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The Impact of Ethnicity Match on Athlete Endorsement: A Parasocial Identification Perspective

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Direct linkages between sponsor brands and sports viewers were widely investigated in the context of athlete endorsement, but few studies examined the effect of parasocial identification (PSI) on how sports viewers would perceive brands endorsed by athletes of color. A two (Black vs Asian athletes) by two (Black vs Asian viewers) mixed factorial experiment was designed to examine the role of viewers' PSI with athletes of color in interaction effects between viewers' ethnicities and athletes' ethnicities on viewers' perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands. Results found that athletes' ethnicities generated a main effect on viewers' perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands. Although viewers' ethnicities did not yield any significant impact, an interaction between viewers' ethnicities and athletes' ethnicities affected viewers' perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands. Moreover, viewers' PSI with athletes intervened this interaction effect on their perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands. The practical application of ethnic similarities was also discussed in response to athlete endorsement.

Keywords: athlete endorsement, parasocial identification, athletes of color, athlete-endorsed brands,

Parasocial identification (PSI) begins with the characteristics of both media characters and viewers and their parasocial encounters that provide media viewers with the illusion of being engaged in social interactions with media characters (Rubin & Perse, 1987). This study aims to explore the impact of sports viewers' PSI with athletes of color on their perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands by conducting an experiment. According to the 2021 ethnic and gender report card, nearly three-fourths of all athletes in the National Basketball Association were Black, less than one-fifth White, and the rest of other or multiple ethnicities, with Asian athletes representing only a small fraction (Lapchick, 2022). Black athletes are more likely to enjoy the label of Black excellence on the basketball court, while Black people are proud of their ingroup athletes dominating most basketball games (Messner, 1992). Compared to other professional sports (e.g., football or baseball), basketball athletes' ethnic backgrounds are evidently observed, due to only ten athletes playing on the basketball court simultaneously (Fortunato, 2001). Moreover, their ethnic backgrounds are even more highlighted on the court than other professional sports, as basketball athletes do not wear any protective equipment and hence more visible (Cole & Andrews, 1996).

Although Black athletes lead constantly and perceptibly in the NBA, some non-Black athletes still take prominence on the court. In early 2012, Jeremy Lin, the first American of Taiwanese and Chinese descent, led a lowly New York Knicks team to seven straight victories. Lin scored 136 points, including 38 against the Kobe Bryant-led Los Angeles Laker, in his first five starts, and established an NBA scoring record, which generated a viral cultural phenomenon known as "Linsanity" ("Jeremy Lin's Starting Points," 2012). During the first week of "Linsanity," a Google search returned more than 2.1 million search results from over 6,700 news sources (Lariviere, 2012). As an Asian basketball athlete, "Jeremy Lin" was mentioned 146,000 times, "Lin" 530,000 times, and "Linsanity" 42,000 times in social media sites during the first two week of February 2012 (Ngak, 2012). Moreover, Lin has passed up millions in endorsement deals since he rose to fame in 2012 and then earns \$4 million yearly from his endorsement deals in 2020, which leads him to be a very selective endorser (Canicosa, 2020). When linking ethnic identifications to athlete endorsement, it is important to investigate how sports viewers perceive physical images and ethnic backgrounds of basketball athletes on the basketball court and how their parasocial identification with athletes of color impact their perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands.

The objective of this study is to examine the impact of ethnicity match on sports viewers' perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands in the framework of parasocial identification. Because NBA athletes are very visible on the basketball court, their excellent performance may activate sports viewers' PSI with NBA athletes and then maximize commercial values of athlete-endorsed brands. This study uses an experimental approach to investigating how sports viewers interact with athletes of color based upon their shared or dissimilar ethnic categories and explore how their PSI with athletes of color mediate the impact of sports viewers' ethnic identification on their perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands. Furthermore, the study attempts to offer both practical and theoretical insights into the mediating role of sports viewers' PSI with athletes of color in how sports viewers perceive athlete-endorsed brands.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Athlete Endorsement

Sports sponsorship has been used as an effective promotion strategy for developing corporate images and brand names, providing opportunities for enriching the symbolic value of sponsors, and maximizing benefits of partnerships during sporting events (Kahuni, Rowley, & Binsardi, 2009). Sports sponsorship is viewed as less obtrusive, more unintended, and less selfish than traditional advertisements during sporting events, and sponsor brands are perceived as more prominent and socially supportive than non-sponsored brands (Meenaghan, 2001). Athlete endorsement is similar to sports sponsorships, given that athletes with brand-endorsed apparels and equipment endorsements activate an immediate linkage between brands and sports. Numerous potential benefits of pairing a successful, talented athlete with a brand emerge to prove that brand values can be enhanced or built through athlete endorsements (Cianfrone & Zhang, 2006; Cornwell, Roy & Steinard, 2001). Three main benefits of using athlete endorsements for brands include (a) increasing brand awareness, (b) building or improving brand image (Cornwell, 1995; Van Hoecke et al., 2000), and (c) connecting brands to athletes (Dyson & Turco, 1998). Moreover, sports fans who have an emotional tie with their favorite athletes would transfer their emotional tie into the brands their favorite athletes endorse, regardless of the fit between products and sports (Van Hoecke et al., 2000). A recent report by Badenhausen (2020) showed that many top-level athletes can command up to \$60 million for these endorsement deals (e.g., Tiger Woods and LeBron James), while other athletes earn at least \$10 million in their endorsements each year (e.g., Tom Brady and Lewis Hamilton). The immediate brand recognition and identification that sports fans have with their favorite athletes is a great benefit to sponsors that provide endorsement deals.

Athlete endorsement has been widely examined in response to consumers' perceived brand image and purchase intention. For instance, Wu (2015) found that athlete endorsement has a positive influence on purchase intention, while brand image yields an intervening effect on purchase intention via athlete endorsement. Regarding the congruency between athletes and products, Chang, Ko and Carlson (2018) suggested that consumers with high involvement with athletes exhibit more arousal when they perceive a low fit between athletes and products and their pleasure, arousal, and pride are also interrelated and systematically determine their behavioral intentions of viewership and online friendship with athletes. Furthermore, Carlson and Donovan (2017) used a social identity approach to examining the effectiveness of athlete endorsement. They suggested that consumers' identification with athletes leads to positive outcomes with team-related intentions as well as a sense of community with other sports fans, and eventually drives the success of athlete endorsement.

Previous studies also investigated the effectiveness of particular athlete endorsers. For example, Bailey (2007) found that participants are more inclined to recall or discuss negative events involving male athletes, but assume that the negative impact of these events are minimum on their perceptions of brands or companies endorsed by these male athletes who involve in these negative events. Additionally, the participants are likely to refer to Kobe Bryant as they are asked to discuss a particular controversy involving an athlete endorser. Some studies further use Kobe Bryant as an athlete endorser to examine the impact of immoral behaviors of athlete endorsers on consumers' reactions to athlete endorser (Thwaites et al., 2012), athlete-endorsed brands (Miller & Laczniak, 2011), and endorsement relationship (White, Goddard & Wilbur, 2009). Since 2012, Jeremy Lin has been frequently used as an athlete endorser due to the cultural phenomenon known as Linsanity. Wu and Chen (2019) found that

the positive effect of Jeremy Lin as an athlete endorser for Volvo is yielded on brand image, personality and identification, and then promotes Volvo product value. Similarly, Chiu, Wen and Lin (2019) also found that Lin's credibility generates positive influences on brand image and purchase intention. To sum up, outstanding athletes as athlete endorsers are investigated in different ways, but very limited studies attempt to examine the impact of athlete ethnicity on athlete endorsement.

Media Portrayals of Athletes of Color

Media portrayal of athletes of color has been frequently investigated with ethnic stereotypes. Billings and Eastman (2003) synthesized previous studies on ethnic stereotypes in sports media into three main categories: (1) The perceived superiority of White athletes regarding their intelligence and work ethic; (2) The presumed natural powerfulness of Black athletes in contradiction of the presumption of hard work by White athletes; and (3) The identification of White athletes as born leaders of team sports. Due to these ethnic stereotypes, Black athletes are mostly described as successful due to their athletic excellence, while White athletes are typically represented to succeed because of their high commitment to sports and further depicted as more modest or introverted than Black athletes. Similarly, Denham, Billings and Halone (2002) found that sports media report Black athletes to be consistently praised for their physicality, intelligence, and leadership in the games. Although Black athletes are portrayed positively in many different ways, some hidden ethnic stereotypes are also made, especially when other athletes in different ethnic groups compete with Black athletes (Denham et al., 2002). On the other hand, Sabo et al. (1996) found Asian athletes are described mostly with cultural stereotypes. Moreover, Asian athletes are depicted as obsessive and hard workers, conformists, and with extremely self-disciplined personalities, but their emotions and personalities are rarely mentioned by sports commentators. Specifically, some differences between the uses of psychological descriptors (e.g., descriptions of inner emotions and personality characteristics) are examined across ethnic groups. For Asian athletes, their representation as unemotional or reluctantly emotional is highlighted with their mechanical or machine-like performances and training practices. Once Asian athletes are reported in the context of the machine metaphor, even positive descriptions of their sports performances would be directed to negative mechanic images that dehumanize Asian athletes and diminish their achievements (Sabo et al., 1996).

Kim and Cheong (2011) investigated the effect of ethnicity match between athlete endorsers and target audiences in the framework of ethnic self-awareness. According to Forehand and Deshpandé (2001), ethnic self-awareness is a "temporary state during which a person is more sensitive to information related to his or her ethnicity" (pp. 336-7). Once activated, the self-awareness increases message elaboration because the audience tends to relate his or her ethnic aspect to the ethnic aspect of the communicator (Burnkrant & Unnava, 1995) and such increased elaboration tends to intensify audience reaction to the same-ethnicity communicator (Forehand & Deshpandé, 2001). They further emphasized that exposures to ethnic primes — the visual or verbal cues that draw attention to ethnicity — affect ethnic self-awareness by encouraging ethnic processing at the subconscious level. Therefore, these simple cues in athlete endorsement, such as athlete endorsers of color, can activate ethnic self-awareness without directing attention to ethnic information (e.g., ethnic identification), or without the enduring traits or social context (e.g., salience of group membership). Based on ethnic self-awareness, Kim and Cheong (2011) confirmed that athlete endorsers add to the persuasive effects, especially when there is an ethnicity match between athlete endorsers and target audiences. Using the role of ethnicity

match between athlete endorsers and sports viewers in the context of athlete endorsement, this study assumes that both athletes' ethnicities and sports viewers' ethnicities generate a significant impact on sports viewers' perception of brands endorsed by athletes of color and the interaction between the ethnicities of athletes and sports viewers leads sports viewers to perceive athlete-endorsed brands in different ways. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. *Athletes' ethnicities will affect sports viewers' perceptions of brands endorsed by athletes of color.*

H2. *Athletes' ethnicities and sports viewers' ethnicities will jointly affect sports viewers' perceptions of brands endorsed by athletes of color.*

Parasocial Identification

Horton and Wohl (1956) first defined parasocial identification (PSI) as a procedure in which media viewers generate psychological identifications with media characters in their mediated encounters. By examining the importance of social, task, and physical attraction for the development of PSI with favorite media characters, Rubin and McHugh (1987) found that social attraction (e.g., media characters as good friends to media viewers) is a more important motivating factor in developing PSI than physical attraction, while Perse and Rubin (1989) suggested that a higher level of attributional confidence is associated with greater parasocial complexity that is measured by descriptions of favorite and disliked media characters. Beyond various types of interactions between media viewers and media characters, identification is viewed as a key role in developing PSI. Cohen (2001) conceptualized identification as a procedure in which media viewers imagine themselves as media characters and replace their personal identity with media characters' identity. Moreover, the duration of identification is determined by media viewers' cognitive ability to release from the fantasy and return to the reality (Cohen & Perse, 2003).

Media viewers identify with media characters because both groups share certain salient characteristics. The degree of similarity to media characters promotes a desire to resemble them due to certain similarities that lead media viewers to easily recognize similar characteristics of media characters (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Similarity identification emerges to influence media viewers by activating them to vicariously share experiences with media characters or developing their affective bonds with media characters. Moreover, such affective bonds direct media viewers to perceive media characters as more similar to themselves and to incorporate the characteristics of media characters into their own personality and behavioral repertoire (Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). In other words, similarity identification between media viewers and characters affects the tendency to take media characters' perspective and then develop a long-lasting PSI. Schiappa, Allen, and Gregg (2007) found that PSI is shaped based upon media viewers' characteristics and their perceptions of media characters. Media viewers who watch more mass media are more likely to engage their PSI with media characters. Similarly, Tian and Hoffner (2010) found that higher PSI with media characters generates higher identification with media characters, and the role of perceived similarity is important during the process of identification with media characters, ultimately resulting in the development of parasocial bonds. Parasocial interaction processes are more likely to occur when media viewers perceive media characters as more real and attractive, but can be simply switched or modified as media viewers reasonably expect or meet their similar characteristics in other media characters. Thus, there is a replacement available for

parasocial interaction processes once media viewers perceive some homophily with media characters through different communication channels.

In the context of sporting events, Earnhardt and Haridakis (2009) found that sports viewers who report higher levels of fandom are more likely to have parasocial relationships and identify with their favorite athletes. They also confirmed that both fandom and identification with athletes are key predictors of PSI in sporting events. Sun and Wu (2012) found that parasocial relationship with athletes is determined positively by materialism (the elemental trait), interest in sports spectatorship (the situational trait), but negatively by self-esteem (the compound trait). Another study by Pan and Zeng (2018) investigated the role of ethnicity in the development of parasocial interaction between sports viewers and athletes, indicating that sports viewers are more inclined to exhibit higher PSI with athletes who belong to their same ethnic group than those from another ethnic group. Furthermore, they found that the more similar sports viewers are to athletes, the more likely sports viewers are to develop affective bonds with athletes of color. Shan, Chen and Lin (2020) further examined the role of PSI in the relationship between self-influencer congruency and influencer-endorsement outcomes, indicating that perceived endorser motive moderates the effects of self-influencer congruence on influencer-endorsement outcomes through PSI with social influencer.

Applying sports viewers' PSI with athletes of color into the context of athlete endorsement, the current study would not only assume that sports viewers' ethnicities and athletes' ethnicities would yield any individual or joint effects on sports viewers' perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands, but also hypothesize that sports viewers' PSI with athletes mediates such impacts on their perceived brands endorsed by athletes, due to the important role of PSI in how consumers react to brand endorsement (Shan, Chen & Lin, 2020). Thus,

H3. *Sports viewers' PSI with athletes of color will affect their perceptions of brands endorsed by athletes of color.*

As sports viewers' PSI with athletes of color may vary based upon their ethnicities and athletes' ethnicities (Pan & Zeng, 2017), sports viewers' PSI may also interact with their ethnicities and athletes' ethnicities to affect their perceived brands endorsed by athletes. In this vein, it is important to examine how the interaction of sports viewers' PSI with their ethnicities and athletes' ethnicities affects sports viewers' perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands. Thus,

RQ1. *How will sports viewers' parasocial identification with athletes of color, sports viewers' ethnicities and athletes' ethnicities jointly affect their perceptions of brands endorsed by athletes of color?*

METHODS

Experimental Design

This study was performed by a 2 (Athletes' ethnicities: Black versus Asian) by 2 (Sports viewers' ethnicities: Black versus Asian) mixed factorial experiment. The experiment used sports viewers' PSI with Black and Asian athletes as two covariates to examine the roles of sports viewers' ethnicities and athletes' ethnicities in sports viewers' perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands. Specifically, athletes' ethnicities served as a within-subjects factor, whereas sports viewers' ethnicities served as a between-subjects factor in this experimental study. After receiving IRB approval, the experiment was conducted in a computer lab. A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit Black

or Asian participants. A total of 98 participants with 50 Black participants (25 females and 25 males) and 48 Asian participants (24 females and 24 males) were recruited from several communication-related classes at a public university in the Southeastern United States. All participants received a course credit after their participation in this experiment.

Two online sports videos were edited and then used as stimuli. Kobe Bryant and Jeremy Lin were selected in the videos because they were the best basketball athletes of color in their ethnic categories. Based on several sports media reports, Bryant was frequently selected as the greatest basketball player of all time (e.g., Davis, 2020), while Lin was viewed as an icon of Asian basketball player (e.g., Lee, 2017). The lengths of two online videos ranged from three to four minutes. The first video included segments of Bryant's performance, while the second one collected those of Lin's performance. Both videos also included their endorsed brands as their uniforms were covered with brand logos, but they separately demonstrated perfect plays of the two excellent basketball athletes within two ethnic categories: Black versus Asian. The experiment was conducted before Kobe Bryant passed away in 2020.

Manipulation Checks

Ethnic similarity between sports viewers and athletes was used to check the manipulation of experimental stimuli. After watching each online video, the participants rated five statements regarding how similar they felt to the basketball athletes in terms of their culture, ethnicity, and social group, including: (1) The athletes and I share the same ethnic background, (2) The athletes and I belong to the same social group, (3) The athletes and I have the same cultural background, (4) There is a high ethnic similarity between the athletes in the video, and (5) There is a high similarity between me and the athletes in terms of our skin colors. The results found that both Black and Asian viewers reported significantly different levels of ethnic similarity to Kobe Bryant ($t = 28.89$, $df = 96$, $p < .01$) and Jeremy Lin ($t = 5.00$, $df = 96$, $p < .01$) separately, indicating that both stimuli were manipulated successfully.

Measured Variables

Sports viewers' perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands. Three questions were used to look at whether sports viewers would perceive a brand endorsed by Kobe Bryant/Jeremy Lin in a positive way, namely (1) How likely will you be fond of some brands endorsed by Kobe Bryant/Jeremy Lin?, (2) How likely will you recommend some brands endorsed by Kobe Bryant/Jeremy Lin to others? and (3) How likely will some brands endorsed by Kobe Bryant/Jeremy Lin be as good as he is? The participants answered the questions on seven-point scales. Cronbach's α was .80 for Kobe Bryant-endorsed brand ($M = 3.87$, $SD = .89$) and .83 for Jeremy Lin-endorsed brand ($M = 3.45$, $SD = .97$). Similarly, all scores from the seven items were summed and averaged to indicate the participants with higher scores perceived athlete-endorsed brands in a better way.

Parasocial identification was measured by adapting the original 20-item PSI scale developed by Rubin, Perse and Powell (1985). According to Rubin et al., this parasocial identification scale appears to "stem from an active bonding with a person who is perceived as real and similar" (p. 175), rather than from a perceived state of deficiency such as loneliness. However, Rubin, Perse, and Powell's scale was particularly designed to measure news viewers' PSI with newscasters. This study used seven items from the original scale that were most relevant to the measurement of Black/Asian viewers' PSI with Black/Asian athletes. These items were rated on seven-point scales, namely: (1) When I am watching Kobe Bryant/Jeremy Lin, I feel as if I am a part of his team, (2) I feel sorry for Kobe Bryant/Jeremy Lin

when he makes a mistake, (3) I see Kobe Bryant/Jeremy Lin as a natural, down-to-earth person, (4) I look forward to watching Kobe Bryant's/Jeremy Lin's performance on any sports media, (5) If there were a story about Kobe Bryant/Jeremy Lin in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it, (6) I would like to meet Kobe Bryant/Jeremy Lin in person, and (7) I find Kobe Bryant/Jeremy Lin to be attractive. A principal component analysis was used to indicate that all seven items were significantly loaded as PSI for both Bryant ($\alpha = .83$, $M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.03$) and Lin ($\alpha = .90$, $M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.52$). All scores from the seven items were then summed and averaged, where sports viewers with higher scores exhibited higher PSI with athletes of color.

RESULTS

H1 was proposed to examine whether athletes' ethnicities would generate a main effect on sports viewers' perceived brands endorsed by athletes of color. As indicated in Table 1, athletes' ethnicities did yield a significant impact on sports viewers' perceived brands endorsed by athletes (Wilks' Lambda = .84, $F = 17.08$, $p < .001$, Partial Eta² = .16), while sports viewers' ethnicities did not affect their perceived brands endorsed by athletes ($p = .46$). Specifically, sports viewers perceived Black athlete-endorsed brands ($M = 3.87$, $SD = .89$) as more positive than Asian athlete-endorsed brands ($M = 3.45$, $SD = .97$). Therefore, H1 was confirmed.

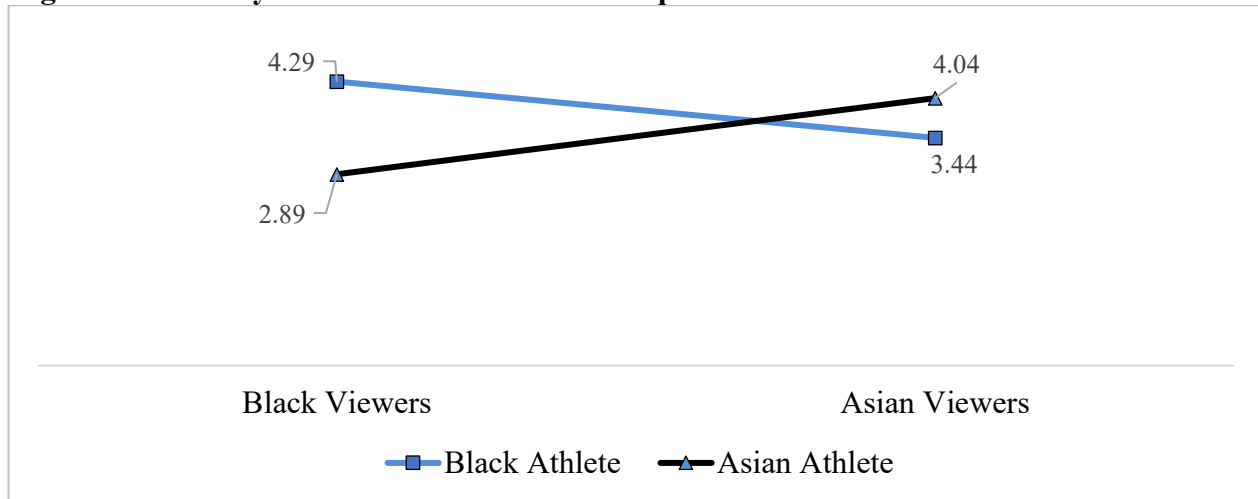
Table 1. Main Effects and Interaction Effects on Perceived Brands Endorsed by Athletes of Color

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial Eta ²
Main Effects				
Within-Subjects Factor: Athletes' Ethnicities	4.34	17.08	<.001	.16
Between-Subjects Factor: Viewers' Ethnicities	.07	.55	.46	.01
Covariate: PSI with Black Athlete	7.33	60.01	<.001	.40
Covariate: PSI with Asian Athlete	3.29	26.97	<.001	.28
Two-way Interaction Effects				
Athletes' Ethnicities *Viewers' Ethnicities	7.09	27.94	<.001	.23
Athletes' Ethnicities *PSI with Black Athlete	.20	.79	.38	.01
Athletes' Ethnicities *PSI with Asian Athlete	9.44	37.21	<.001	.28
Viewers' Ethnicities *PSI with Black Athlete	.08	.67	.42	.007
Viewers' Ethnicities *PSI with Asian Athlete	.05	.41	.52	.004
Three-way Interaction Effects				
Athletes' Ethnicities *Viewers' Ethnicities *PSI with Black Athlete	7.64	30.10	<.001	.25
Athletes' Ethnicities *Viewers' Ethnicities *PSI with Asian Athlete	.001	.003	.96	<.001

H2 examined whether the interaction between sports viewers' ethnicities and athletes' ethnicities emerged to affect sports viewers' perceived brands endorsed by athletes of color. As indicated in Table 1, the results supported H2 that athletes' ethnicities interacted with sports viewers' ethnicities to impact how sports viewers perceived brands endorsed by athletes of color (Wilks' Lambda = .77, $F = 27.94$, $p < .001$, Partial Eta² = .23). Furthermore, as demonstrated in Figure 1, Black viewers showed the most positive perceptions of Black athlete-endorsed brands ($M = 4.29$, $SD = .36$), but the least positive

perceptions of Asian athlete-endorsed brands ($M = 2.89$, $SD = .79$). However, Asian viewers perceived Asian athlete-endorsed brands ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .79$) as more positive than Black athlete-endorsed brands ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.05$).

Figure 1. Two-way Interaction Effects on Perceptions of Athlete-endorsed Brands



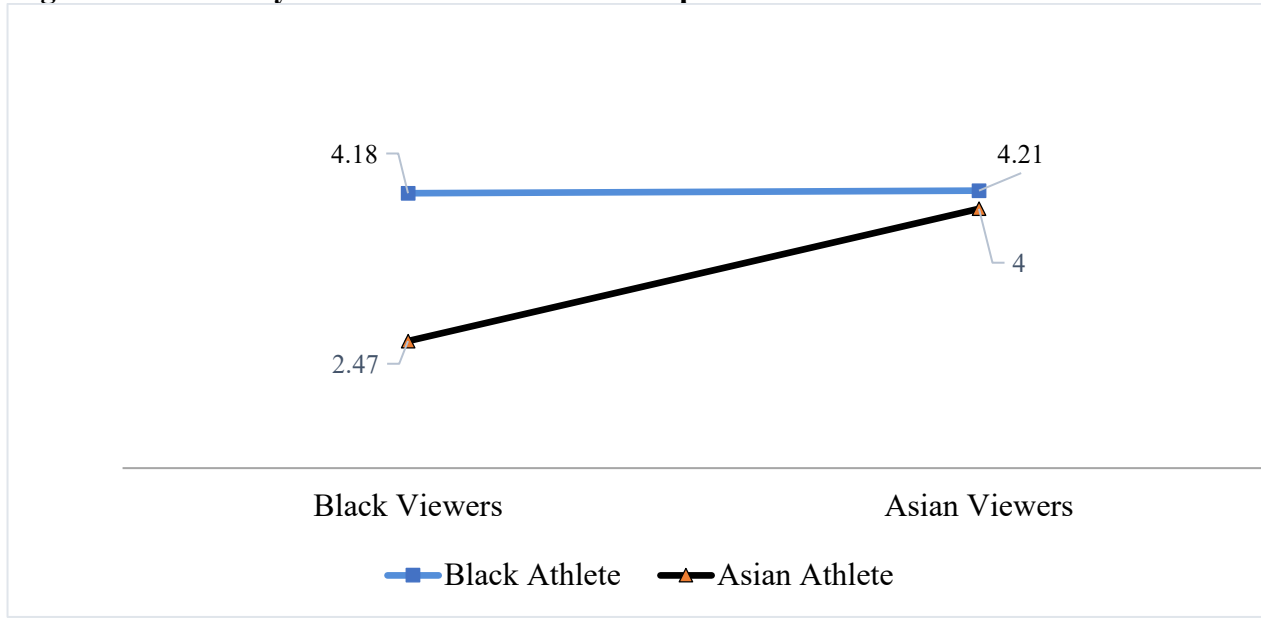
H3 considered sports viewers' PSI with athletes of color as a key covariate to examine whether sports viewers' PSI would generate a significant impact on sports viewers' perceived brands endorsed by athletes. As indicated in Table 1, sports viewers' PSI with both the Black athlete ($F = 60.01$, $p < .001$, $\text{Partial Eta}^2 = .40$) and the Asian athlete ($F = 26.97$, $p < .001$, $\text{Partial Eta}^2 = .28$) did generate main effects on their perception of brands endorsed by athletes of color. Specifically, higher PSI with the Black athlete activated more positive perceptions of Black athlete-endorsed brands ($r = .81$, $p < .001$), while higher PSI with the Asian athlete affected sports viewers to perceive Asian athlete-endorsed brands as more positive ($r = .69$, $p < .001$). Thus, H3 was supported.

RQ1 explored whether the interactions of sports viewers' PSI with their ethnicities and athletes' ethnicities would yield significant influences on their perceived brands endorsed by athletes of color. Regarding two-way interactions, the results showed that athletes' ethnicities only interacted with sports viewers' PSI with the Asian athlete ($F = 37.21$, $p < .001$, $\text{Partial Eta}^2 = .28$), but did not interact with sports viewers' PSI with the Black athlete ($p = .38$) to affect sports viewers' perceived brands endorsed by athletes. Moreover, sports viewers' ethnicities did not interact with their PSI with either Black ($p = .42$) or Asian athletes ($p = .52$). More specifically, regardless of sports viewers' ethnicities, sports viewers' PSI with the Black athlete led sports viewers to more positive perceptions of Black athlete-endorsed brands (from 3.87 to 4.20), but their PSI with the Asian athlete slightly hindered them from perceiving Asian athlete-endorsed brands as more positive (from 3.45 to 3.24).

In terms of three-way interactions, the results revealed that the interaction effect between athletes' ethnicities and sports viewers' ethnicities on sports viewers' perceived athlete-endorsed brands was intervened by sports viewers' PSI with the Black athlete ($F = 30.10$, $p < .001$, $\text{Partial Eta}^2 = .25$), but not their PSI with the Asian athlete ($p = .96$). Figure 2 showed a three-way interaction effect on perceived athlete-endorsed brands. More specifically, the interaction between Asian viewers and the Black athlete intervened by Asian viewers' PSI with the Black athlete activated Asian viewers to perceive Black athlete-endorsed brands as more positive (from 3.44 to 4.21). However, Black viewers' PSI with the

Asian athlete interfered the interaction between Black viewers and the Asian athlete to affect Black viewers to perceive Asian athlete-endorsed brands as less positive (from 2.89 to 2.47). Simply stated, PSI with the Black athlete only activated Asian viewers' positive perceptions of Black athlete-endorsed brands, while PSI with the Asian athlete deteriorated Black viewers' positive perceptions of Asian athlete-endorsed brands.

Figure 2. Three-way Interaction Effects on Perceptions of Athlete-endorsed Brands



Note: Covariates appeared in the value: PSI with Black Athlete = 4.56 and PSI with Asian Athlete = 3.91.

DISCUSSION

Conclusion

This study conducted a mixed factorial experiment to examine how sports viewers of color reacted to athletes of color in terms of their perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands. The results were in line with Sabo et al. (1996), indicating that the role of ethnic similarity or difference between media characters and media viewers affected how media viewers reacted to media characters and media viewers may further transfer their reactions to media characters, which would exert a certain symbolic meaning to media character-endorsed brands. The study confirmed that athletes' ethnicities generated a significant effect on sports viewers' perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands, but did not find any significant influence of sports viewers' ethnicities on their perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands. The reason why sports viewers' ethnicities did not affect their perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands may be that the portrayals of both athletes' performances were very positive and some sports viewers may also enjoy the performance of the other athlete who did not share the same ethnic background. Therefore, the difference in the perceptions of brands endorsed by the two athletes might not be very significant, given that Asian viewers still perceived Black athlete-endorsed brands as positive, only as less positive than how they perceived Asian athlete-endorsed brands.

Although sports viewers' ethnicities did not affect how sports viewers perceived athlete-endorsed brands, sports viewers' ethnicities significantly interacted with athletes' ethnicities to influence sports viewers' perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands. In compliance with previous studies on ethnicity

match (Forehand & Deshpandé, 2001; Kim & Cheong, 2011), target audiences perceived athlete endorsers as more positive when both belonged to the same ethnic category. The interaction between sports viewers' ethnicities and athletes' ethnicities also emerged in the context of athlete endorsement, indicating that Black athlete-endorsed brands were alleged as more positive by Black viewers, and Asian athlete-endorsed brands were reported as more positive by Asian viewers. Simply stated, sports viewers' ethnicities would not exert any individual influence on Asian viewers' perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands, but these viewers would perceive athlete-endorsed brands in a more positive way when sports viewers and athletes shared the same ethnicity.

Sports viewers' PSI with athletes of color emerged as a key role in their perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands. This study extended the line of previous research that media viewers' PSI with media characters yielded some main, interactive, moderating, and mediating effects on media viewers' behavioral and perceptive outcomes in various contexts (Pan & Zeng, 2018; Shan et al., 2020). It further confirmed that sports viewers' PSI with athletes of color not only affected their perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands, but also intervened in the interaction between their ethnicities and athletes' ethnicities. Based upon ethnic similarities between sports viewers and athletes, sports viewers were more likely to parasocially interact with athletes who belonged to their ethnic categories and consequently generate some significant impact on their perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands. That is, PSI with athletes activated sports viewers to display more positive perceptions of brands endorsed by athletes whose ethnic categories were the same as sports viewers'— The higher PSI with Black athletes, the more positive perceptions of Black athlete-endorsed brands; The higher PSI with Asian athletes, the more positive perceptions of Asian athlete-endorsed brands.

Sports viewers' PSI with different athletes also yielded some interaction effects with their ethnicities and athletes' ethnicities on their perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands at different levels. Specifically, Asian viewers reported more positive perceptions of Black athlete-endorsed brands via their PSI with Black athletes, while Black viewers showed more negative perceptions of Asian athlete-endorsed brands via their PSI with Asian athletes. It was confirmed that sports viewers' PSI with athletes of color would covariate the interaction between sports viewers' ethnicities and athletes' ethnicities in different ways. Asian viewers were more open to parasocial interactions with Black athletes to better their perceptions of Black athlete-endorsed brands. However, Black viewers may weaken their positive perceptions of Asian athlete-endorsed brands, given that they were less likely to parasocially interact with Asian athletes. Indeed, Black athletes were frequently praised for their athleticism and physicality, intelligence and leadership in the games (Denham et al., 2002), so that Asian viewers may be more likely to parasocially connect with Black athletes and then generate a higher PSI with Black athletes to improve their perceptions of Black athlete-endorsed brands. Therefore, although previous studies found the moderating and mediating roles of PSI with media characters in media viewers' behavioral and perceptive outcomes, the moderating and mediating effects of PSI still varied based upon demographic similarities or affective connections between media viewers and media characters (e.g., gender, age and ethnicity).

Implications and Limitations

Several practical implications emerged from this study for brand managers and marketers. First, it was confirmed that sports viewers positively perceived brands endorsed by athletes who belonged to their ethnic categories. Ethnic similarities between sports viewers and athletes can be used to improve

sports viewers' perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands. When primary consumers are targeted, brand managers and marketers should consider some ethnicity match between sports viewers and athlete endorsers in order to assist sports viewers to positively perceive athlete-endorsed brands. Second, Black and Asian viewers were very different when they perceived brands endorsed by athletes who were not in their ethnic categories. Brand managers and marketers might consider that certain athletes of color were most outstanding in certain sports, and sports viewers could have their own bias of certain ethnicity when perceiving brands endorsed by some athletes of color. When sports viewers found that some athletes who belonged to another ethnic category were not the best in certain sports, they may perceive athlete-endorsed brands as less positive. Third, the selection of suitable athletes to be brand endorsers was important for successful athlete endorsement. Regardless of ethnic difference between sports viewers and athletes, sports viewers were more inclined to interact with outstanding athletes, given that sports viewers would be affected to generate positive perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands via their PSI with outstanding athletes.

Some limitations also existed as the study only examined the impact of ethnic difference. First, the study examined similarity identification, but failed to consider the importance of wishful identification in parasocial interactions. According to Hoffner and Buchanan (2005), wishful identification occurs where media viewers desire to emulate media characters, either in general terms (e.g., role model for future action, or identity development) or in specific terms (e.g., particular behavior copying). As Bryant and Lin, two of the most skillful and famous basketball athletes in their ethnic groups, were used in the stimuli, the impact of role modeling or behavior copying might be generated on sports viewers to develop their own PSI with athletes of color. Second, the stimuli were only composed of Bryant's and Lin's best professional performances, but did not include their personal stories or non-athletic representations, which may indirectly affect sports viewers' cognitive processing of athletes in their parasocial interactions. Third, Bryant and Lin may not be comparable in terms of their basketball careers and athletic experiences. In fact, Bryant was a first-ballot Hall of Famer and one of the most iconic athletes in NBA history. However, Lin was covered with low expectations by mass media, making his success "miraculous" and "warranting" in media coverage (Park, 2015). Thus, if more basketball athletes can be used in the stimuli, the results of this study can be more applicable to different sports contexts. Finally, the study may include other variables, such as gender difference (e.g., female athletes), sports types (e.g., soccer, tennis, and golf) or other cross culture-related scales, given that these variables could also affect sports viewers' PSI with athletes of color and then affect their perceptions of athlete-endorsed brands.

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