

Athlete endorsement and nationality: Is there a world cup effect?

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This research considers whether attributes such as the nationality of athlete endorsers and their physical and emotional characteristics have an impact on how appealing, credible, and relevant an advertising message is to a country's national audience. Using rugby athletes, the study assesses the impact of these attributes on respondents' ad preference and purchasing intention across two distinct periods: during and after the rugby world cup. The results indicate that congruence of national identity between audience and endorser leads to a more positive assessment of the endorsement and a high intention to purchase by the audience across both time periods but that both ad preference and purchase intentions are higher during a mega event period.

Keywords: Athlete endorsers, patriotism, mega events, ad preference, purchase intention.

Introduction

The category of celebrity athlete endorsers has been, and still is, one of the most used in advertising (Agrawal and Kamakura, 1995; Gilbert, 2007; Lear Runyan and Whitaker, 2009; Turner, Bounds, Hauser, Motsinger, Ozmore and Smith, 1995; Jones and Schuman, 2004;) because as Shanklin and Miciak (1997) noted athletes “are some of the most recognizable, revered, and imitated celebrities of all” (p. 1). With their enormous power to attract fans, and an ability to break through the media clutter especially when they are at the peak of their career and because of their “winning attitude, healthy appearance and general appeal” (Jones and Schumann (2004, p. 108), celebrity athletes provide powerful ways for brands to spread messages across a range of channels.

One of the central questions advertisers face is whether their use of celebrity athlete endorser is effective or not. Researchers have attempted to answer this question by developing theories - not specifically related to the realm of sport – which try to explain in more depth how celebrity endorsement works. These are the source credibility model (Hovland and Weiss, 1951; see also Ohanian, 1990, 1991; Till and Bustler, 1998), the source attractiveness model (McGuire, 1985), the congruence or product match-up hypothesis (Kamins, 1990; Khale and Homer, 1985), the FREDD model (Miciak and Shanklin, 1994), and the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989). Over the years, research has shown that,

because celebrities attract attention, advertisers hope that this attraction will draw attention to the advertisement and the product advertised, thus enhancing brand name and advertisement recall which can result in purchase intentions and sales increase (see Knoll and Matthes, 2017).

Our study's focus is on fit (congruence) between endorser and audience, one of the concepts common to the source attractiveness theory (Bryne, Whitehead, and Breen, 2003; Shimp, 2003). Specifically, we focus on an area of research that has hardly received any attention so far, the importance of the nationality congruence between endorser and consumer. We consider whether the nationality of an athlete endorser has an impact on how appealing, credible, and relevant an advertising message is to a country's national audience. The study also fills another gap in research. It is the first to assess the impact of different time periods in the use of endorsers, (1) during a sport mega event and (2) outside that period. Using rugby athletes, the study assesses the impact of endorser nationality on respondents' ad preference and purchase intention across two distinct periods: (1) during a rugby world cup and (2) and outside a world cup period.

Source attractiveness theory

The theory of particular interest to us is source attractiveness. Source attractiveness is concerned with endorser-audience congruence and contends that endorsers who are similar to, known to, and liked by, the consumer are attractive and to this extent increase message effectiveness (McGuire, 1985). Although source attractiveness has often been understood and studied the sense of physical attractiveness (Kahle and Homer, 1985; Ohanian, 1991), it actually includes all "the virtuous characteristics that consumers might perceive in a celebrity endorser: for example intellectual skills, personality properties, lifestyles, athletic prowess" (Erdogan, 1999, p. 299). Source attractiveness is based on familiarity with, likability of, and similarity with the source (endorser). Familiarity refers to the prior knowledge of the source

(endorser) through exposure, likeability is an affection for the source (endorser) based on physical appearance, behaviour, or other personal traits, and similarity refers to an imaginary similitude between the receiver of the message (consumer) and the source (endorser) (McGuire, 1985). Thus, with source attractiveness, the consumer's perceived similarity with the endorser leads to identification, a process which "is assumed to occur when information from an attractive source is accepted as a result of desire to identify with such endorsers" (Erdogan, 1999, p. 300).

Source attractiveness and nationality

In this study, we suggest that the nationality of an athlete endorser should be considered as a central element of his/her attractiveness. Indeed, Athletes are part of the realm of sport which is one of the main sites through which communities imagine and actively construct themselves and others as nations and in which nationalistic sentiments of individuals are crystallized (e.g., Bairner, 2001; Horne, Tomlinson, and Whannel, 1999). Sport favours what authors in the field of social psychology have called intergroup bias (favouring members of one's in-group over those of out-groups) based on cognitive, evaluative and affective processes (see Tajfel 1982; Dimmock, Grove and Eklund, 2005)

Thus, a successful athlete who represents his/her country (by playing for the national team) can be an important tool to cement national identity feelings. For audiences who are always nationally situated (Desmarais and Bruce, 2010) nationally involved athletes are more than simple athletes, they also represent their in-group, they are heroes and as such should be understood as "an aspect of culture, a part of society's collection of symbols or totems [. . .] a human figure that serves as an object of admiration, aspiration, and, at times, worship" (Strate, 1985, p. 47). The national dimension of sport endorsers should consequently be taken into account and assessed as part of the important symbolic properties they carry and which they can transfer to brands and products.

Literature review

Research has shown that specific types of endorsers are better accepted by specific publics than others. Studies have for instance shown that endorser ethnicity affects consumer responses towards advertisements and brands (Ryu, Park, and Feick, 2006). In particular, the use of endorsers of the same, rather than different, ethnicity affect trustworthiness, because people trust individuals who are similar to them (Deshpandé and Stayman, 1994) and enhances the persuasive impacts of advertising. For example, Anglo-Americans respond more favourably to advertisements using Anglo- than non-Anglo actor endorsers (Whittler, 1989; Whittler and Dimeo, 1991), Asian-Americans respond more favourably to Asian- rather than non-Asian model endorsers (Martin, Lee, and Yang, 2004) and African Americans respond more favourably to the same-ethnicity spokespersons appearing in public service announcements (Wang and Arpan, 2008). In the realm of sport, Kim and Cheong (2011) showed that an athlete endorser adds to the persuasive impacts of advertising especially when there is an ethnicity match between the endorser and the target audience.

The ability of endorsers to raise patriotic feelings and generate national identity congruence between audience and endorser has only been explored in very few studies so far. Most of these studies focus on actor or model endorsers and research on athlete endorsers specifically is extremely scant. Research on actor endorsers (Roy and Bagdare, 2015; Roy et al., 2019) has for instance found that congruence between a celebrity's country of origin and a brand's country of origin create more favorable attitude towards the advertisement, the brand advertised and generates better purchase intentions. One of their conclusions was that "for a national brand, it would always be a better strategy to use a local celebrity with whom the audience could connect more" (Roy and Bagdare, 2015, p. 15)

Research on athlete endorsers specifically has shown that local identity plays an important part in people adhering to a sport hero (Parry, 2009) and that the perceived

similarity with the celebrity athlete was an important factor in the local audience liking the celebrity athlete or not (Dixon and Flynn, 2008). For instance, in the context of China, Zhou and Belk (2004) showed that “with athletes as spokespersons, there is an appeal to Chinese nationalism” (p. 72). Successful Chinese athletes acquire *mianzi* (face- dignity, prestige) through their victories, a face that is “shared by Chinese consumers and is transferred in part through the products these athletes endorse” (p. 72). This identification with athlete endorsers can affect consumer behaviour. As Chao, Wurher and Werani (2005) showed, an American endorser will not necessarily generate purchase intentions in Austria because of consumer ethnocentrism. It has also been suggested that advertising professionals’ beliefs contribute to reproducing a form of ethnocentrism in their practice of selecting athlete endorsers (Desmarais, 2014). Across countries, advertising practitioners believe there is an athlete endorser archetype to which consumers from their country best relate to and identify with, and select these endorsers partly on the basis of their cultural attractiveness to the national audience. In the end, those athletes located within a strong national sport tradition and those who are the most successful internationally have the most endorsement value.

Media representations of national identity during sport mega-events

This study explores whether the effectiveness of athlete celebrity endorsers varies between periods of low and high sporting hype, such as a mega event in which the national public/sports fans, BIRG (bask in reflected glory of their team) and Blast (derogate disliked opponents) (Wann, Melnick, Russell, and Pease, 2001). Indeed, during sport mega-events, when sport is highly visible, the public’s national self-concept is particularly heightened (Bale, 1986; Gibbons, 2014; Whannel, 2008; Wenner and Billings, 2017). As Whannel (2008) noted, major international sport events allow spectators “to experience a fierce and tribal patriotism not generally manifest in many other contexts” (p. 171). Instrumental in fuelling the fire of nationalism during global sport events is the media. Its importance in promoting

and reproducing national identity and a shared sense of national community has been theorised and researched empirically (Anderson, 1991; Billig, 1995; Rosie et al., 2004). Much research has identified how sport mega-events provide sport journalists with “opportunities to wave national flags in patriotic support for the country’s team” (Vincent, Kian, Pedersen, Kuntz and Hill, 2010, p. 201), producing intensely partisan and nationalistic coverage (Garland, 2004; Garland and Rowe, 1999; Maguire and Poulton, 1999; Poulton, 2004). Thus, through the media’s intense interpellation of sport audiences as patriots, sport mega-events “become sites of hyperbolic ideological and nationalistic rhetorics” (Delgado, 2003, p. 293). During the 2011 RWC, Bruce (2017) showed how the event bolstered many New Zealanders’ “feelings of pride, patriotism and national belonging” but also alienated and frustrated other members of the public. Overall, Bruce’s research shows that rather than leaving New Zealanders indifferent, the event generated passionate reactions in relation to the country’s national identity.

Research questions

The questions we wanted to answer were: (1) Is the nationality of an endorser a significant factor in consumers’ attitude towards an advertisement and on their willingness to purchase? (2) Is athlete endorsement subject to a sport mega event effect?

Method

Subject and design

The research was carried out during two distinct periods to allow us to test a possible world cup effect in relation to athlete endorsement: Study 1 was conducted during the rugby world cup held in New Zealand in 2011, a period during which publics’ sense of national identity is heightened; and study 2 was conducted during 2022, a non world cup year. A total of 237 undergraduate students took part in study (1); 141 took part in study 2.

Athlete endorser selection

For each study, two athlete endorsers (rugby players), both prominent players in their respective country, were chosen. For study one we used New Zealand's Daniel Carter and England's Jonny Wilkinson, and for study 2 we used New Zealand's Beauden Barrett, and England's Owen Farrell. These players were selected for their similarities on several level. Apart from playing the same sport (rugby union), they played in their respective national teams and have played similar key roles in their team's success over many years. They all played similar position on the field, had similar physical attractiveness (all known as good looking men) and sport ability (all world-renowned gifted players). These similarities left us with one main difference between these men: their nationality.

Development of advertisements

Two advertisements were created for each study (see figure 1). The main part of the message was a visual of the athlete in order to keep the endorser as the central focus. For consistency, in each study the athletes were portrayed wearing their national colours and were portrayed in similar postures. Study one used the distinctive posture both players use as they concentrate before kicking a penalty, and study 2 used a picture of both players passing the ball. In both studies the athletes look equally serious and concentrated on the job.

To avoid country of origin effects, the product selected to feature in the advertisements was a global brand of deodorant with no obvious country of origin. Deodorant was used as it is a product that fits well with the athletes' activity. Therefore, each of the endorsers featured had equal relevance, credibility and expertise in relation to endorsing that product type.

The test

A questionnaire containing 18 questions was designed on the Qualtrics platform containing a mix of likert scale questions using items based on endorsement theories. Respondents were shown both ads (one with the NZ athlete and the other with the English athlete) and were

asked to rate the advertisement in terms of appeal of the ad, credibility of the ad, relevance of the ad (athlete-product fit), relevance of the ad (athlete-NZ audience fit). They were also asked which ad they preferred (Ad preference) and why, and which ad would make them buy the brand (Purchase Intention).

To gauge respondents' level of national identification, respondents were asked to rate themselves on different constructs: "I am proud to be a New Zealander", "The fact that I am a New Zealander is an important part of my identity", and "When New Zealand does well in international sports, it makes me proud". After calculating Cronbach's alpha (0.985) we averaged the three scales to create an overall patriotism item.

Results

Patriotism level of respondents

Since we were testing whether the national identity sentiments of publics affect their preference for advertising messages featuring national endorsers, we first calculated the level of patriotism of our sample. In both studies, respondents rated themselves highly on all dimensions of national pride, national identity and sport pride (see table 1). We can therefore describe our sample of respondents across both periods as "proud New Zealanders who like to see their country achieve well in sport". The important finding for our two-period study was that the national identity sentiments of respondents were significantly higher during study 1, the world cup year.

Ad preference

Results show that NZ respondents are significantly more likely to prefer the ad with the NZ endorser across the two studies. However, preference for the ad featuring the NZ endorser was significantly higher in study 1, during the World cup (see table 2). Analysis of NZ respondents' comments from both studies showed they preferred the ad with the New

Zealand endorser mostly because it generated a national identity congruence between endorser and themselves (see tables 3 and 4).

Purchase intention

Results show that NZ respondents' purchase intention is significantly more likely to happen from the ad with the NZ endorser. This is valid for both studies but purchase intention prompted by the ad with the NZ endorser was significantly higher in study 1, during the World cup (see table 5).

Attitude towards the ad

Results from study 1 (see table 6) show a significant preference from NZ respondents for the ad with the NZ endorser across all the dimensions of ad appeal, ad credibility, athlete-product fit, and athlete-NZ audience fit. In other words, the ad with the NZ endorser was considered as significantly more appealing, credible, and relevant, particularly in terms of athlete-NZ audience fit. Results from study 2 (see table 7) show no significant difference in ad appeal, less significance in ad credibility, but show significant difference for athlete product fit, and athlete-NZ audience fit. In other words, the ad with the NZ endorser was not considered as significantly more appealing and more credible than the ad with the English endorser but it was considered as fitting better with the product than the ad with the English endorser. The most important finding was that athlete-NZ audience fit was highly significant, in other words, NZ respondents considered the ad with the NZ endorser significantly more relevant to them.

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to calculate the mean differences between study 1 and study 2. Results show that in both studies 1 (2011) and 2 (2022), ads with NZ endorsers were not considered significantly different in terms of ad credibility and athlete-product fit (table 8). There were differences in terms of ad appeal, with study 1 respondents (2011 world cup period) finding the ad with the NZ endorser more appealing than did

respondents from 2022. Results also show that study 1 respondents (2011 world cup period) assessed the ad with the NZ endorser significantly higher in terms of athlete-NZ audience fit, in other words, in that world cup period, they saw the ad with the NZ endorser as more relevant to them (see table 8). There was no significant difference in NZ respondents' assessment of the ads with English endorsers between study 1 and 2 in terms of ad appeal, ad credibility, athlete-product fit, and athlete- NZ audience fit (see table 9). The most significant finding was that, in both studies, NZ respondents found the ad with the English endorser not relevant to the NZ audience.

Conclusion

This study shows that the nationality of athlete endorsers is an important element to connect with a country's national audience, especially at the occasion of sport mega events when nationalistic feelings are significantly higher than in a normal non mega event period.

Consumers are significantly more likely to prefer an ad using a nationally congruent endorser in any time period, but that ad preference for the nationally congruent ad is heightened during a sport mega event period. Consumers are also more likely to purchase the product advertised from an ad using a nationally congruent endorser in any time period, but purchase intention prompted by the nationally congruent ad is heightened during a sport mega event period. Our study shows that the nationality of an athlete endorser should be considered as a central element of his/her attractiveness. The celebrity athlete endorsement process is in part about matching identities: the national identity of the endorser with that of the consumer with a view to capitalise on national sentiments. This national identity matching is an important aspect in the staging of 'national communion' around products and brands.

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Figures

Figure 1: Advertisements for study 1 and 2.

Study 1 (2011)	Ad with Dan Carter (NZ)	Ad with Jonny Wilkinson (England)
		
Study 2 (2022)	Ad with Beauden Barrett (NZ)	Ad with Owen Farrell (England)
		

Tables:

Table 1: Patriotism levels of our sample.

		National Pride	National Identity	Sport pride	Overall Patriotism (AVG)
Study 1 (2011)	Mean	9.16	8.82	8.80	8.94
	StdDev	1.58	1.99	1.89	1.68
Study 2 (2022)	Mean	8.32	7.64	7.83	7.93
	StdDev	2.48	2.80	2.80	2.48
	MeanDiff	0.84	1.18	0.98	1.02
	T Stat	3.77	4.48	3.79	4.45
	Significance	0.0002	0.0000	0.0002	0.0000

Table 2: Ad preference.

		N	%
Study 1 (2011)	NZ endorser ad Daniel Carter	195	95.12
	Engl. endorser ad Jonny Wilkinson	10	4.8
Study 2 (2022)	NZ endorser ad Bauden Barrett	104	76.5
	Engl. Endorser ad Owen Farrell	32	23.5
		Chi2	Prob
Likelihood-ratio chi2(2)		27.2159	0.0000

Table 3: Reasons for ad preference (Study 1, 2011, Rugby World Cup period)

Study 1			
Categories related to source attractiveness theory	Key to coding	N comments in the category	% of comments in the category
1 & 2 Attractiveness relating to national identity (77.2%)	Source attractiveness (1) When respondents noted that the endorser was like them, similar to them in nationality and that the ad was therefore more relevant (explicit relevance to audience and ad)	128	56.1 %
	Source attractiveness (2) When respondents identified the endorser as a NZer without explicitly noting he was similar to them (implicit relevance to audience and ad)	56	24.6%
3 Trustworthiness	When respondents noted that they preferred the endorser because he was more trustworthy, or they respected him more. Answers focusing on notions of believability, reliability, credibility in.	12	5.2%
Attractiveness not related to nationality			
4 Looks. Sexiness	Respondents noted that they preferred the endorser because he was more sexy	11	4.8%
5 Friendliness	Respondents noted that they preferred the endorser because he was more friendly	4	1.8%
6 Player ability and experience	Respondents noted that they preferred the endorser because he had better sporting abilities	8	3.5%
7 Better photo, colours, look of ad, pose	Respondents noted that they preferred the endorser/ad because they preferred the colours, photo, pose of the player, look of the ad	9	4%
		228	

Note: Typical comments in category 1 were on Nationality match, relevance to NZ/NZ audience, identification, belonging, loyalty to NZ, similarity: “He represents me”, “he is a role model in NZ”, “He belongs to NZ like me”. Typical comments in category 2 were on Recognisability as NZer: “He is a NZer/kiwi”, “he is well known in NZ”, “he is a local”, “I know him”, “I have more knowledge about him than the other endorser”.

Table 4: Reason for ad preference (study 2, 2022, Non Rugby World Cup period)

Study 2			
Categories related to source attractiveness theory	Key to coding	N comments in the category	% of comments in the category
1 & 2 Attractiveness relating to national identity 82.6%	Source attractiveness (1) When respondents noted that the endorser was like them, similar to them in nationality and that the ad was therefore more relevant (explicit relevance to audience and ad)	60	58.3
	Source attractiveness (2) When respondents identified the endorser as a Nzer without explicitly noting he was similar to them (implicit relevance to audience and ad)	25	24.3
3 Trustworthiness	When respondents noted that they preferred the endorser because he was more trustworthy, or they respected him more. Answers focusing on notions of believability, reliability, credibility in.	3	3%
Attractiveness not related to nationality			
4 Looks. Sexiness	Respondents noted that they preferred the endorser because he was more sexy	6	5.8%
5 Friendliness	Respondents noted that they preferred the endorser because he was more friendly	1	0.9%
6 Player ability and experience	Respondents noted that they preferred the endorser because he had better sporting abilities	1	0.9%
7 Better photo, colours, look of ad, pose	Respondents noted that they preferred the endorser/ad because they preferred the colours, photo, pose of the player, look of the ad	7	6.8%
		103	

Table 5 Purchase intention

		N	%
Study 1 (2011)	NZ endorser ad Daniel Carter	192	93.2
	Engl. endorser ad Jonny Wilkinson	14	6.8
Study 2 (2022)	NZ endorser ad Bauden Barrett	114	84.4
	Engl. Endorser ad Owen Farrell	21	15.6
		Chi2	Prob
Likelihood-ratio chi2(2)		6.621	0.010

Table 6: Attitude towards the ad (study 1, during 2011 Rugby World Cup)

	Ad appeal	Ad credibility	Relevance (athlete-product fit)	Relevance (athlete- NZ audience fit)
NZ endorser ad Daniel Carter				
N Valid	237	237	237	237
Mean	5.96	6.40	7.64	8.52
St Deviation	2.32	2.14	2.03	1.57
Engl. endorser ad Jonny Wilkinson				
N Valid	237	237	237	237
Mean	5.31	5.34	6.53	3.84
St Deviation	2.32	2.37	2.57	2.69
Difference	-0.650	-1.060	-1.110	-4.680
Std error	0.213	0.207	0.213	0.202
t-statistic	-3.050	-5.110	-5.218	-23.132
DF	472	472	472	472
Significance	0.0024	0.0001	0.0001	0.0001

Table 7. Attitude towards the ad (Study 2, 2022, Non world cup year)

	Ad appeal	Ad credibility	Relevance (athlete-product fit)	Relevance (athlete- NZ audience fit)
NZ endorser ad Bauden Barrett				
N Valid	146	146	146	146
Mean	5.12	6.05	7.50	7.97
Std.Deviation	2.51	2.48	2.26	2.22
Engl. Endorser ad Owen Farrell				
N Valid	138	138	138	138
Mean	5.04	5.28	6.70	3.70
St Deviation	2.42	2.53	2.62	2.80
Difference	-0.080	-0.770	-0.800	-4.270
Std error	0.293	0.297	0.266	0.299
t-statistic	-0.273	-2.590	-3.007	-14.280
DF	282	282	282	282
Significance	0.7849	0.0101	0.0029	0.0001

Table 8: Attitude towards the ad: Difference between study 1 and 2 for ads with NZ endorsers

		Ad appeal	Ad credibility	Relevance (athlete-product fit)	Relevance (athlete-NZ audience fit)
Study 1 (2011)	NZ endorser ad Daniel Carter				
	N Valid	237	237	237	237
	Mean	5.96	6.40	7.64	8.52
	St Deviation	2.32	2.14	2.03	1.57
Study 2 (2022)	NZ endorser ad Bauden Barrett				
	N Valid	146	146	146	146
	Mean	5.12	6.05	7.50	7.97
	St Deviation	2.51	2.48	2.26	2.22
	Difference	-0.840	-0.350	-0.140	-0.550
	Std error	0.252	0.239	0.223	0.194
	t-statistic	-3.335	-1.462	-0.628	-2.834
	DF	381	381	381	381
	Significance	0.0009	0.1446	0.5307	0.0048

Table 9: Attitude towards the ad: Difference between study 1 and 2 for ads with English endorsers.

		Ad appeal	Ad credibility	Relevance (athlete-product fit)	Relevance (athlete- NZ audience fit)
Study 1 (2011)	Engl. endorser ad Jonny Wilkinson				
	N Valid	237	237	237	237
	Mean	5.31	5.34	6.53	3.84
	St Deviation	2.32	2.37	2.57	2.69
Study 2 (2022)	Engl. Endorser ad Owen Farrell				
	N Valid	138	138	138	138
	Mean	5.04	5.28	6.70	3.70
	St Deviation	2.42	2.53	2.62	2.80
	Difference	-0.270	-0.060	0.170	-0.140
	Std error	0.252	0.260	0.277	0.292
	t-statistic	-1.070	-0.231	0.613	-0.479
	DF	373	373	373	373
	Significance	0.2854	0.8178	0.5400	0.6324