

Chinese and U.S. consumers' perceptions of the effectiveness of celebrity athlete endorsers

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Abstract

The Chinese sports industry is expanding at a rapid pace. Celebrity Athlete Endorsers (CAEs) are increasingly being employed by global advertising strategists to reach the burgeoning Chinese market. This study analyzes Chinese and U.S. consumers' perceptions regarding CAEs in relation to the AIDA (attention, interest, desire, and action) framework. Findings suggest that CAEs influence both Chinese and U.S. consumers, but that Chinese were influenced to a greater degree. The results from a classroom administered survey of 147 college students in the U.S. and China provide insight into how consumers in those two nations differ in the perceptions of their responsiveness to CAEs.

Keywords: Celebrity, athlete, endorsers, AIDA, China advertising

INTRODUCTION

In China, generous governmental funding of elite sport development has contributed to the Chinese sport industry's present rapid growth phase (Yang, Sparks and Li, 2008). The 2008 Beijing Olympics served as the centerpiece of these efforts, with the Chinese Olympic team topping all nations by winning 51 gold medals (Roberts, 2008). Additionally, several elite international sporting events (e.g., Masters Tennis Cup, pre-season National Basketball Association games, Formula One Grand Prix Racing, World Golf Championship - HSBC) have taken place in China since 2004 (Liu, Huang & Minghua, 2007).

These top tier events typically involve high profile celebrity athletes, many of which are presently serving as product endorsers for global products. Houston Rockets basketball star Yao Ming is arguably the most notable Chinese celebrity athlete endorser (CAE). Yao's endorsement deals with Reebok, Apple, VISA, TAG Heuer, Gatorade and McDonald's reportedly total more than \$20 million (Liu, Huang, & Minghua, 2007). In addition to the Chinese CAEs, U.S. athletes are increasingly endorsing Chinese and non-Chinese brands directed at the Chinese market. For example, Baron Davis and Shaquille O'Neal of the National Basketball Association (NBA) have served as CAEs for the sports brand Li Ning (Tschang, 2009). Olympic record-setting swimmer Michael Phelps recently signed an endorsement deal with Japanese automaker Mazda to reach the Chinese market, despite his questionable out-of-pool behavior (Tschang, 2009).

Regardless of their origins, CAEs are being used in targeting the increasingly affluent middle-class Chinese consumer. Indeed, the size of China's middle class (\$6K to \$25K annual income) will grow from 130 million to 340 million between the years 2006 to 2016 (Cui & Song, 2009). To effectively target this burgeoning market, advertisers must develop strategies that gain attention, hold interest, arouse desire and elicit action. In practice, few messages take the consumer all the way from awareness through purchase, but the AIDA (attention, interest, desire, action) framework suggests desirable qualities for any communication (Kotler, 2002).

Despite these dramatic developments, the topic of celebrity sports endorsements in China has received insufficient academic research attention. Thus, global marketers considering using CAEs in China may lack the insight necessary to effectively target this market. An exhaustive literature search uncovered no studies of Chinese consumers' perceptions of CAEs, such as how CAEs impact the AIDA framework with regards to the Chinese consumer. Although conventional wisdom suggests that transnational advertising must be sensitive to local conditions (Zandpour, 1994), a dearth of literature exists offering guidelines regarding whether the advertising strategy of using CAEs fits the Chinese market. The purpose of the present study is to help fill this void by testing for differences between Chinese and U.S. consumers' perceptions of CAEs.

Specifically, this study examines the degree to which Chinese and U.S. consumers believe that celebrity endorsements influence their advertising persuasion processes. This influence will be analyzed using the AIDA framework so that each step of the persuasion process, as perceived by consumers, can be evaluated. The AIDA framework will be analyzed using 15 statements that relate to the AIDA framework. This research can potentially provide global marketers and advertisers with insight into how to more effectively develop advertising strategies to target the Chinese consumer.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to McCracken (1986), a celebrity endorser is "...any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement." A celebrity sports endorser is defined as "...a famous [athlete or coach] who uses public recognition to recommend or co-present with a product in an ad" (Stafford, Spears, & Hsu, 2003, p. 13). These athletes may be active, retired or deceased (Constanzo & Goodnight 2005).

Celebrity endorsements are one of the most popular advertising strategies used in today's global marketplace (White, 2004). In Japan, nearly 70 percent of television commercials feature a celebrity (Kilburn, 1998). In the United States, about a quarter of all ads feature a celebrity endorser (Shimp, 2000). In an effort to maximize persuasive advantage, U.S. firms invest heavily in the use of celebrity endorsements, sometimes running into the millions of dollars per endorsement deal (Simmers, Damron-Martinez & Haytko, 2009). Benefits of using celebrity endorsements include an enhancement of ad recall, product desirability, and product glamour (Spielman, 1981). Other research suggests celebrity endorsements are an effective strategy for gaining and holding attention (Atkin & Block, 1983), positively impacting brand attitudes and enhancing likelihood of purchase (Friedman & Friedman, 1979), fostering brand loyalty, and positively impacting word-of-mouth (Bush, Martin, & Bush, 2004). Additionally, McCracken (1986) theorized that celebrity endorsers transfer cultural meaning from the celebrity to the endorsed product, suggesting advertisers need to be familiar with meanings associated with potential CAEs or risk having undesirable meanings linked with their products.

According to Strong (1925), the creation of the AIDA (attention, interest, desire, action) model can be traced back to E. St. Elmo Lewis in 1898. This classic linear model of advertising has since been widely used by traditional media advertisers (Preston, 1982). With this model, the buyer is depicted as passing successively through the stages of attention, interest, desire and action. The marketer must first gain the prospect's attention and then create interest in the product. Sufficiently strong levels of interest arouse desire for product use/ownership (Belch & Belch, 2009).

According to Gebhardt (2007), within the AIDA model, the goal of advertising changes based on the individual consumers' stage in the continuum. Since different consumers will be at different stages along the continuum, advertisers must target ads at the various stages. Thus, advertisers should be cognizant of how their target market is distributed across the continuum stages.

Attention is the first step in the AIDA process and it is especially relevant to the use of CAEs. Attracting attention is an increasingly challenging task for advertisers due to today's media-cluttered environment. By some accounts, U.S. consumers are exposed to more than 3,000 marketing messages daily (Weiss, 2003). Advertising managers commonly believe that CAEs can effectively break through this advertising clutter (Miciak & Shanklin, 1994; Erdogan, Baker and Tagg, 2001). Once attention is gained, the next step is to create interest. CAEs may contribute to product interest by capitalizing on consumers' obsession with celebrities and their desire to know all they can about their favorite celebrities (Pringle, 2004). This obsession may be even more pronounced in China, where celebrities commonly reach hero status with their fans (Liu, Huang & Minghua, 2007).

A limited number of studies have used the AIDA framework to examine celebrity endorser effectiveness. For example, Premeaux (2009) found that CAEs mainly impacted the

attention and interest stages of the AIDA framework, and that they did so in a positive manner. In another study using the AIDA framework, Van der Waldt, De Beer and Du Plessis (2007) found that celebrity endorsers mainly influenced AIDA by attracting attention and generating interest in both the advertisement and advertised product and that this was true in the case of attractive as well as credible endorsers.

METHODOLOGY

The present study involved a comparison of U.S. and Chinese college students' general perceptions of CAEs. The Chinese sample consisted of Chinese national college-aged students enrolled in a business course offered at the Dalian, China branch campus of a Midwestern U.S. university. The U.S. sample was drawn from U.S.-born college-aged students enrolled in a business course offered at the main U.S. campus linked to the Dalian branch campus. On both campuses, participants responded to questionnaires in a classroom setting. For this study, 147 usable questionnaires were returned; 71 from the U.S. and 76 from China. (A description of the sample can be found in Table 1 in the Appendix).

A convenience sample of college students was drawn for both the U.S. and Chinese samples. While the use of student samples has been criticized for detracting from the generalizability of findings, the use of these two convenience samples was deemed appropriate as they provided homogeneity (Calder, Phillips & Tybout, 1981), which is important for cross-cultural research (Hofstede & Bond, 1988).

Measures

The survey instrument included a fifteen-item scale designed to measure respondents' general perceptions of CAEs. A literature review revealed no existing scales specifically designed to measure general perceptions of CAEs, so each of the items developed for this study were either modifications of existing scale items or items created specifically for this study. Items were modified from a scale developed to measure consumers' general perceptions of celebrity endorsers with respect to the AIDA framework (Van der Waldt, De Beer and Du Plessis, 2007). The final version of the questionnaire consisted of four items related to attention, four to interest, three to desire and four to action (see below).

Attention - CAEs attract my attention to the product being advertised.

Attention - I give more attention to a celebrity athlete in an ad than to the product itself.

Attention - I often observe what products celebrity athletes are endorsing.

Attention - In general, ads featuring a CAE grab my attention.

Interest - I am more interested in products that use CAEs.

Interest - I am interested in products that use CAEs.

Interest - I often want to know more about products endorsed by CAEs.

Interest - I am more interested in an ad's CAE than the advertised product.

Desire - I desire products that use CAEs.

Desire - I desire products endorsed by likable CAEs.

Desire - Products using CAEs are more desirable to me.

Action - I prefer buying products endorsed by CAEs.

Action - I generally buy products that I think celebrity athletes would approve of.

Action - I often make buying decisions based on the CAEs believability in the ads.

Action - I often identify with a celebrity athlete by buying products they endorse in ads.

Respondents rated their levels of agreement with each of the 15 items. Responses were measured on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Because the Chinese branch campus required English fluency for admission, all participants in this study answered identical versions of the questionnaire. All questions were composed in English, which simplified the questionnaire construction process by eliminating the need for instrument translation.

FINDINGS

T-tests were conducted to test for differences between the U.S. and Chinese samples (see Table 2 in the Appendix). The first four items dealt with the attention step of the AIDA framework. Responses from the third item indicate that relative to the U.S. respondents, Chinese respondents agreed more strongly that they observed what celebrity athletes are endorsing ($p=.000$; China $\mu = 4.16$, U.S. $\mu = 2.65$). For the fourth item, relative to U.S. respondents, Chinese respondents agreed more strongly that an advertisement with a celebrity grabs their attention ($p=.020$; China $\mu = 4.88$, U.S. $\mu = 4.32$). See Table 2 in the appendix.

The next four items dealt with the interest step of the AIDA framework. Concerning the item stating that they were interested in products that used a celebrity athlete, Chinese again agreed more strongly than the U.S. sample ($p=.031$; China $\mu = 4.36$, U.S. $\mu = 3.80$). Chinese respondents also agreed more strongly that they desired more knowledge about products endorsed by CAEs ($p=.013$; China $\mu = 4.15$, U.S. $\mu = 3.52$).

The next three items concerned the desire step of the AIDA framework. Chinese agreed more strongly than the U.S. sample that they desired products endorsed by CAEs ($p=.000$; China $\mu = 4.20$, U.S. $\mu = 3.01$), and that they desired products endorsed by likable CAEs ($p=.000$; China $\mu = 4.47$, U.S. $\mu = 3.48$). Responses to the next item indicate that relative to the U.S. sample, the Chinese agreed more strongly that CAE-endorsed products are more desirable ($p=.000$; China $\mu = 4.17$, U.S. $\mu = 2.90$). Finally, relative to U.S. sample, the Chinese agreed more strongly with the statement that they preferred buying CAE-endorsed products ($p=.000$; China $\mu = 4.13$, U.S. $\mu = 2.99$).

Four items dealt with the action step in the AIDA model. Concerning the first item, which stated they generally buy products of which they believe celebrities would approve, Chinese again agreed more strongly than did the U.S. sample ($p=.000$; China $\mu = 4.04$, U.S. $\mu = 2.27$). They also agreed more strongly with the next statement, that they make buying decisions based on the CAEs believability ($p=.000$; China $\mu = 3.77$, U.S. $\mu = 2.72$). Finally, Chinese respondents agreed more strongly that they identify with a CAE by buying the endorsed products ($p=.000$; China $\mu = 4.00$, U.S. $\mu = 2.57$).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Regarding the impact of CAE on AIDA, both Chinese and U.S. perceptions of the persuasiveness of CAEs suggest that CAEs attract attention and create interest in both the products and the ads in which those products are featured. However, the findings suggest that CAEs were less effective at positively influencing desire and buying behavior. Overall, the findings also suggest that the Chinese were influenced more by CAEs than were the U.S. sample.

The highest scoring item for both the Chinese and U.S. sample was “CAEs attract my attention to the advertised product.” The second highest scoring item for both samples was “In general, an ad with a CAE grabs my attention.” These findings are consistent with Premeaux (2009) and Van der Walddt, De Beer and Du Plessis (2007) who found that items measuring attention received the highest ratings. Interestingly, the gap between the highest and lowest rated items for the Chinese was 1.16, while it was much higher (2.22) for the U.S. sample (for both samples, the lowest rated item was a buying/action item). This suggests that in the case of China, CAEs may do a better job of maintaining their level of impact as they move along the AIDA continuum.

The data shown in Table 2 suggest CAEs offer a viable advertising strategy for reaching Chinese markets, as the Chinese seemed considerably more receptive to CAEs than did the U.S. respondents. The Chinese agreed more strongly than the U.S. sample that they pay attention to advertisements using CAEs. While significance was found shown for two of the four items measuring attention, the Chinese rated their agreement with the statement “CAEs attract my attention to the product being advertised” at a mean score of 4.93 compared to the U.S. mean score of 4.49. However, while not statistically significant, practically speaking this mean difference may be relevant. As the Chinese market is subjected to an ever increasing flood of advertisements, gaining attention in that market will become increasingly challenging. The use of CAEs may offer exceptional value in accomplishing this task.

The findings suggest that CAEs more effectively generated interest in the Chinese than in the U.S. sample. Compared to the U.S. sample, the Chinese reported significantly higher levels of agreement with three of the four items pertaining to interest in the advertisement and advertised product. The Chinese rated the interest statement not showing significance higher as compared to the U.S. sample (3.89 to 3.48).

The results suggest that CAE usage may positively influence U.S. and Chinese consumers’ demand for advertised products. The Chinese agreed more strongly with each of the three statements concerning desire. Generally, the findings suggest that CAEs may enhance the desire to purchase the advertised product and that influence may be stronger among Chinese than U.S. consumers.

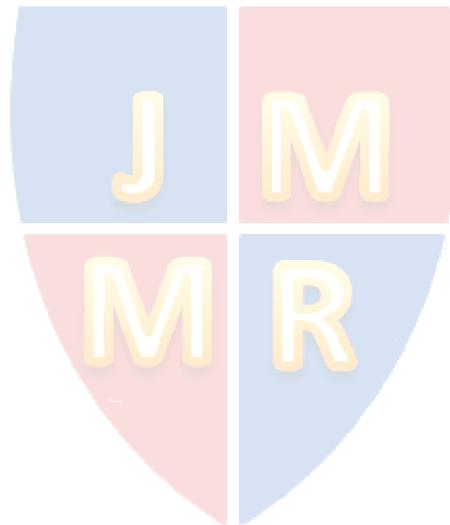
The data presented in Table 2 offers a compelling argument for the use of CAE when advertising to the Chinese consumer. The Chinese agreed more strongly with each of the four action-related statements. This suggests the actions (e.g., product purchases) of Chinese consumers may be more influenced by CAEs than would the actions of U.S. consumers. This study analyzed Chinese and U.S. consumers’ perceptions regarding CAEs in relation to the AIDA framework. The findings suggest that Chinese consumers are relatively open to CAE influence and marketers should consider CAEs as a viable strategy for impacting the AIDA stages of Chinese consumers.

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Appendix

	China	U.S.	Total
Sample Size	76	71	147
Gender			
Male	19	40	59
Female	53	30	83
Age			
Under 21	9	37	46
21-22	47	25	72
23-up	19	9	28

Table 2
A Comparison of the Influence of Celebrity Athlete Endorsers (CAEs)

Endorser Influence Item	Chinese Mean Score	U.S. Mean Score	T Value	df	Significance Level
CAEs attract my attention to the advertised product.	4.93	4.49	1.902	145	.059
I give more attention to an ad's CAE than to the product itself.	3.91	4.06	-585	145	.559
I often observe what products celebrity athletes are endorsing.	4.16	2.65	6.067	144	.000
In general, an ad with a CAE grabs my attention.	4.88	4.32	2.360	144	.020
I am more interested in ads that use CAEs.	4.65	4.03	2.509	145	.013
I am interested in products that use CAEs.	4.36	3.80	2.182	144	.031
I often want to know more about products endorsed by CAEs.	4.15	3.52	2.508	145	.013
I am often more interested in an ad's CAE than the advertised product.	3.89	3.48	1.720	143	.088
I desire products that use CAEs.	4.20	3.01	5.123	143	.000
I desire products endorsed by likable CAEs.	4.47	3.48	3.938	143	.000
Products using CAEs are more desirable to me.	4.17	2.90	5.422	144	.000
I prefer buying products endorsed by CAEs.	4.13	2.99	5.201	144	.000
I generally buy products that I think celebrity athletes would approve of.	4.04	2.27	7.777	144	.000
I often make buying decisions based on the CAEs believability in the ads.	3.77	2.72	4.264	144	.000
I often identify with a celebrity athlete by buying the products they endorse in ads.	4.00	2.57	6.213	144	.000