The Spillover Effects of a Sports Celebrity’s Negative Publicity on Consumers’ Evaluations of a Sponsor and Its Product*

유명 스폰서인의 부정적 평판이 스폰서와 제품에 대한 소비자의 평가에 미치는 파급효과*

Sung-Wook Yoon(윤성욱) · Seongyeon Shin(신성연)

This study examines how the effects of negative publicity about a sports celebrity who endorses a sponsor’s product are likely to spread to the sponsor and the product. In particular, this study focuses on the moderating roles of consumers’ identification with a sports celebrity and media credibility. A sports celebrity’s negative publicity (negative vs. controlled) and consumers’ identification with a sports celebrity (a high degree of identification vs. a low degree of identification) were manipulated at two levels. In addition, media credibility was divided into two levels (a high degree of credibility vs. a low degree of credibility). A total of 316 participants participated in the research and a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was utilized for the analysis of the subsequent data. The results show that negative publicity about a sports celebrity transfers to the celebrity’s sponsor and the sponsor’s product. In this regard, the research participants who were exposed to a negative news article about a sports celebrity formed more negative opinions of the celebrity’s sponsor and its product than those exposed to a controlled news article. The moderating effects of the participants’ identification with the sports celebrity on the sponsor and its product were significant. In addition, the interaction between negative publicity and media credibility with regard to participants’ attitudes toward the sponsor and its product was also significant. The specific implications of these results and suggestions for future research are outlined in the paper.

Key words: negative publicity, media credibility, identification, sponsorship, meaning transfer model, social identity theory.

1. Introduction

Why do many companies seek to employ sports celebrities who are popular and talented? The answer is that sponsorship, especially the endorsement of sports celebrities, is one of the most effective strategies to im-

* This work was supported by the Dong-A University research fund.
We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the anonymous reviewers who have provided their constructive suggestions and valuable comments.

Sung-Wook Yoon / Professor. Department of Business Administration, Dong-A University(weuns@dau.ac.kr)
Seongyeon Shin / Lecturer. Department of Business Administration, Dong-A University(syshink@gmail.com).
Corresponding Author
prove a company’s brand equity. A company can benefit from sponsorship in various ways by supporting well-known celebrities for the following reasons (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Meenaghan, 1998; Javalgi, Traylor, Gross, & Lampman, 1994). First, a company’s brand can easily be introduced to consumers through the natural exposure of a sports celebrity during sports events and news releases. Second, a sponsor company enhances its brand image or shapes a positive attitude toward the company through its association with a sports celebrity. For example, sponsoring a sports celebrity generates positive evaluations because the sports celebrity has a positive and progressive image. Third, consumers’ positive attitudes toward a sports celebrity can transfer to consumers’ buying intentions and the purchase of products. For example, Michael Jordan became the face of NIKE in the 1990s and even today NIKE earns a great deal of money through its Air Jordan brand. Indeed, companies prefer well-known sports celebrities; thus, various sports celebrities endorse their sponsors’ companies and products. However, research about the side effects of sports celebrity sponsorship is still in its infancy. In this regard, sports celebrity sponsorship may well be an effective marketing strategy but may also carry risks. For example, if a sports celebrity is involved in various misdeeds, the negative impacts may transfer to consumers’ evaluations of a sponsor company or its products. Further, negative publicity spreads fast through Internet-based social networks. In this context, the Internet has rapidly emerged as one of the most important sources for human communication (Dholakia, Reyes, & Bonoff, 2015; Rice, 2006). Increasingly, people stay informed on specific issues by reading news online rather than watching television or reading newspapers. Regardless of location, individuals can access Internet news sources through mobile devices; consequently, many traditional news platforms, such as newspapers and television, have been replaced by the Internet because of this perceived ease of use. In addition, when consumers are exposed to online media, their perceptions of news content are influenced by the level of media credibility (Petty, Priester, & Brinol, 2002; Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Fiske & Taylor, 1992; Fontenot & Vlosky, 1988; Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1959). Moreover, not all sports celebrities who endorse their sponsors’ products hold the same position in consumers’ opinions. The degree of consumers’ identification with sports celebrities differs significantly. For example, consumers do not always identify with a well-known sports celebrity even though the latter’s performance is outstanding, and vice versa. Thus, research about the potential risk factors associated with using sports celebrities in sponsorship strategies must be considered. Further, the role of media credibility and consumers’ identification with a sports celebrity must also be examined with regard to consumers’ perceptions of negativity.