Athletes as Product Endorsers: The Effect of Gender and Product Relatedness

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Abstract

Although the use of athletes as endorsers is increasing, we know relatively little about how consumers perceive athlete endorsers and the factors that influence endorser effectiveness. In particular, we know little about how congruence—the “fit” between the product, the endorser and the consumer—influences consumer perceptions of the endorser. The authors report on a study that examines the effects of endorser gender, consumer gender, and the type of product advertised on consumer perceptions of endorser trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. After viewing ads containing athlete endorsers for either milk or cross trainer shoes, subjects answered a battery of questions about their perceptions of the endorser. Findings show that regardless of product type, subjects rate endorsers of the same gender as more trustworthy. Also, women rate endorsers as more expert when there is a fit between the endorser and product (e.g., when the endorser uses the product in their sport) while men rate endorsers as more expert when there is not an endorser-product match. Other findings and implications are also discussed.

Introduction

Celebrity endorsers have long been used as the source of marketing messages to promote a wide variety of products and services. Celebrity images are featured in print, radio, and approximately 20% of all television commercials (Lane and Spiegel, 1996). The

"Research has shown that customers will have more positive brand attitudes toward products that are endorsed by celebrities and are more likely to choose those products."

celebrities used as promotional tools come from a variety of areas including television, movies, music, corporate America, politics, and of course, athletics. Companies are spending huge sums of money to have athletes such as Michael Jordan ($30 million/year), Tiger Woods ($70 million/year) and Lance Armstrong ($16.5 million/year) endorse both sports and non-sports products (Isidore, 2003). Popular wisdom says that these athletes in particular can command huge sums to endorse products because of their universal popularity and clean images. The fame and popularity of these athletes make them popular as endorsers but little has been done to help us understand whether they are truly effective, or the circumstances under which effectiveness is increased.

U.S. companies paid $897 million to athletes, coaches, and sports personalities in 2001 (Sports Business Journal, 2002) to endorse their goods and services. In addition to the fees for signing these athletes, companies spend another $10 billion to promote their association with them. One study found that sports figures were used as endorsers in 98 of the 872 (11.9%) television commercials analyzed (Turner, Bounds, Hauser, Motsinger, Ozmore & Smith, 1995). Interestingly, only 3% of the advertisements used female athletes as endorsers. Although only a small percentage of the television commercials analyzed used female athletes, this number should continue to grow as women’s sports become increasingly popular around the globe (Miller, 1997).

Based on the above studies, it seems that athletes remain a popular choice for advertisers of both sports and non-sports products. Dyson and Turco (1997) discuss a number of reasons for using celebrities as endorsers. First, research has shown that customers will have more positive brand attitudes toward prod-
ucts that are endorsed by celebrities (Pett, Cacioppo & Schuman, 1983) and are more likely to choose those products (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995). Second, celebrities gain and hold consumers' attention (Atkin & Block, 1983). Third, celebrities can provide expert testimonials for products that helped contribute to their success. This is especially true for sports celebrities who endorse products in their competition. Wayne Gretzky endorsing hockey equipment or Rebecca Lobo endorsing basketball equipment are excellent examples of the powerful "match-up" that can be created between athlete endorsers and sports products. However, it has also been shown that in the presence of negative information about the celebrity, the endorser may have negative effects on attitudes toward the brand (Till & Shimp, 1998).

"The message is more effective when there is a match-up or congruence between the qualities of the endorser and the product being endorsed."

Although billions of dollars are spent using athletes as pitchmen for a host of products, little is known about choosing athletes as endorsers. Relatively few studies have explored the factors that influence the effectiveness of athlete endorsers. Moreover, even less is known about the use of female athletes as endorsers. The studies that have been conducted on the effectiveness of celebrity endorsers are grounded in understanding the characteristics of the source (DeSarbo & Harshman, 1985; Haley, 1996; Ohanian, 1990) and the match-up between source and product (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990).

The purpose of the present study is to explore how the gender of the athlete endorser and type of product that they are endorsing (sport-related versus nonsport related) is related to respondents' perceptions of source expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness.

Background

A number of theoretical approaches have been used to study the questions of how celebrity endorsers work. They include attribution theory (Mowen & Brown, 1981), the elaboration likelihood model (Pett, Cacioppo & Schuman, 1983), adaptation theory (Kahle & Homer, 1985), transfer of cultural meaning (McCraekan, 1989), source characteristics and credibility (Ohanian, 1990), and associative learning (Till & Busler, 2000; Till & Shimp, 1998; Till, 2001). In this research, we are interested in the ways in which matches between source and consumer characteristics influence perceptions of the source as a model, making research on source characteristics and credibility the most appropriate to apply here.

Source Characteristics

Most research on celebrity endorsers has explored the characteristics of the source that affect the effectiveness of the message. Most notably, the credibility of the source has been linked with the persuasiveness of the message. In other words, the more credible the source, the greater the persuasiveness of the message on the target audience. As Haley (1996) points out, "[M]uch support has been found for the main effect of source credibility. That is, different perceptions of source credibility differentially affect message evaluation, attitude change, behavioral intentions and behavioral compliance."

While source credibility has been described as a multidimensional construct, there is no consensus on what factors compose source credibility. Ohanian (1990) provides an excellent review of source credibility scales and the dimensions measured. Source expertise and trustworthiness have been identified as the two most critical dimensions of credibility by a number of researchers (DeSarbo & Harshman, 1985; Appelbaum & Anarol, 1972; Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953). Additional dimensions such as charisma (attractiveness and enthusiasm), objectivity, and dynamism have also been used to describe source credibility.

Ohanian (1990) has conceptualized source credibility as having three distinct dimensions: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. It is important to note that (and as stated by Ohanian) research suggests that the three dimensions of source credibility can make independent contributions to the effectiveness of the source (Weiner & Mowen, 1985). For example, Dennis Rodman may be seen as an expert source of information about basketball shoes, but not very trustworthy. And his attractiveness is most certainly in the eye of the beholder.

Source expertise refers to the "extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions" (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953). Research has shown that a source's perceived expertise has a positive impact on attitude change and that topic specific expertise is important (i.e., athletes endorsing sport-related products). Moreover, expertise of the source is the one dimension of credibility that has been linked with intention to purchase products (Ohanian, 1991). For example, it is easy for a consumer to perceive Tiger Woods' expertise about Nike golf balls, but his expertise about automobiles may be doubted.

Source trustworthiness refers to the consumer's confidence in the source for providing information in an objective and honest manner (Ohanian, 1991). In her
review of the literature, Ohanian (1990) stated that “trustworthiness of the celebrity is an important construct in persuasion and attitude-change research.” However, she found in a later study (Ohanian, 1991) that trustworthiness did not have a significant impact on purchase intentions across four celebrities endorsing four products (one of which was John McEnroe endorsing tennis racquets).

Source attractiveness is a more difficult characteristic to conceptualize. Most researchers describe attractiveness in terms of physical appearance and facial attractiveness (Patzer, 1983). Other researchers believe that attractiveness is a more multidimensional construct. For instance, attractiveness may be described in terms of the perceived similarity of the source to the receiver of the message, familiarity, and whether the source is likeable or admired (Triandis, 1971). Regardless of how attractiveness is defined, studies have shown that attractive sources are able to enhance the target audience’s perception of the ad (Baker & Churchill, 1977) and increase purchase intentions (Petrosius & Crocker, 1989) and purchase behavior (Caballero & Pride, 1984).

In addition to the dimensions of credibility, another source characteristic of importance to advertisers is the gender of the endorser. Gender has not received much attention in advertising research (especially in the context of athlete endorsers), although a few studies have examined gender of the endorser as it relates to attitude towards the ad (e.g., Baker & Churchill, 1977; Debevec & Iyer, 1986; Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990) and product images (e.g., Allison, Golden, Mullet & Coogan, 1980; Alreck, Settle & Belch, 1982). Baker & Churchill (1977) found that respondents judging the affective dimensions of ads, rated ads with endorsers of the opposite gender higher than advertisements using endorsers of the same gender. Langmeyer (1991) also found that respondents tend to rate models of the opposite sex more favorably on a number of items (e.g., sexier, nicer) than they rate endorsers of the same sex. In another study, Ohanian (1991) found a respondent’s gender had no significant influence on purchase intentions or on ratings of celebrities’ attractiveness, trustworthiness, or expertise.

**Match-up Hypothesis**

Related to all three dimensions of credibility is the notion that a good fit between endorser characteristics and the type of product being endorsed is beneficial (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990). Kamins (1990) suggests that in an effective advertisement, the message conveyed by the image or characteristics of the celebrity and the image or characteristics of the product converge, thereby achieving a balance between celebrity and product. This suggests that the message is more effective when there is a match-up or congruence between the qualities of the endorser and the product being endorsed. In fact, the match-up hypothesis states the greater congruence between the image of the endorser and the image of the product being promoted, the more effective the message. This may also depend upon how we measure effectiveness (e.g., increased sales, improved attitude toward the ad or toward the brand).

"Research suggests that expertise may be more important than attractiveness in influencing brand attitudes under match-up conditions."

Support for the match-up hypothesis is mixed. In two studies using a fictitious athlete endorser Till & Shimp (1998) found positive main effects for endorser attractiveness but no match-up interaction between endorser attractiveness and products that enhance attractiveness. Kamins (1990) only found support of the match-up hypothesis on two of seven measures of effectiveness, and not for the critical measures of brand attitude and purchase intentions.

Research suggests that expertise may be more important than attractiveness in influencing brand attitudes under match-up conditions. In a second study, Till & Busler (1990) found that there is an interaction effect between the endorser and product for perceived expertise. Specifically, they found that for an athlete endorsing an energy bar (match-up condition) brand attitudes were higher and the endorser was rated higher on expertise than in conditions of an actor endorsing an energy bar or on either person endorsing a candy bar.

Naturally, athletes are perceived to have high levels of expertise when endorsing sports-related products. In addition, athletes may be perceived to be attractive endorsers, if the definition of attractiveness is based on physical appearance and body shape. As such, any body enhancing or beauty-related products may represent good ‘matches’ for athletes. Unfortunately, the trustworthiness of many professional athletes is perceived to be questionable (e.g., Kobe Bryant), therefore a congruent match may be more difficult on this dimension.

Beyond the match-up between endorser and product is another equally important linkage between the target audience and the endorser. Mowen, Brown, and Schulman (1979) use balance theory (Heider, 1958) to describe the relationships that exist among target audience (i.e., the consumer) and endorser, product and endorser, and consumer and product. As Mowen,
Brown, and Schulman (1979) state, “an endorser will be maximally effective when both a strong sentiment (affective) relationship exists between the consumer and the endorser, and a strong unit relationship exists between the endorser and the product.” Because of this relationship between each of the elements in the triad, advertisers must carefully consider an endorser who ‘fits’ both the product and the target audience.

**Research Questions**

We now examine how the fit between the athlete endorser, the product, and the consumer influence consumers’ perceptions of the important source characteristics. The source characteristics being measured have previously been shown to improve ad effectiveness. Thus, understanding how to enhance consumers’ perceptions of source characteristics should lead to improved ad effectiveness. Based on the previously discussed literature on source characteristics (including expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness and gender) and the match-up hypothesis, the following research questions have been formulated.

“Of particular interest to sport marketers is the question of whether or not the use of celebrity endorsers should be limited to sport enthusiasts or fans.”

It is important to note the questions are meant to reflect issues of particular interest to practitioners who must make difficult decisions about selection of athletes as endorsers of products. From a practitioner perspective, the broad research question is as follows: “Given a particular product, target audience and advertising objective, how can I choose the most effective athlete endorser?” More specific research questions include

RQ1: Will athletes be seen as more attractive, more trustworthy and as having more expertise when endorsing a sports product versus nonsports product?

RQ2: Will respondents’ gender have any impact on the evaluation of the athlete’s attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise?

RQ3: Will the gender of the athlete endorser influence the target audience’s evaluation of the endorser’s perceived attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise?

RQ4: Will the gender of the consumer influence evaluations of the endorser’s perceived attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise differently for sport versus nonsport products?

RQ5: Will the effects of gender matching between the consumer and athlete endorser impact consumers’ evaluations of the athlete endorser’s perceived attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise?

RQ6: Will the effect of gender matching between consumers and athlete endorsers show different patterns in the rating of perceived endorser attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise for sport versus non-sport products?

**Method**

**Subjects**

Participants were undergraduate marketing majors at a midwestern university. Gender was evenly split. Participation was voluntary and students received no credit for taking part. A total of 309 usable responses were received. Of particular interest to sport marketers is the question of whether or not the use of celebrity endorsers should be limited to sport enthusiasts or fans. We measured sport interests in order to determine whether or not responses differed by interest level. Subjects reported the following sport-related behaviors and interests: 90.8% described themselves as sport fans; their interest was equally divided between local and national teams; 66.2% said they would be willing to plan a day around a sporting event; 62% reported reading a newspaper sports section more than once a week for an average of 1.6 hours per week; and respondents spend an average of 5.3 hours per week watching sports on television.

**Procedure**

Data collection took place in classrooms where participants were arranged in rows. They were told that they were participating in a study that was looking at what people thought of different ads that were being considered for inclusion in an advertising campaign. Participants were randomly assigned to evaluate one ad that was inside a folder. Subjects were told that they would first answer questions about their sports viewing habits because the ads were possibly to be run in sports magazines. On the cover of the folder was a questionnaire asking about sports involvement, sport-related media viewing habits, and sex. The sports involvement scale was taken from Shank and Beasley (1998). After completing the first written questionnaire, subjects opened the folder and viewed the ad. They then completed a written battery of fifteen items about their perceptions of the spokesperson in the ad. Perceptions of the athlete endorser’s attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise were measured with a 7-point Likert scale using semantic differential anchors. Scale items were taken from Ohanian (1990) and included five items each for the three scales of credibility. After completing all questions, subjects placed the completed
surveys inside the folders and returned them to the researcher.

**Stimuli**
A 2x2x2 full factorial between-subjects experimental design was used with gender of subject, gender of athlete endorser, and type of product advertised (milk or running shoes) as the three factors. Stimuli consisted of four magazine ads. There were two ads for milk using the familiar milk moustache appearing on an athlete. One milk ad showed Amy Van Dyken, a female Olympic gold-medal swimmer, and the other showed Oscar de la Hoya, an Olympic gold-medal boxer. The shoe ads were both for the Saucony Ultimate Cross Trainer running shoe. The female spokesmodel was Paula Newby-Fraser and the male was Dave Scott—both elite level triathletes. Both shoe ads showed pictures of both the spokesmodel and the product. Although the milk and shoe ads were made as similar as possible, they are not identical and therefore any effects of ad design will be confounded with the effects of product in our analysis. Thirty-six percent of respondents reported being familiar with the endorser in the ad they saw. Far more subjects were familiar with the milk endorsers (69% familiar with Amy Van Dyken, 56% familiar with Oscar de la Hoya) than with the shoe endorsers (6.5% familiar with Paula Newby-Fraser and 9.3% familiar with Dave Scott).

**Analysis and Results**
Care was taken to ensure random assignment to experimental conditions, but the use of a student sample means that caution should be used in generalizing results to other populations. To address the research questions, separate analysis of variance (ANOVAs) were run using attractiveness (ATTRACT), trustworthiness (TRUST) and expertise (EXPERT) as dependent measures. Additionally, ANOVAs were run with credibility (sum scale of trustworthiness and expertise) and with source liking (sum scale of all three subscales) as dependent variables. Although the models for credibility and source liking were significant ($p=.013$ and $p=.045$, respectively) the present study does not address these broader constructs. First, we believe that the models run on the individual subscales provide more information about the effects of our experimental factors. Second, the low item correlations between the subscales (.24, .34, and .56) and a low Cronbach alpha (.649) (Cronbach, 1951) indicate that these subscales represent distinctively different dimensions that should be interpreted separately. Further evidence is provided by the very different patterns of results we

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Independent variable</th>
<th>Source liking</th>
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<th>Trust</th>
<th>Expert</th>
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<td>.1569</td>
<td>.1086</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Model                | .013        | .0001   | .05   | .049   | .045     |
| $R^2$                | .057        | .299    | .045  | .044   | .046     |

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find for the experimental factors on each of the subscales. Table 1 reports $p$ values from the ANOVAs and illustrates the extent of differences in results between the three subscales, as well as the summed scales.

Table 1 shows the full ANOVA results for each of the five models run. All models were significant at the $p<.05$ level. Only the model for ATTRACT showed high explanatory power with the experimental factors accounting for 29.9% of the variation in rated attractiveness. For the other models, variation in the dependent variable explained by the experimental factors ranged from 4.4% (EXPERT) to 5.7% (LIKING). We now present a more detailed discussion of the results in the context of our research questions.

RQ1: Will athletes be seen as more attractive, trustworthy and as having more expertise when endorsing a sports product versus non-sports product?

The results provide mixed evidence that athlete endorsers are more effective when endorsing sport-related products. Looking at the main effect of product in our models we see that it is significant for both ATTRACT ($F=107.97, p=.0001$) and EXPERT ($F=5.85, p=.0161$). An examination of cell means, however, shows that the effects are in opposite directions. Subjects found milk endorsers to be more attractive than shoe endorsers (22.57 vs. 16.79) while they found shoe endorsers to be more expert (29.49 vs. 27.92). The finding on perceived expertise is consistent with expectations based on previous literature (Ohanian, 1991) and supports the match-up hypotheses. Regarding the finding on attractiveness, it is possible that the endorsers in the milk ads were simply better looking or that the quality of photography was more flattering to the models. It is also possible that the milk models, by virtue of their Olympic accomplishments and greater familiarity, were more attractive in a nonphysical sense (i.e., familiar, likeable). To fully understand this effect, future research should place the same models in both ads (sport and non-sport products) so that the model and product effects are not confounded with the ad.

RQ2: Will respondents’ gender have any impact on the evaluation of the athlete’s attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise?

We examined the main effects of respondent gender (Resgen) to determine whether the gender of the target audience might affect endorser effectiveness. We found a significant main effect of Resgen on ATTRACT only ($F=3.64, p=.0572$). There were no significant respondent gender effects for expertise ($F=1.43, p=.232$) or trustworthiness ($F=.30, p=.584$). Comparing cell means, we see that female respondents rated endorsers as less attractive than did male respondents (19.26 vs. 20.33) with marginal significance ($F=3.64, p=.057$). During respondent debriefing it was suggested that one possible reason for this result is that women have been

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**Figure 1**

**Trustworthiness Ratings by Product and Subject Gender**

![Diagram showing trustworthiness ratings by product and subject gender. Women rated endorsers differently compared to men.](image)
socialized to have less appreciation for athletes' physiques. This possibility provides an opportunity for future study, perhaps exploring how social roles influence the effect of athlete endorsers.

RQ3: Will the gender of the athlete endorser influence the target audience’s evaluation of the endorser’s perceived attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise?

Testing for main effects of celebrity gender (Celebgen) tells us whether the gender of the athlete endorser will influence her or his effectiveness when results for both products are combined. As with Resgen we find that Celebgen is only significant in the model for ATTRACT ($F=14.83$, $p=.0001$). Cell means reveal that while male athletes were rated higher than female athletes on all dimensions, those differences were only significant for attractiveness (20.83 vs. 18.67). Future research might test the hypothesis that Americans have been socialized to appreciate the physical attributes of male athletes more than those of female athletes.

Thus far we have examined only main effects from our models. Although informative, most issues of real interest to practitioners and researchers involve the interaction effects of our experimental design. The two and three-way interaction effects discussed below reveal information about the value and importance of matching the endorser to the product and the target market.

RQ4: Will the gender of the consumer influence evaluations of the endorser’s perceived attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise differently for sport versus non-sport products?

An examination of the Product by Resgen interaction shows a significant effect on TRUST only ($F=4.89$, $p=.0278$). Cell means show (see Figure 1) that men rated milk endorsers as more trustworthy than did women (25.5 vs. 24.2) while women rated shoe endorsers higher on TRUST than did men (25.7 vs. 24.6). This suggests that male target markets (in this case college age males) may be more likely to trust athlete endorsers of nonsport products than women, thus, given a nonsport product, ads targeting men may be making better use of athlete endorsers than ads targeting women; this conclusion depending on the generalizability of this research from a student sample.

RQ5: Will the effects of gender matching between the consumer and athlete endorser impact consumers’ evaluations of the athlete endorser’s perceived attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise?

Although we see no significant effects on ATTRACT or EXPERT, we see a strong effect of the Resgen by Celebrity Gender interaction on TRUST ($F=6.61$, $p=.0106$). As expected, women rated female endorsers

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**Figure 2**

*Trustworthiness Ratings by Subject-Endorser Gender Match*

![Graph](image-url)

- - - - Male Endorser
- - - - Female Endorser

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**Figure 3a**
Milk Endorser Attractiveness by Subject-Endorser Gender Match

![Graph showing attractiveness vs gender match for milk endorsing](image)

**Figure 3b**
Shoe Endorser Attractiveness by Subject-Endorser Gender Match

![Graph showing attractiveness vs gender match for shoe endorsing](image)
as more trustworthy than male endorsers (25.8 vs. 24.6) and men rated male endorsers as more trustworthy than female endorsers (25.6 vs. 24.1). Figure 2 shows this crossed effect independent of product. This is a strong finding in support of the notion that gender matching between the endorser and the consumer is important in creating trust. Interestingly, subjects did not follow this pattern of same-gender preference in evaluating attractiveness or expertise.

RQ6: Will the effect of gender matching between consumers and athlete endorsers show different patterns in the rating of perceived endorser attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise for sport versus non-sport products?

Finally, we examine the three-way interaction of our experimental factors. Although we see $p$ values that approach significance for TRUST ($p=.19$) and EXPERT ($p=.16$), we only see significant three-way effects on ATTRACT ($F= 3.31, p=.0700$). Cell means show that for shoes, male endorsers were rated more attractive than female endorsers by both men (17.97 vs. 16.4) and by women (17.16 vs. 15.65). However, for milk, women rated the male endorser as much more attractive than the female (24.0 vs. 19.82) while men rated the male and female endorsers similarly (23.63 vs. 22.72). This three-way interaction is illustrated by Figures 3a and 3b.

where the pattern of effects differs between male and female subjects for the two products.

In addition to the effects related to our research questions, we see no significant effects of the product by celebrity gender interaction in any model, suggesting that the gender of the athlete endorser does not matter more for a non-sport product than for a sport product.

“All things being equal, athletes will be most effective when endorsing sport-related products.”

**The Role of Involvement**

Obviously, there are consumer characteristics other than gender likely to influence athlete endorser effectiveness. Of particular interest to sport marketers is the question of whether or not the use of celebrity endorsers should be limited to sport enthusiasts or fans. We explore this issue by considering subjects’ self-reported involvement with sport. Using an eight-item involvement scale developed by Shank and Beasley (1998) we divided subjects into split halves reflecting relatively low and high levels of felt involvement for sport. Subjects falling below the median for the involvement scale were treated as having low

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**Table 2**

**ANOVA Results for Low Involvement Subjects**

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involvement and subjects falling above the median were treated as having high involvement with sport.

Because an ANCOVA using involvement as a covariate resulted in biased estimators and was uninterpretable, we instead compared ANOVAs on all dependent measures for subjects with high versus low involvement. Tables 2-3 show the results of ANOVAs on each of the five dependent measures comparing the high and low involvement subjects.

Results from the high and low involvement subjects indicates that most found effects for our experimental factors occur for low involvement subjects but not high involvement subjects. For high involvement subjects, only the model for ATTRACT is significant ($F=11.48, p=.0001$). In contrast, models for all three source characteristics are significant for low involvement subjects (see Table 2). In general, the pattern of significant effects for low involvement subjects mirrors the effects found for all subjects. This result indicates that it may be futile to attempt to predict the effects of gender or product matching to the target market when the target market is highly involved in sport, but it may make sense to do so when the target market has low felt involvement for sport.

### Table 3
ANOVA Results for High Involvement Subjects

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### Conclusions

**Main Effects of Factors**

Our findings from the main effects of the experimental factors suggest that athlete endorsers are most effective when the target market is male, the athlete is male, and the product is sport-related. First, from the effects of product on perceived expertise we conclude that athlete endorser credibility is enhanced by perceived expertise when the product is sport-related. We cannot, however, generalize about a product the athlete-endorser does not use. All else being equal, this suggests that athletes will be most effective when endorsing sport-related products. Second, there is mixed evidence to suggest that male consumers are more receptive to athlete endorsers. Independent of endorser gender, men tend to see athletes as more attractive; however, women rated the athletes as more expert and trustworthy although those differences were not statistically significant. Third, across all subjects we saw male athlete endorsers rated higher, although only attractiveness is significant. This finding suggests that male athlete endorsers may be more effective than their female counterparts, to the extent attractiveness influences credibility, regardless of audience gender.
Interaction Effects of Factors

Men rated nonsport product endorsers as more trustworthy while women rated the sport product endorsers as more trustworthy. This raises the question of how consumer characteristics influence how generalizable the match-up hypothesis is. It appears that women are more sensitive to the match between endorser and product. Alternatively, it may be that men see a closer match between athletes and milk consumption than do women.

We see strong evidence that the match-up between the consumer and the athlete may contribute to endorser/ad effectiveness. Simply put, men trust men and women trust women, regardless of the product-endorser match. This finding strongly suggests advertisers should consider target audience gender when choosing athlete endorsers.

“Comparison of endorser credibility where athletes and non-athletes appear in the same ad would provide additional insights into the ways in which athlete endorsers are more or less effective than other endorsers.”

Finally, we find that consumers with low sport involvement are more likely to be influenced by our experimental factors. Although low involvement and high involvement subjects showed no significant differences in their numerical ratings of endorser attractiveness, trustworthiness, or credibility, the amount of variance explained by subject gender, athlete gender, and product was much higher for the low involvement group. This indicates that low involvement consumers may be more predictable in their responses to athlete endorsers. Assuming that consumers who read sport magazines are more likely to be high sport-involvement consumers, our findings may apply more readily to advertising placed in magazines more likely to be read by low sport-involvement consumers.

The results here raise questions of how consumers' perceptions of their own expertise regarding a product influence their reliance on an endorser. It is possible that women are socialized to believe they should know about milk (nutrition/diet) and, therefore, see an endorser as less relevant, while the same might be true for men with athletic equipment. If true, this has implications for when it is effective to use an endorser. We suggest that future research should examine the relationship between consumer expertise, gender, product category, and consumer reliance on an endorser, and how that translates into perceptions of endorser credibility.

Managerial Implications

The current study suggests that when using product endorsers, marketers should consider the gender of the target market and the endorser. Our findings indicate that a match-up on gender will improve endorser credibility through greater trustworthiness. Further, marketers are likely to see improved effectiveness when there is a match between the product and the endorser. For athlete endorsers this means that they will be perceived as more credible when endorsing athletic equipment they use. We cannot generalize to athletic equipment they do not use, as we did not test that situation.

Future Research

The ultimate goal of the present study was to understand what makes athlete endorsers effective and how athlete endorsers differ from other types of celebrities. Some of our findings are consistent with previous studies while others are contradictory. For example, we found that respondents rated athlete endorsers of the opposite sex as significantly more attractive than athletes of the same sex. This finding is similar to other research (Baker and Churchill, 1997; Langmeyer, 1991). However, Ohanian (1991) reported no effect of respondent’s gender on perceptions of attractiveness (or expertise and trustworthiness) regardless of the gender of the celebrity. One possible explanation for these differences among researchers is that the findings are highly dependent on the ads, the endorsers, and the sample.

While we attempted to find ads that were similar, it is likely that the ads themselves and the endorsers used varied enough to ‘create’ effects. Replication of this research is necessary before strong generalizations can be made. Ideally, ads using the same endorsers in the same poses could be used for both sport and nonsport products to minimize the effects of the ad. Also, future research could help reduce the effects of familiarity by using a larger number of endorsers and introducing familiarity as a covariate.

Although we have gained insight into athlete endorser effectiveness, it would be helpful to have a more direct contrast between athlete endorsers and nonathletes. Comparison of endorser credibility where athletes and nonathletes appear in the same ad would provide additional insights into the ways in which athlete endorsers are more or less effective than other endorsers. Considering the amount of money spent on celebrity endorsers, we know surprisingly little about what makes them effective and how to best match the endorser with our products and target markets to maximize effectiveness.
References


