Influences of Athlete's Transgression in Endorsement Context: Effects of Transgression Type and Functional Fit

Joon Sung Lee, University of Michigan
Dae Hee Kwak (Advisor), University of Michigan

Marketing	Friday, May 30, 2014	20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2014-104	9:45 AM	(Allegheny)

Introduction

Despite evident advantages of athlete endorsement, various risks are associated with athlete endorsement. In particular, given the fact that many athlete endorsers commit immoral transgressions in today's world and marketing managers cannot control their misconducts, the athlete endorsers' transgressions deserve more attention. However, to date, only minimal attention has been paid to celebrity athletes' transgressions, while the research community has paid extensive attention to the question of how the endorsement campaign can become more persuasive. Therefore, the main purpose of the current study is twofold: (1) to examine negative effects of athlete transgression on sport consumers' attitude toward an athlete (AAth), attitude toward associated brand (ABrd), and purchase intention (PI), and (2) to examine the potential moderating effects of two potential boundary conditions - transgression type and functional fit between an athlete and a brand - in an experimental setting.

Theoretical Background and Research Hypotheses

According to the associative learning theory, human memory works as a network consisting of various processing units (so called nodes) linked by associative connections (Anderson, 1976). These nodes are known to be activated when associated nodes are stimulated, which in turn facilitate transferring attitudes. In this sense, it becomes plausible that negative evaluation of athlete elicited by the athlete's transgression will also negatively influence an associated brand through a link between the athlete and the brand. Thus, we propose:

H1. Athlete's transgression will have negative effects on consumer's AAth, ABrd, and PI.

Previous exploratory studies (e.g., Hughes & Shank, 2005; Wilson et al., 2008) have suggested that the extent to which an athlete's transgression is related to the athlete's performance level has different influences on consumers' perceptions. For instance, Hughes and Shank argue that people generally recognize incidents to be more scandalous when the acts involve violating the integrity of sport (e.g., doping). Given this, we hypothesize as below.

H2. Transgression type will moderate consumers' perceptions about an athlete and a brand: in the on-field transgression condition, consumers will show lower levels of AAth, ABrd, and PI than consumers in the off-field transgression condition.

Functional fit between an athlete and a brand refers to whether an actual use of endorsed brand is related to an athlete's performance. A greater functional fit (a stronger association) is known to determine the amount of thought and attention that consumers pay to the association between an athlete and an endorsed brand (Becker-Olsen, 2003; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008). Moreover, according to the Elaborating Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983), the attitudes induced by taking into account product-relevant attributes (e.g., central route) are regarded as relatively more enduring than the attitudes formed via the peripheral route. Thus, it may be plausible that attitude toward higher functional fit brand may become more immunized against negative information.

H3. Functional fit between athlete and brand will moderate consumers' brand perception: in the high-fit condition, consumers will demonstrate more positive ABrd and PI than consumers in the low-fit condition.

Method

A 3 (transgression type: on-/off-field/control) x 2 (functional fit: high/low) between-subjects design was utilized to test the proposed hypotheses. Stimuli were developed based on a pretest (n=57) which identified two different transgression types (i.e., doping vs. financial fraud). An online survey program (i.e., Qualtrics.com) was utilized to

develop the survey for the main study. A total of 218 respondents were recruited from an online penal service (i.e., mturk.com). Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions and were asked to read a fictitious athlete's outstanding records and transgression information then asked to complete questionnaires. Respondents then were asked to read a brief information about a sponsor brand (i.e., sport drink vs. carbonated drink), and then completed the rest of the survey.

The outcome measures included AAth and ABrd (3 items each: MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989), PI (3 items: Yi, 1990), and personal involvement level with sport (4 items: Zaichkowsky, 1985) using a 7-point Likert scale. In addition, manipulation-checking items were included to test whether the intended manipulations worked: (1) a single item asking if the transgression committed by the athlete is a violation of sport integrity and (2) three items asking functional fit between an athlete and a brand (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999). Data analyses included descriptive analysis, reliability test, manipulation check, and a set of ANCOVAs using personal involvement with sport in the scenarios (i.e., track and field) as a covariate.

Results

Results showed that individuals in the control (without transgression) condition reported significantly greater levels of AAth, ABrd, and PI than those in the on-field and the off-field transgression conditions (H1 supported). However, according to another set of ANCOVAs and follow-up post-hoc analyses, contrary to our expectations, individuals in the on-field condition (M = 2.93, SE = .15) reported a greater level of AAth relative to individuals in the off-field condition (M = 2.17, SE =.14; $p < .001$). Moreover, participants' ABrd ($p = .55$) and PI ($p = .85$) levels in on- and off-field conditions did not differ from each other (H2 rejected). Intriguingly, we could not find any significant main effects of functional fit on individuals' ABrd and PI (H3 rejected). No interactions between transgression type and functional fit were found.

Discussion

From the results, we can understand that athlete endorsers' transgressions have negative effects on consumers' AAth, ABrd, and PI regardless of transgression types. However, the results show that off-field transgression has more negative influence on sport consumers' attitudes and purchase intention than on-field transgression. These results are contrary to what Hughes and Shank (2005) argued. As for the equivocal results, it is plausible to speculate that the perceived severity of transgression could have moderated the impact of transgression on individuals' perceptions and evaluations. Moreover, brand perceptions do not differ based on transgression type. These results might have transpired due to the laboratory setting utilizing fictitious athlete and brand. As Till and Shimp (1998) noted, compared to the actual marketplace, only limited set of feelings and responses are evoked in laboratory setting using fictitious spokesperson and brand. Given the argument that human memory network consists of associations between memory nodes (Anderson, 1976) we would argue that a single exposure would not be sufficient to build any meaningful associative connections. Furthermore, regarding the functional fit, we utilized drink category, which is considered as a low-involvement product (Traylor, 1981). Use of low-involvement product could have not elicited enough interests in brands (Bogart, 1967; Mitchell, 1979) and failed to evoke expected responses. To sum up, despite the unexpected results herein, the study evidently shows that an athlete transgression has significant negative effects on sport consumers' AAth, ABrd, and PI. It is worth noting that these findings provide answer for marketing practitioners' concern about potential negative impact from an athlete transgression to an associated brand. Nevertheless, future studies addressing aforementioned limitations are still needed to further extend our understanding of athlete transgression and its marketing implications.