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Research paper

'Rogue' athlete endorsers: Using social identity theory to assess brand fit

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Abstract

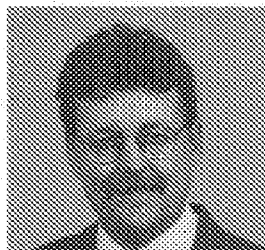
Athlete endorsement deals typically assume that the brand will benefit from an association with the celebrity athlete's public persona. When athletes find themselves in trouble with the law, spouses or frustrated fans, brands like Nike, Reebok, Buick, Wrangler and others must ask, 'Can these "rogue" sports celebrity endorsers resurrect their image and their endorsement power? Are there certain "rebellious" products that may be better suited for endorsement from such rogue celebrities? These are the key questions addressed in this research. Survey results asking respondents to assess real athlete endorsers with either a 'rebel' or benign brand show that matching rebel endorsers with rebel brands can lead to positive brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Social identity theory, which shows how consumers identify with the athlete, and how that rubs off on the brand, is used to explain the effects found in the study. Implications are addressed for marketers considering athletes as endorsers.

Keywords

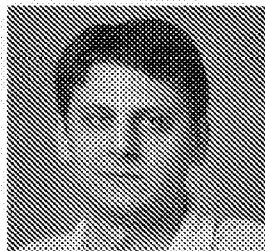
endorsements, sports celebrities, social identity, source credibility, sports sponsorship

PRINCIPAL MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

- Consistency between social identity and source credibility measures suggest that social identity has explanatory power in predicting the reaction that consumers may have to an endorser of certain brands.
- The degree of transgressions by athletes cannot be ignored when brands are considering continuing a current relationship with a 'transgressed' endorser or establishing a new relationship with a 'rogue' sports celebrity.
- Measures of social identity, brand attitudes and purchase intent may provide evidence to help brand managers in any legal proceedings involving termination of endorsement contracts with 'rogue' sports celebrities.
- Social identity measures provide another way to assess brand-endorser fit.



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- Valuation of the relationship with a sports celebrity may be assessed with the use of measures from this study.
- Application of these results may extend beyond endorsement relationships with athletes to other 'rogue' celebrities from show business, music or pop culture.

INTRODUCTION

Convicted dog killer. Accused but never charged with sexual assault. Dramatic indecisions regarding career moves and retirement. Highly publicised extra-marital affairs ultimately resulting in divorce. Are these the types of celebrity endorsers that product marketers are looking for? Brands such as Nike, Reebok, Buick, Wrangler and others face this decision as athletes find themselves in trouble with the law, spouses or frustrated fans. Can these 'rogue' sports celebrity endorsers resurrect their images and their endorsement power? Are there certain 'rebellious' products that may be better suited for endorsement from such 'rogue' celebrities? These are the key questions addressed in this research.

Athlete endorsement has been a marketing practice for over 100 years.¹ Early in Nike's history, the brand strategically used 'notorious athletes' to stand out and appeal to a certain market segment, starting with Steve Prefontaine, a combative and controversial distance runner, followed by tennis player John McEnroe and basketball player Charles Barkley.¹ In 1996, Dennis Rodman, a professional basketball player with highly publicised 'anti-social' behaviours, doubled his salary with endorsement deals from Nike, Pizza Hut and Kodak, among others.¹ The call for research to better understand the marketing impact of such strategies has grown ever since.

Michael Vick, Ben Roethlisberger, Brett Favre, LeBron James, Tiger Woods and Michael Phelps are among the present

sports celebrities whose transgressions have affected their lives as well as tainted their reputations as product endorsers. Vick's endorsement deals with Rawlings, Nike, Reebok and Upper Deck were all terminated after his indictment but before his conviction for dog fighting, which led to two missed seasons from the National Football League (NFL).² As one analyst put it: 'there is no "til death do us part" in marriages by endorsement, only "until you doth embarrass us"'.² For Roethlisberger, the loss was a few local endorsements and a four-game suspension from the NFL, but Nike, unlike with Vick, stayed with Big Ben throughout his ordeal. Favre's work for Wrangler and James' endorsements for Nike continued unaffected, but new endorsement deals have been few and far between.

Vick and Roethlisberger both appeared during the 2011 NFL play-offs. Through numerous interviews they appeared contrite and apologetic for their transgressions and the majority of media coverage seemed sympathetic and ready to rebuild their images as heroes. Vick received prominent press for a visit to a Florida prison³ and commencement speech at a school for troubled youth in Philadelphia.⁴ A film documenting his life is in production. He was a finalist in fan voting to appear on the cover of the EA Sports 'Madden NFL 2012' video game, beating 30 other players before ultimately losing to Peyton Manning.⁵ Clearly, Vick retains value as a public figure and endorser despite the negative publicity associated with his name.

The present research examines the link between how consumers perceive athlete endorsers and their purchase intent for the endorsed brand. Shuart's study of sports heroes found that perception of athletes as heroes contributed to greater purchase intent than as 'sports celebrities' (merely famous people) or 'sports anti-heroes'

('athlete(s) who (do) not affirm the predominant value system in American society').⁶ Shuart suggests, however, that: 'an anti-hero such as Dennis Rodman selling something like the new model of Harley Davidson motorcycle, based on the associations we make with the two, might prove to be a very effective marketing strategy'.⁶ The present study tests the proposition that consumers perceive congruence between characteristically 'rogue' athletes and products and tests consumer preference for rogue athletes over non-rogue athletes as endorsers of 'rebel' brands that are perceived as alternatives to a more mainstream product within the same product category.

Berger *et al.* investigate instances in which negative publicity benefits sales.⁷ Although studied in the context of negative book reviews and their relation to books sales, a similar principle may explain if and how 'rogue' celebrity endorsers affect product sales. While negative publicity is understood to have no positive impact on consumer evaluations, product awareness and accessibility increase with all forms of publicity. Berger *et al.* study how sales might increase as a result of this heightened awareness. The key variable seems to be existing product awareness at the time of the publicity. In general, brands enjoying high awareness suffer from negative publicity, while brands that are relatively unknown to consumers, or with low top-of-mind presence, benefit from increases to these purchase predictors (awareness and availability) despite the associated negative assessment affect.

This evaluation-awareness relationship suggests a unique effect in the sports endorsement context. Endorsement relationships consist of two brands – the endorser and the endorsed product or brand. While an athlete who commits a transgression possesses high awareness

among sports fans, and thus carries a heavy evaluative penalty for transgressions, publicity also causes increased awareness among non-fans. Berger *et al.*⁷ imply that the degree of the transgression is relevant in change to consumer affect; minor athlete misbehaviour may effectively lead consumers to recall that an endorser's name was 'in the news', but not the nature of his or her particular transgression. Thus, among the non-fan consumer base, athlete misbehaviour may produce high name awareness without the accompanying disdain expected of more passionate fans.

It is expected that social identity theory may go a long way in explaining the impact of a 'rogue' celebrity endorser. Consumers who identify with a sports celebrity may be quicker to forgive the transgression, whether it is major or minor in nature. Those perceiving less social identity with a sports star, which may comprise a majority given the astronomical salaries and glamorous lifestyles of most sports stars, may turn quickly against celebrities for their transgressions. In addition to social identity, source credibility must also be considered, given its established role in the brand endorsement literature.⁸⁻¹¹

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sport sponsorship overview

O'Reilly and Madill¹² conducted an extensive multi-phase study and found that the rebranding or repositioning of a brand was an objective that sports sponsorship had the potential to impact. 'Rogue' celebrities can play a vital role in rebranding, particularly if a brand is looking to move from being perceived as a traditional, conservative brand to one that is rebellious, current and cutting-edge.

Brand personality has been studied extensively, but sports brand personalities are a more recent focus of study. Five

unique personality dimensions of sports were identified by researchers: diligence, uninhibitedness, fit, tradition and amusement. These sports-related personalities were linked to attitudes towards the sporting event and the brands associated with the event. The emergence of 'uninhibitedness' and 'tradition' among sports brand dimensions fits well with the concepts of traditional and 'rogue' sports celebrities studied here.¹³

O'Reilly and Madill¹⁴ found from a series of interviews with sports sponsorship practitioners that evaluation metrics for sports marketing relationships tended to mirror those used to evaluate advertising, not metrics unique to sponsorship or overly focused on purchase intent and return on investment. In addition, the researchers emphasised the importance of understanding the theoretical grounding that explains sponsorship, something the present study attempts to advance with regard to using sports celebrities as endorsers.

Differences were found in brand recall produced from three different components of a sponsorship package (venue signage, athlete clothing/equipment endorsing brands and television ads). Television ads during the event produced the greatest brand recall, followed by athlete apparel logos. An experimental condition also testing a combination of sponsorship activities produced good sponsor recall, suggesting that multiple aspects of sports sponsorship can play differentiating roles in accomplishing marketers' goals.¹⁵

Social identity theory

Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory¹⁶ examines the interplay of personal identity and social identity to contextualise group behaviour. The theory seeks to explain the influence of group membership in terms of beliefs that tie personal

behaviour to the behavioural choices of the group. Groups and their behaviour are largely determined by commonness of goals, the intensity of competition between groups over comparable but divergent interests and the perceived efficacy of group action.

In sponsorship and endorsement contexts, the theory is useful for its examination of the process by which individuals self-identify with a group and, once the identity has been established, 'share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership in it'.¹⁶ Tajfel and Turner establish three variables for the creation of differentiated groups: (1) each individual member must adopt the group as a component of his or her 'self-concept'; (2) there must be identifiable 'relevant relational attributes' by which groups assess the purpose of membership; (3) 'relevant comparison group(s)' must exist to distinguish membership and foster competitiveness (because 'in-groups do not compare themselves with every cognitively available out-group').¹⁶ Fan groups associated with sports teams exemplify this competitive group environment, particularly because of the high comparability of sports teams, the intense personal investment demonstrated by some fans and the seasonal 'reset' in the rankings of teams, which deters group members from accepting the status quo in terms of each team's competitiveness or ability to beat other teams and achieve a winning season.

Madrigal¹⁷ examines the relationship between belief, attitude and purchase intent in the context of social identification with sports teams. Social identification theory predicts that in-group identifiers will exhibit preferential affect towards associations with the team. Madrigal employs measures of strength of

team identity, beliefs about the importance of corporate sponsorship to the team, preference towards products of sponsors and purchase intent and behaviour to identify a significant social identity effect. Consumers with high in-group team identification employ the matched identity of corporate sponsors and teams as a heuristic-level cue¹⁸ in purchase situations.

Carlson and Donovan¹⁹ use social identity theory to conclude that the closeness of individual identification with an athlete endorser is positively related to attitude towards the team and brand purchase intention. Identification with a team and personal identification with its athlete members are both components contributing to the strength of an individual's loyalty to group membership and his or her attitudes towards the group's affiliates (eg, sponsors). Carlson and Donovan describe this process of athlete identification as 'a cognitive state in which the individual evaluates the degree of overlap between their own self-schema and the athlete's schema'.¹⁹ The present study adopts this concept as a social identity factor.

Fink *et al.*²⁰ also employ social identity theory to study athlete endorsers. Their study examines 'unscrupulous off-field behaviours', finding that these actions diminish fans' team identification. An athlete's on-field team affiliation and off-field brand affiliation serves as a conduit for the identification between fan, team and product. Fink *et al.* suggest that fans evaluate 'unscrupulous' players by either rejecting the allegations against them, thus preserving the in-group identifier, or by rejecting the player's team affiliation. According to the authors, 'the "black sheep" effect occurs when group members (particularly coaches and management) derogate the guilty in-group member (athlete) and label him/her as "different from the rest of the group" to preserve the integrity of the team identity' (p. 145).²⁰

Each of the social identity theory articles covered so far places special emphasis on the degree to which fandom plays a role in identity. This concept of fandom as a key construct for sponsorship-related study is validated by Gwinner and Swanson.

Gwinner and Swanson²¹ combine modern sponsorship theories and outcomes to test a single coherent model of sponsorship centring on the level of fan identification. 'Perceived institutional prestige', 'domain involvement' (how involved the participant is in the sport), and 'fan associations' (the number of associations/interactions with a team) serve as antecedents to fan identification. 'Sponsor recognition', 'attitude towards sponsors', 'sponsor patronage' and 'satisfaction with sponsors' are all outcomes predicted by identification with the team.

The team identification measure itself is a six-item measure, indicating the respondent's association of the team performance with his or her own (eg 'when someone criticises [teamname] football, it feels like a personal insult').²¹ All seven hypotheses (ie, the three antecedents and four outcomes) are found to be well supported by the data. Further, the measures serve to create one coherent structural equation model centred on team identification.

This suggests that social identification, or a person's 'fandom', is useful for predicting differential (high/low fandom) responses to sponsorship-related information. In this study, that information is about the athletes themselves, suggesting a similar mechanism to Gwinner and Swanson's 'perceived institutional prestige' variable, to the extent that athlete personalities can influence perceptions about the team's prestige.

Celebrity source credibility

Source credibility studies examine how perceptions of an endorser's personality

characteristics mediate message acceptance.¹⁰ Early work on the topic consisted largely of developing reliable, generalised multi-dimensional scales: notably, McCroskey's authoritativeness character scale,⁸ Whitehead's objectivity scale²² and Berlo *et al.*'s safety qualification dynamism scale,⁹ among others. Following the development of such scales, the research agenda turned to contextualisation of speaker credibility. The present study factor analyses the credibility items used to verify their interrelationships while looking to celebrity-specific endorsement credibility measures for insights.

According to Ohanian,¹⁰ celebrity credibility studies nuance source credibility models with the source attractiveness model.²³ Ohanian's attractiveness-trustworthiness-expertise source credibility model,^{10,11} designed to address dimensions of celebrity credibility, functions well as a measure of aggregate celebrity credibility. Semantic differential items from that model are used to measure celebrity source credibility.

Congruence theories

Endorsement literature often investigates the principles behind perceptions of the appropriateness of brand and endorser pairings. This function is usually described as fit, match-up or congruence; although not synonymous, these terms originate from scholastic efforts to identify the attributes or features that influence preferences for pairing brands and endorsers.

Olson and Thjomøe²⁴ identified four factors that influence consumer perceptions of brand fit: (1) clear use of the product by the endorser; (2) commonality between the brand's consumer segment and the audience segment; (3) physical geographic similarity (eg skiing sports and cold-weather apparel); (4) shared affect

(ie similarity in the respondent's attitude towards the product and sport). The study further found that the effectiveness of these fit cues can be modified by the articulation of the fit between a sponsor and a brand. Thus, a skilful narrative connecting a seemingly incongruent partnership can produce favourable fit perception and, conversely, poor explanation of the sponsorship relationship can actually disrupt the 'natural' fit factors. Rogue behaviour may create a negative narrative, if incongruity in perceptions of a brand's relationship with an athlete interferes with marketing articulation efforts. However, for some brands a skilful fit narrative might benefit from initial incongruence perceptions; mis-fit between sponsor and brand increase attentiveness, without necessarily detrimentally affecting sales if the relationship is effectively explained and the incongruence rectified. This may, in fact, be a strong cognitive strategy in terms of recall. Further, rebel brands may present natural fit opportunities for rogue athletes.

Like the fit cues, endorser-product match-up theory suggests congruency between the attributes of an endorser or product improves consumers' product evaluation and purchase intent. Koernig and Boyd (p. 27) argue match-up is the key to joining 'endorser-brand fit and endorser credibility'.²⁵ According to Pornpitakpan (p. 182),²⁶ studies of celebrity match-up tend to be treated in terms of physical attributes. For example, Kamins²⁷ finding that physically attractive celebrities are more credible endorsers of luxury cars, but not necessarily of home computers, suggests physical attractiveness is a feature of both an endorser and a product that can be 'matched' to create congruence for an audience.

A final key congruence theory is the meaning transfer model, which maintains that celebrities possess cultural meaning,

such as status and lifestyle, which can transfer to products they endorse.^{28,29} The present study is thus attentive to conditional brand perceptions related to consumer attitudes towards celebrities, particularly in terms of positively associating rogue athletes and rebel brands. Meenaghan³⁰ attributes the success of the partnership between Guinness (the essential Irish drink) and hurling (the essential Irish sport) to image transfer. The 'inherent values' of the sport are suggested to transfer to the brand in part because of the brand's success in capturing a shared ethos and in part simply because the two share a common culturally authentic 'Irishness'.

The practical implication of congruence is that the effectiveness of a sponsorship (either in terms of sales or brand attitudes) hinges on how an audience cognitively processes the relationships between sponsor, property and the consumer. Speed and Thompson³¹ advance congruence theory research using a mixed logit structural model not previously used in sports sponsorship literature. They confirm that: '[brand] response is stronger when consumers perceive there is a fit between sponsor and event'.³¹ A second key finding is that high message fit actually decreases perceptions of sincerity when the event is high-profile.³¹ The authors suspect that this is because highly orchestrated messaging appears overly 'commercially motivated, rather than altruistic'.³¹ In the context of athlete endorsers, this effect is implicit in the congruence between endorser and product; rogue endorsers are expected to more sincerely match rogue brands because their status is not created by marketers, but is the result of observable behaviour.

Forgiveness

The present study considers forgiveness as a potential explanatory variable in the

assessment of athletes with histories of misbehaviour. Scobie and Scobie³² identify four models of forgiveness: health, philosophical, Christian and pro-social. This study is most interested in the pro-social stance, which approaches forgiveness as an interpersonal communication process intended to negotiate a return to relationship equilibrium. This pro-social standpoint seems most appropriate to the athlete endorser context, where relationships with athletes are impersonal and (from the endorser's viewpoint at least) a return to equilibrium is directly related to sponsorship effectiveness. Given the conceptual overlap that social identity seems to have with forgiveness, at least in the context of celebrity endorsements, forgiveness will be measured and assessed for its relationship with social identity in this study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given the previous literature and the need to assess the potential effectiveness of 'rogue' athlete endorsers for different types of products, the following research questions were addressed:

- R.1: What role, if any, does social identity theory play in explaining how respondents react to athlete endorsers, given varying levels of identification with athletes?
- R.2: Will athletes with different types of 'transgressions' produce different social identity scores for consumers?
- R.3: What effects will athlete endorsers with different levels of social identity among consumers have on consumers' rating of brands and likelihood to purchase?

METHOD

The four professional athletes selected for this study represent different levels of

social transgressions. It was believed that real athlete names were important to the validity of the study. Brett Favre, professional quarterback, was selected because of his 'minor' transgressions of being undecided about retiring every year combined with a rumour of texting lewd comments and photos to a former fellow employee. Ben Roethlisberger, professional quarterback, was selected for his 'medium' transgression of being accused, but never charged, with sexual assault. Michael Vick, professional quarterback, represents the 'large' transgression category, following his conviction and prison sentence related to animal cruelty. Michael Jordan, retired professional basketball player, was also included in the study as a barometer for comparison, given his success as a brand endorser.⁶ A pre-test showed high-level recognition and knowledge of these athletes and their transgressions relative to other high-profile rogue athletes, such as Tiger Woods, Michael Phelps and Ray Lewis.

The 103 surveyed participants were undergraduate students at a mid-size Midwestern university. All but one of the respondents were 18–25 years old; 63 per cent were female, approximating the university's population split. Respondents were recruited on a volunteer basis from courses in communication and marketing.

Two product categories, energy drinks and motorcycles, were selected for study because of their appeal to the participants involved and past use of similar studies.⁶ Both product categories also offer renowned 'rebellious' brands^{33,34} that made for a distinct comparison to standard or less rebellious brands. For energy drinks, Red Bull was selected as the standard brand, while Full Throttle represented the 'rebellious' brand. For motorcycles, Honda was the standard brand, while Harley-Davidson repre-

sented the rebel. A pre-test among similar respondents using brand personality measures from Martin³⁵ was used to select the brands.

Independent measures

Measures from social identity theory

Four scale items measure respondents' identification with the athlete endorsers.¹⁹ One item (Carlson and Donovan,¹⁹ citing Bergami and Bergozzi³⁶) indicates perceived identity overlap with each athlete as a baseline indicator of similarity. The remaining four items are evaluations of the degree to which the athlete is a 'joy' to watch play his sport, is a leader in society, sets a good example for others and can be empathised with for his transgressions. The items serve to create a collective image of the degree to which respondents' ascribe an in-group or out-group evaluation of athletes based on their public behaviour.

Measures from congruence theories

Congruence measures collect information about the fit between the respondent's endorsement preferences and the characteristics of the endorsers and brands. Six items measured the attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise source credibility indicators for each athlete.^{8,10,11} The specific items were measured on a five-point Likert scale of agreement with each athlete as a product endorser: attractive, expert, trustworthy, friendly, sincere and reliable.

Dependent measures

The match-up dimension serves as one dependent measure. Respondents were asked to identify one of two motorcycle brands (Harley-Davidson and Honda) and one of two energy drink brands (Full

Throttle and Red Bull), for which each athlete would make a strong endorser. In a seven-point paired comparison question, each athlete was assessed as a better endorser for one brand or the other.

Brand attitudes and purchase intent were also used to assess the impact of the athlete endorsement. Consumers were asked to rate the brand 'if this athlete was the endorser', using two scale items to indicate perceived quality and value, as well as their likely brand purchase intent given that the athlete served as an endorser.

RESULTS

First, scale analyses were conducted to identify any underlying dimensions among either the social identity or source credibility measures. In both cases, all items loaded on a single factor, justifying the use of a single, summated, multi-item score to represent social identity and one for source credibility. In the case of the social identity factor, high factor loadings and strong correlations between the individual measures and a single item measuring 'this athlete deserves forgiveness' resulted in adding this measure to the mix.

For social identity, significant differences emerged across the four athletes. Respondents identified the most with Jordan and least with Vick and Roethlisberger (see Table 1 for sum scores); Brett Favre fell in between. These

results suggest that respondents may find Jordan and Favre easier to relate to and Vick/Roethlisberger more distant or 'rogue', which may influence consumer perceptions of the product brand offering the best fit for different athletes.

Source credibility scores reflected the same pattern as above, with Jordan significantly rated most credible, Vick and Roethlisberger least and Favre in between (see Table 1). Once again, Jordan was perceived overall as setting the bar as a brand endorser. The remaining analysis examines how he might be eclipsed as an endorser for certain brands, particularly rebel brands that may be more effectively represented by 'rogue' endorsers.

Energy drink endorsers

A single, seven-point paired comparison scale asked respondents to indicate whether they felt that each of the four athletes was a better endorser for Red Bull or Full Throttle. With higher numbers on the scale representing the 'rebellious' brand and lower scale scores representing the standard brand, Jordan received the lowest average score (2.5) while Vick and Roethlisberger had score averages of 3.4, with Favre at 3.1 (see Table 2). Although this pattern showed that the 'rogue' athletes were favoured over Jordan for endorsing the 'rebellious' Full Throttle brand, these average scores fall near the midpoint of the scale. A better perspective was gained by evaluating the

Table 1 Social identity and source credibility scores for four athletes

Social ID (5 items)	Mean	Source credibility (6 items)	Mean
Jordan	17.5	Jordan	23.2
Favre	13.9	Favre	18.9
Vick	12.6	Vick	11.6
Roethlisberger	11.6	Roethlisberger	
$F(3.96) = 119.5 \text{ } p < 0.0001$		$F(3.97) = 89.3 \text{ } p < 0.0001$	12.6

Table 2 Endorser preference, brand attitude and likely to purchase mean scores for four athletes

<i>Energy drink</i>				
	<i>Brand endorsement</i>	<i>Brand attitude quality</i>	<i>Brand attitude value</i>	<i>Likely purchase</i>
Jordan	2.5 (Red Bull)	4.1	3.9	3.9
Favre	3.1 (in between)	3.2	3.1	3.2
Vick	3.4 (Full Throttle)	3.1	3.0	3.1
Roethlisberger	3.4 (Full Throttle)	2.8	2.8	2.8
<i>F(3,93) =</i>	11.6	35.1	28.5	11.6

<i>Motorcycle</i>				
	<i>Brand endorsement</i>	<i>Brand attitude quality</i>	<i>Brand attitude value</i>	<i>Likely purchase</i>
Jordan	3.4 (in between)	4.0	4.0	3.2
Favre	3.7 (Harley)	3.5	3.5	2.8
Vick	2.9 (Honda)	3.1	3.1	2.6
Roethlisberger	3.2 (in between)	3.4	3.4	2.7
<i>F(3,93) =</i>	9.3	16.9	16.9	9.3

All *F* significant at $p < 0.0001$.

percentage of respondents who felt 'very' or 'somewhat' strongly about an athlete endorsing one of the two brands. For Jordan, 58 per cent felt this way for his endorsement of Red Bull, far and away the leader among the four athletes. On the other hand, 52 per cent felt that Vick was a strong endorser for Full Throttle, followed closely by Roethlisberger with 48 per cent. Favre's largest preference was 35 per cent believing he was the right endorser for Full Throttle.

A single-item 'likely to purchase' measure mirrored the results of the brand comparison measure. A Jordan endorsement produced significantly higher 'likely to purchase' scores than Roethlisberger and Vick, with Favre in between. Two brand attitude measures (quality and value) also followed the same pattern, adding more evidence to the relationship between social identity and persuasiveness of an endorser (see Table 2).

Motorcycle endorsers

The same single, seven-point paired comparison scale was used to evaluate consumers' preference for each athlete's endorsement of Honda or Harley-Davidson. Favre earned the highest average paired comparison score (3.64), followed by Jordan (3.36). Vick was lowest at 2.89, with Roethlisberger at 3.16 (see Table 2). Here the 'rogue' athletes were perceived to be the better endorsers for the less rebellious brand (Honda). Favre (62 per cent) and Jordan (48 per cent) had the highest percentage of 'very' or 'somewhat' strong feelings towards endorsing the 'rebel' Harley brand. Consumers were unsure about Vick and Roethlisberger's best fit, with almost equal numbers picking Honda and Harley as the best fit.

Again, the 'likely to purchase' brand attitude scores mirrored the results of the brand comparison measure, with Jordan endorsements generating significantly

higher scores than Roethlisberger and Vick, with Favre in between (see Table 2).

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents who more closely identified with sports endorsers such as Michael Jordan and Brett Favre found them to be stronger endorsers for a less rebellious brand than 'rogue' sports endorsers such as Michael Vick and Ben Roethlisberger, who faced much-publicised run-ins with the law. However, results show that all is not lost for the endorsement careers of Vick and Roethlisberger, who were favoured by respondents for more 'rebellious' brands, at least in the case of the energy drink brands tested in this study. Although the results were less clear for cycle brands, consumers showed that personal transgressions by endorsers can be forgiven to a degree, but congruence between the brand's personality and the endorser's image have to exist.

The consistency in results classifying the four athlete endorsers using measures of social identity and source credibility suggests that social identity has explanatory power in predicting the reaction that consumers may have to an endorser of certain brands. Higher brand ratings and likelihood to purchase were associated with the athlete most strongly identified with in this study. These results lend support for research questions 1 and 3 of this study. Although factors beyond personal transgressions by endorsers may have a role in explaining the potential impact an endorsement may have on a brand, the degree of such transgressions cannot be ignored when brands are considering continuing a current relationship with a 'transgressed' endorser or establishing a new relationship with a 'rogue' sports celebrity. Professional football player Rashard Mendenhall's lawsuit charging

Champion sports apparel with breach of contract for terminating his endorsement deal over controversial Twitter comments related to the US government shows legal applications of this research.³⁷ An interesting current case involves baseball player Ryan Braun, whose positive Major League Baseball drug test was overturned by a technicality. Will this transgression, which may have been nothing more than a fake accusation, trigger source credibility ramifications, especially considering his being named most valuable player of 2011 just before the failed drug test result was leaked? According to a national ESPN poll several days after the suspension was rescinded, 69 per cent believed Braun's image was still tainted, although Wisconsin respondents (where Braun plays) believed his reputation was restored (61 per cent).³⁸

These managerial implications of the present study add to other implications, such as brand-endorser fit, valuation of the relationship with a sports celebrity and application of social identity theory to endorsement relationships beyond sports athletes. Actor Charlie Sheen's recent personal transgressions and his future relationship with Hanes and other brands, as well as television shows and future movie appearances, show the need to answer such questions beyond the field of sports endorsements. Sheen's appearance in recent DirecTV ads, which take advantage of his quirky personality to show the advantages of satellite television over cable, is a good example of 'rogue' celebrities finding an effective fit with a brand.

The results of this study clearly distinguish the impact that different levels of 'transgressions' reflected by the representatives chosen for this study have on brand ratings and purchase intent, at least from a statistical standpoint. No statistical differences were found between Vick and Roethlisberger on social identity measures

or brand ratings, leaving research question 2 open for discussion. This suggests further study is needed to investigate the match-up of 'rogue' endorser with rebel brand. There is an obvious demand for knowledge about this relationship in the present marketplace. One case in point is the current marketing efforts of an energy drink called 'American Rebel'. The drink positions itself against Red Bull, using the slogan, 'Are you a rebel?'³⁸

Sponsorship literature^{12, 14} that emphasises the importance of using evaluation metrics regularly to assess sports marketing tactics is highlighted by a 2012 Nielsen poll. It shows that Michael Vick remains high on awareness, even among casual fans, but for the negative reasons related to his dog fighting imprisonment. This same poll also showed the huge jump on to the list that can be achieved by one 'transgression'. Detroit Lions defensive lineman Ndamukong Suh went from the top of the most liked poll to the disliked poll after a highly publicised stomping of a Green Bay Packers player during a nationally televised Thanksgiving Day game.⁴⁰

Limitations of this study include the use of a student sample. While college-age consumers are familiar with energy drinks, they are less likely to be motorcycle owners, possibly explaining the less consistent results regarding endorsers for this product category. More familiar products categories such as personal care or autos may have provided better environments for testing 'rebellious' brands. However, using real brands that have developed brand images added realism to the assessment of the potential impact of different kinds of sports endorsers.

The use of Brett Favre to represent a minor personal transgression because of his career indecisiveness may have introduced a confound to the results. Although Favre ranked high in respondent recognition of

his transgression in pre-test screening, heightened emotional connections unique to Favre may have existed, given that he played in the market being surveyed.

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