taekwondo competitor.

Table 1

The Effect of Perceived Race-Sport Fit on Endorser-Product Fit

Sport	Race	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
Basketball	African-American	4.64	1.54	17.23	.000
	Asian	3.20	1.48		
Taekwondo	African-American	3.79	1.17	4.55	.036
	Asian	4.47	1.64		

Dependent variable: endorser-product fit

Study 2

In matters of advertising, one of the most important factors in the selection of an athlete endorser is the extent to which the endorser is perceived to be an expert by consumers (Fink et al., 2004; Till & Busler, 2000). In Study 2, the design of the first study was expanded to include endorser expertise. Level of endorser-product fit was compared according to the following experimental conditions: 2 (race-sport fit: strong and weak) \times 2 (expertise: skillful and unskillful).

Procedure and participants. The advertisements used in Study 1 and Study 2 were identical except for the manipulation of expertise. Athlete endorser's level of expertise was manipulated by adding expert information to the advertisements. For example, in the case of skillful athlete endorser for a taekwondo competitor, the caption "World Champion" was included with the athlete's image. Five items were adopted from Till and Busler's (2000) endorser-product fit scale ($\alpha = .96$) to measure endorser-product fit.

Data were gathered from 135 undergraduate students at universities in the Northeastern and Southeastern United States. Sixty percent of the participants were male ($n = 81$), and approximately 83% of the participants ($n = 112$) were 18-24 years of age. The majority of the participants were Caucasian ($n = 81$) followed by Asian ($n = 24$), Hispanic ($n = 17$), and African-American ($n = 13$).

Results

A repeated-measure ANOVA was implemented to compare the influence of perceived race-sport fit and expertise on endorser-product fit. An athlete endorser with strong race-sport fit (African-American basketball player), but not expertise, had a more powerful influence on endorser-product fit ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.54$, $n = 41$) than did the weak race-sport fit athlete (Asian basketball player) with expertise [$(M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.57$, $n = 35)$; $F(1, 74) = 6.97$, $P < .05$; $\eta^2 = .09$]. Study participants reported significantly higher levels of endorser-product fit after viewing the advertisement with the Asian taekwondo athlete who had a strong race-sport fit ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.19$, $n = 30$) but not expertise, than the advertisement with an African-American taekwondo athlete who was designated as an expert in the sport advertisement [$(M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.25$, $n = 29)$; $F(1, 57) = 5.02$, $P < .05$; $\eta^2 = .08$]. Thus, H2 was supported (See Table 2).

Table 2

Comparing the Effects between Race-Sport Fit and Expertise on Endorser-Product Fit

Sport	Race	Expertise	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
Basketball	African-American	No	4.64	1.54	6.97	.010
	Asian	Yes	3.70	1.57		
Taekwondo	African-American	Yes	4.44	1.25	5.02	.029
	Asian	No	5.15	1.19		

Dependent variable: endorser-product fit

Study 3

Several endorsement studies in the context of sport have examined the role of individuals' levels of identification with an athlete, a sport, or a team in determining endorsement effectiveness (Fink, Parker, Cunningham, & Cuneen, 2012). Identification is important to the study of athlete endorsements because consumers' psychological connections to sport can influence how they perceive athlete endorser-sport product relationships. Accordingly, to test H3 and H4, a 2 (race-sport fit: strong and weak) x 2 (sport identification: high and low) factorial design was used to examine the interaction effect of race-sport fit and sport identification on attitude and purchase intentions toward an athlete endorsed product.

Procedure and participants. Data were collected from 278 undergraduate students at universities in the Northeastern and Southeastern United States. Most study participants were male ($n = 175$, 62.9%) and Caucasian ($n = 174$, 62.6%). Approximately 84% of the participants ($n = 232$) fell within the 18-24 years of age category.

Measures

Till and Busler's (2000) endorser-product fit scale ($\alpha = .96$) was used again. Four-items were taken from the Points of Attachment Index (PAI; Trail, Robinson, Dick, & Gillentine, 2003) to measure sport identification levels. The PAI possesses strong reliability ($\alpha = .96$). A semantic differential scale with three-items ($\alpha = .95$) was used measure participant attitude toward the athlete endorsed product. For example: "In general, how do you feel about the product?". The scale was anchored from 1 (Strongly Dislike) to 7 (Strongly Like). Finally, to measure consumer purchase intentions toward an athlete endorsed sport drink, three-items were adapted from Till and Busler's behavior intentions scale ($\alpha = .96$).

Results

The effect of race-sport fit on sport consumer attitude and purchase intentions was tested using a MANOVA. Participants who viewed athlete endorsed advertisements with strong race-sport fit had more positive attitudes toward the endorsed product ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.14$) than participants who viewed athlete endorsed advertisements with weak race-sport fit ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.15$, $F(1, 276) = 5.87$, $P < .05$; $\eta^2 = .02$). Further, participants who saw advertisements with a strong race-sport fit had significantly higher levels of purchase intentions toward the endorsed product ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.52$) than participants who viewed advertisements with weak race-sport fit ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.66$, $F(1, 276) = 4.59$, $P < .05$; $\eta^2 = .02$). Thus, H3 was supported (See Table 3).

Table 3*The Effect of Race-Sport Fit on Attitude and Purchase Intention*

Variable	Race-sport fit	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
Attitude	Strong	4.54	1.14	5.87	.016
	Weak	4.21	1.15		
Purchase intention	Strong	3.88	1.52	4.59	.033
	Weak	3.47	1.66		

Next, to test the moderating effects of sport identification and race-sport fit on attitudes and purchase intentions toward an athlete endorsed product, participants were divided into two groups using the median score of participants' sport identification scores (i.e., median split method). A high sport identification group ($n = 137$) and a low sport identification group ($n = 130$) were formed. In the strong race-sport fit group, participants with high sport identification showed more positive attitudes toward the endorsed sport product ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 1.12$) than participants with low sport identification ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.1$). In the weak race-sport fit group, no significant mean differences of attitude toward the endorsed sport product [$F(1, 263) = 4.05$, $P < .01$; $\eta^2 = .31$] were found between high sport identification participants ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.07$) and low sport identification participants ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.23$).

Although the moderating effect of sport identification and race-sport fit on purchase intentions toward the endorsed sporting product was not statistically significant [$F(1, 263) = 2.35$, $P = .127$], a significant mean difference of purchase intentions between consumers with different levels of sport identification was found. In the strong race-sport fit group, participants with high sport identification reported a higher level of purchase intentions toward the endorsed sporting product ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.62$) than participants with low sport identification ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.3$). In the weak race-sport fit group, no significant difference of purchase intentions between consumers with high identification ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.54$) and those with low sport identification ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.78$; $F(1, 263) = 4.68$, $P < .05$; $\eta^2 = .03$) was found. Thus, H4 was partially supported (See Table 4).

Table 4*The Moderating Effect of Sport Identification and Race-Sport Fit on Attitudes and Purchase Intentions toward a Sport Product Endorsement*

Variable	Sport identification	Race-sport fit	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
Attitude	High	Strong	4.78	1.12	4.01	.042
		Weak	4.23	1.07		
	Low	Strong	4.22	1.1		
		Weak	4.23	1.23		
Purchase intention	High	Strong	4.23	1.62	2.35	.127
		Weak	3.58	1.54		
	Low	Strong	3.49	1.30		
		Weak	3.44	1.78		

Discussion

Using athletes in advertisements is a common practice. This practice tends to be more effective when athletes endorse a sport-related product because of the general perception of consumers that these individuals are experts in sports (Fink et al., 2004; Martin, 1996; Till & Busler, 2000). Athletes endorsing products such as sports drinks, sports apparel, and strength and conditioning equipment is a stronger and more logical fit than athletes endorsing refrigerators, tax services, and yard supplies. Interestingly, though the current study does not discount the importance of expertise in athlete endorsers, race-sport fit was found to be a more significant factor than expertise when using non-celebrity athlete endorsers.

Perceptions of race-sport are fluctuating; they are not fixed. Sport is for everyone, and as individuals from a variety of social-cultural backgrounds participate in sport, so too will perceptions of race-sport fit fluctuate. Consider Tiger Woods and how he changed perceptions of professional golf (Herrington, 2016). However, such changes are unlikely to occur fast, especially in sports where certain categories of individuals have a strong presence.

The vast majority of the athletes in the National Basketball Association (NBA) are African-American. So, not surprisingly, sports drink brand Gatorade tends to use African-American NBA stars (e.g., Dwyane Wade, Paul George, Michael Jordan, and Jabari Parker) as endorsers. Such a practice could be explained via the results of Study 2 and 3. Namely, sport consumers are expected to easily associate African-American athletes with basketball, and such a strong association is likely to create positive attitudes and foster purchase intentions toward a sports drink for basketball-interested sport consumers. In comparison, though there are many African-American hockey players, it is likely that many (if not most) sport consumers think of professional hockey in terms of Caucasians from the United States, Canada, and Russia. Thus, as a matter of business and strategic acumen, athletes, sport organizations, and sport brands need to balance possible desires to change market perceptions with consumer realities of the current sport marketplace.

Additionally, participants with high sport identification were more likely to have positive attitudes and purchase intentions toward the endorsed sporting product when they perceived a strong race-sport fit with the athlete advertisement. So, alongside matters of race-sport fit, sport professionals need to focus on consumer identification. Several straightforward ways in which this can be done are offering enhanced game experiences and readily accessible team information. Consider the example of Major League Baseball (MLB).

Several major changes are coming to MLB. Of note are plans to add augmented reality (AR) elements to the popular At Bat app during 2018 season (Ortiz, 2017). The new app will allow sports fans to point their smartphone or tablet to the field and get real-time information about players (e.g., game stats). The use of the AR platform is one way in which MLB is embracing new technology to attract and

maintain the interest of a new generation of tech-savvy, young fans. By providing real-time stats and game information via an AR tool kit, MLB teams will better be able to maximize entertainment value of sports fans, which in turn should contribute enhanced sport identification with these consumers.

Fox Sports and other sports media-related websites (e.g., NextVR) also provide a live virtual reality (VR) streaming service to offer consumers a holistic view of the game through vivid graphics and in-game insights. Sports media websites like NextVR and Fox Sports provide opportunities for sport fans to experience live sport events in brand new and exciting ways (e.g., multiple camera angles, ability to control their view from the stands). What is more, the virtual experience is not limited to live games. Sport consumers can watch play-by-play highlights via VR videos during the game. Thus, the combination of both AR and VR platforms provide technological platforms that may help sport teams better engage their consumers and create more highly identified sport fans.

Future Research

This study demonstrated the effectiveness of race-sports fit by revealing that consumers experience more positive attitudes toward a sport product advertised by a fictional African-American basketball player and a fictional Asian taekwondo competitor than an Asian basketball player and an African-American taekwondo competitor. In the future, scholars are strongly encouraged to use real-world basketball players and taekwondo athletes so that levels of attachment to the athletes can be controlled. Future studies also should examine the effectiveness of athlete endorsements using additional races and sports. Further, this study explored race-sport fit using two athletes. Manipulating sport-race fit using examples of female athletes should be done to examine possible moderating effects of gender in the relationship between sport-race fit and attitude toward athlete endorsed products.

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