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A Study of Endorser-Brand Fit in Sports Celebrity Endorsements: The Case of Sun Yingsha and Banmu Huatian

Chenyun Guo

School of Continuing Education, Shenzhen University, Shenzhen, China
2974770735@qq.com

Abstract. Brand endorsement is widely used to build brand awareness and shape brand image. With the development of social media, celebrity endorsement has evolved from a predominantly one-way advertising practice into a more interactive process involving endorsers, brands, fans, and digital platforms. However, controversies surrounding entertainment celebrities can create reputational risks for brands. As a result, sports celebrities have attracted increasing attention as potential endorsers, partly because athletes are often associated with relatively stable public images. Using Sun Yingsha's endorsement of Banmu Huatian as a case, this study examines the relationship from three perspectives: endorser-brand fit, communication influence, and risk management. The case analysis suggests that endorser-brand fit provides a basis for establishing the endorsement relationship, communication influence shapes the reach and commercial impact of the campaign, and risk management is important to the continuity of the partnership. This study provides brands with new insights into endorsements and offers targeted recommendations for endorser-brand fit assessment and reputational risk management.

Keywords: sports celebrity endorsement, endorser-brand fit, communication influence, reputational risk management

1. Introduction

In recent years, brand endorsement has shown a trend of expanding from entertainment celebrities to sports celebrities, with brands gradually shifting their focus from the entertainment industry toward collaborations with the sports sector. Relevant policy documents have also emphasized the commercial value of sports celebrities and their potential role in promoting consumption and advancing the spirit of sport [1]. An endorser's public image influences consumer attitudes, and brands rely on endorsers to communicate brand values. However, celebrity popularity alone does not necessarily guarantee the success of an endorsement [2].

Existing theoretical research was developed primarily in Western markets, and its application to China's cultural and consumer context remains underexplored. In addition, most risk management efforts focus on crisis public relations in response to reputational risk, with little exploration of long-term and proactive risk assessment [3]. There is also limited discussion of clear criteria for selecting

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sports celebrity endorsers and for balancing promotional reach with potential public-opinion risks. Existing research suggests that the attractiveness model, the credibility model, and fit theory collectively influence endorsement effectiveness. However, less attention has been given to the Chinese market context, athlete identity, social media communication, and evolving public-opinion risks in the practical analysis of sports celebrity endorsements.

Against this background, this study uses the case of Sun Yingsha's endorsement of Banmu Huatian to construct a three-dimensional analytical framework comprising endorser–brand fit, communication influence, and public-opinion risk management, and explores their combined effects.

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1. Attraction and meaning transfer

McGuire's source attractiveness model suggests that consumers' responses to an endorser can influence their perceptions of the endorsed brand. When consumers perceive similarities between the endorser and the brand, the endorser's attractiveness may contribute to more favorable brand evaluations [4]. However, attractiveness can explain only the starting point of an endorsement relationship; it does not guarantee sustained endorsement effectiveness. Endorser-brand fit theory further emphasizes the importance of perceived compatibility between the endorser and the brand in shaping consumer responses [5, 6]. The meaning transfer model further suggests that cultural meanings associated with endorsers can be transferred to products and brands through advertising [7, 8]. Consumers may then associate these meanings with the endorsed brand.

2.2. Source credibility model

Ohanian conceptualizes source credibility through three dimensions: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Expertise generally refers to the perceived knowledge or competence of the endorser, trustworthiness concerns the perceived honesty and reliability of the source, and attractiveness relates to physical appeal, personality, and perceived similarity [9]. For sports celebrities, perceived expertise may be supported by their competitive achievements and professional experience in sport [10]. However, this athletic expertise does not necessarily imply expertise in the endorsed product category [11]. Source credibility may therefore change over time as an athlete's competitive performance, public image, and media exposure change. Consequently, when selecting sports celebrities as brand endorsers, brands must not only leverage their professional strengths but also assess fluctuations in their image and reputational risks. Drawing on these theoretical perspectives, this study examines Sun Yingsha's endorsement of Banmu Huatian through three analytical dimensions: endorser-brand fit, communication influence, and reputational risk management.

3. Case analysis

3.1. Case selection

The effectiveness of sports celebrity endorsements depends on more than the endorser's popularity. It also involves the fit between the endorser and the brand, the ability of the endorsement to generate communication and commercial impact, and the management of potential reputational risks. To test this framework, this study selects Sun Yingsha's endorsement of Banmu Huatian as an illustrative case for analysis. The selection of this case is based primarily on two considerations. First, in recent

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years, Sun Yingsha has achieved remarkable results in top international competitions such as the Olympics and the World Table Tennis Championships, establishing her status as a world-class athlete. Second, Banmu Huatian is a domestic beauty and personal care brand whose stated positioning emphasizes natural floral and botanical ingredients. The brand's positioning provides a useful basis for examining its perceived fit with Sun Yingsha's public image. The following analysis examines the case through three dimensions: endorser-brand fit, communication influence, and reputational risk management.

3.2. Endorser-brand fit: alignment between the endorser and brand positioning

As a leading figure of the new generation on the national table tennis team, Sun Yingsha has high public recognition in China and a warm, approachable public persona. Table tennis has a strong cultural and sporting presence in China and attracts a large domestic audience. Expertise is one of the three dimensions identified in Ohanian's source credibility framework [9]. Sun Yingsha's competitive achievements provide observable indicators of her athletic expertise. Her public image is characterized by professional competence and approachability, and she has a broad audience reach, with a fan base that spans ages and social circles, ranging from elementary school students to middle-aged and older adults.

Banmu Huatian is a domestic beauty and personal care brand that emphasizes natural floral and botanical ingredients in its stated brand positioning [12]. The brand targets consumers interested in natural and healthy personal care products. The case suggests a degree of alignment between Sun Yingsha's public image and the brand's stated positioning. Her professional image, public recognition, and approachable persona provide a basis for examining the perceived fit between the endorser and the brand.

3.3. Communication influence: social media exposure and sales performance

On January 6, 2025, Sun Yingsha became the global brand endorser for Banmu Huatian's hair care line. According to reports, within one hour of the announcement, gross merchandise volume (GMV) for the brand's shampoo products exceeded RMB 30 million [13]. During the relevant reporting period, revenue from the hair care category grew by 496.1% year-over-year, contributing 25.4% of total revenue [14]. On social media, the Weibo hashtag #SunYingshaBanmuHuatianGlobalBrandendorser# reportedly generated more than 330 million views and over 7.245 million interactions, suggesting substantial social-media exposure.

The reported sales figures also show a notable increase following the announcement of the endorsement. Compared with the same period last year or with other brand endorsers, Banmu Huatian experienced substantial growth in brand sales following the official announcement, far exceeding the brand's historical average growth rate. Additionally, according to the company's financial report, revenue from the personal care category increased significantly during the quarter. These figures further corroborate that the impact of Sun Yingsha's endorsement is not merely short-term publicity but has translated into sustainable category growth through social media dissemination [15].

3.4. Reputational risk management: fan behavior and public controversy

Sports celebrity endorsements also involve potential reputational risks that brands need to consider. Like entertainment stars, sports celebrities derive commercial value from fan attention and social

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media dissemination. However, excessive or disruptive behavior within fan communities may generate negative publicity and create reputational risks for both the athlete and the endorsed brand. In 2025, the General Administration of Sport of China identified the regulation of "fan circle" disorder as an important task, while the Chinese Table Tennis Association and the Chinese Table Tennis Team subsequently decided to dissolve their official fan groups. The General Administration of Sport of China further emphasized the need to strengthen risk prevention and control, improve risk forecasting, and enhance risk mitigation capabilities [16]. This regulatory action indicates that fan-related issues have become a relevant consideration in the management of sports celebrity endorsements. Brands may therefore need appropriate mechanisms for monitoring potential reputational risks and responding to negative publicity.

In the case of Sun Yingsha's endorsement of Banmu Huatian, the risks stemmed primarily from two sources. The first concerns possible reputational issues arising from excessive behavior within fan communities, while the second concerns potential changes in the athlete's public image associated with fluctuations in competitive performance. These risks differ in nature and may require different responses. Although brands cannot control an athlete's competitive performance, they can reduce potential reputational exposure through contingency planning, ongoing monitoring, and coordinated communication with the athlete's team.

4. Implications

Based on the above case analysis, this study argues that when selecting sports celebrities as brand endorsers, brands should not focus solely on their fame but should comprehensively consider the alignment between the athlete's image and the brand's tone. If there is a mismatch between the endorser's image and the brand's positioning, it will be difficult to establish effective brand associations, regardless of the athlete's level of fame. Therefore, brands should establish a systematic model for evaluating endorsers that not only considers public recognition but also assesses the fit between the athlete's personal image and the brand's tone, thereby avoiding a decline in endorsement effectiveness due to image misalignment.

Information about Sun Yingsha's endorsement reached a wide audience through platforms such as Weibo, while fan-generated content and sharing further increased its online exposure. Endorsement communication on social media is increasingly interactive rather than purely one-way. Brands can therefore monitor and respond to trending discussions on platforms such as Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin. They may also encourage voluntary user engagement and content sharing to increase the reach of endorsement campaigns, while avoiding excessive or coordinated fan activity. Because changes in athletic performance may also affect an athlete's public image, brands should assess potential reputational risks in advance and establish clear communication procedures and contingency plans with the athlete's team. The case therefore suggests that brands should assess endorser-brand fit, communication influence, and public-opinion risk management as interrelated dimensions rather than in isolation.

5. Conclusion

Through an analysis of Sun Yingsha's endorsement of Banmu Huatian, this study examines sports celebrity endorsement from three analytical dimensions: endorser-brand fit, communication influence, and reputational risk management. The case highlights the importance of perceived alignment between the endorser's public image and the brand's positioning. It also shows how social media exposure and fan-generated content can increase the reach of an endorsement, while potential

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reputational risks need to be considered alongside communication benefits. For brands selecting sports celebrity endorsers, these three dimensions provide a useful basis for evaluating the potential fit, communication impact, and reputational risks associated with an endorsement relationship.

However, as this study is limited to a single case study, the generalizability of its findings requires further testing. Future research should conduct comparative analyses of multiple cases across different contexts or strengthen the persuasiveness of its findings through empirical evidence.

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