# Exploring the Impact of Athlete Endorser with Controversial Images on Advertising Effectiveness: The Moderating Effect of Social Cause Involvement

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## Abstract

The use of Colin Kaepernick as a spokesperson in commemorating Nike's "Just do it" anniversary was considered atypical which followed with mixed opinions and provoked polarized responses. Accordingly, the current study attempts to better understand how consumers respond to Nike's advertising featuring Colin Kaepernick with controversial images. This study demonstrated that attitudes toward the endorser become the foundation of consumer's attitudinal and behavioral responses. Additionally, the study confirms the moderating role of social cause involvement in the relationship between attitudes toward endorser and advertising. Although there exists speculation that controversial endorsers may potentially deteriorate the overall marketing efforts, findings in this study manifest and provide insight into the possibility of utilizing a controversial spokesperson to yield positive outcomes.

*Keywords: Endorsement effectiveness; social cause involvement; controversial endorser; Colin Kaepernick; Meaning Transfer Model*

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# 1. Introduction

With the belief that celebrity endorsers have the ability to positively influence consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions, they have become a popular communication strategy used in advertisements. However, given that negative information about the celebrity may lead to putting the endorsed brand at risk (Erdogan & Baker, 2000; White, Goddard, & Wilbur, 2009), it is also recognized as a double-edged sword. As such, businesses have focused on selecting of the high-character celebrity. Similarly, in academia, endorsers' personal attributes have been the focal point of investigation. Models of source credibility (Lafferty, Goldsmith, & Newell, 2002) and source attractiveness (Kamins, 1990) have been developed. Moreover, extending beyond endorser's credibility and attractiveness, the meaning associated with an endorser has been noted as one of the most important criteria (Batra & Homer, 2004; Erodgan, Baker, & Tagg, 2001). Known as the meaning transfer model (MTM), McCracken (1989) emphasized that the endorsement process and outcome are dependent upon the meaning or significance that the celebrity communicates, which subsequently transfers to the endorsed product or brand.

In recent years, Colin Kaepernick became both a controversial figure and a cultural icon as a result of kneeling while the national anthem was being played before the 2016 National Football League (NFL) game. Kaepernick repeatedly claimed that his intention is to promote racially sensitive activism, yet it was interpreted otherwise. Not only did Kaepernick experience verbal condemnation from current and former NFL players (Tennery, 2016), but also fans and the media labeled him as anti-American (Peter, 2016) and unpatriotic (Park, Park, & Billings, 2019). Despite existing backlash towards Kaepernick's action, Nike took a rather bold move and featured him in celebrating its 30th "Just do it" anniversary. Such a decision can be regarded as atypical and raised a question of the long-held conventional wisdom in selecting the right endorser. The tagline of the campaign read, "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything." The message supposedly focused on encouraging people to dream fearlessly as there was no indication of Nike taking a particular position on a social issue. However, with the mere presence of Colin Kaepernick in the advertisement, Nike cleverly and loosely alluded the audience, creating a social conscious image of the brand. The aftermath of the campaign followed with mixed opinions and caused an immediate public stir. On one hand, Nike was highly criticized for exploiting a sociopolitical issue in promoting their brand. On the other, Nike customers were found more receptive to the idea of Nike taking a stand on the social cause (Marzilli, 2018).

In marketing and advertising literature, there exists a plethora of research on endorsement effectiveness. Nevertheless, the phenomenon found in Nike's case, the effect of using a rather controversial figure at present, cannot be fully explained. Campbell and Warren (2012) found that compared to positive associations, negativity associated with an endorser is more easily transferable to a brand, while Amos, Holmes, and Strutton (2008) concluded that negative information attached to an endorser can have a

significant impact on consumer perceptions. Kim, Kang, and Kim (2020) investigated the role of a controversial endorser and its effect on brand evaluations and found that both positive and negative meanings coexist. Thus, although there exists speculation that controversial endorsers may be perceived in a negative light, potentially deteriorating overall marketing efforts, this study suggested that controversy with a celebrity is not always necessarily negative. This current study attempts to empirically examine Nike's case to provide a new and extended perspective on existing celebrity effectiveness literature. It is reasonable to expect that how individuals perceive the cultural and social significance of the endorser will be considered in forming attitudes toward the celebrity. Further, since the majority of academic endeavors have explored celebrity endorsers' direct influence, while empirical works of the moderating effect are still scarce, it is deemed appropriate and important to examine the moderating effect of social cause involvement in particular. In a sense that consumers process information differently depending on the level of involvement (Chakravarti & Janiszewski, 2003; Nkwocha et al., 2005), within the context of cause-related marketing, several studies have shown that social cause involvement positively moderates its influence on consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions (Grau & Folse, 2007; Hajjat, 2003; Lafferty, 1996; Landreth & Garretson, 2007).

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine how attitudes toward endorser influence attitudes toward advertising, attitudes toward brand, purchase intention, and social cause behavioral intention. More specifically, a structural model delineating the relationships among the aforementioned variables was developed and tested (see Figure 1). This study also examined whether the model reveals different patterns across the level of social cause involvement. Having knowledge of the relations among the constructs can be quite valuable as the findings of this study has the potential to provide a new and extended perspective on existing endorsement effectiveness and develop effective marketing and communication strategies.

## 2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

### 2.1 Meaning Transfer Model and Celebrity Endorsement Effectiveness

In academia, meaning associated with a spokesperson has been noted as one of the most important criteria for the persuasive power of celebrities (Batra & Homer, 2004; Erdogan, Baker, & Tagg, 2001), known as the meaning transfer model (MTM; McCracken, 1989). The basic premise of the MTM is that celebrities are public figures who possess a variety of meanings, wherein consumers through experience identify with such symbolic properties that has been created for, and by the celebrity (McCracken, 1989). Accordingly, the model suggests that the effectiveness of the celebrity is dependent upon the meanings that is brought into the endorsement process, which subsequently transfers to the respective product or brand (McCracken, 1989). Langmeyer and Walker (1991) showed that the celebrity's symbolic meanings were more likely to transfer to the endorsed product than meaning transferring to a product within a non-endorsed context.

In addition, Batra and Homer (2004) examined the celebrity's meaning transfer effects and supported that that celebrity's personality traits transfer from the spokesperson to the endorsed brand. More recently, by integrating the tenets of metaphor theory in marketing, Roy (2018) added a new perspective and validated the MTM model. It was concluded that celebrity's meaning can be explained through metaphors, and the metaphor would be transferred to the brand.

As a legitimate form of marketing and communication strategy, celebrity endorsements have endured popularity. Scholars from various disciplines have investigated a wide range of topics related to celebrity endorsement. Within the sport management field, much effort has been dedicated towards understanding the complex nature of athlete endorsement. Celebrity athlete endorser is defined as someone either a current or a former athlete who could utilize his/her name as a form of public recognition to recommend a certain product or service in an advertising (Costanzo & Goodmight, 2005; Royne, Spears, & Hsu, 2003).

In line with the rise of athlete endorsement as a prevalent form of marketing communication, in academia, scholars have explored the persuasive power of celebrities. Generally, athlete endorsement has been proven to be quite effective. Numerous studies found a direct and positive effect of endorser on consumer's cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Burton, Farrelly, & Quester, 2000; Carrillat, O'Rourke, & Plourde, 2019; Knoll & Matthes, 2017). Specifically, given that athlete endorsers align naturally with sport-related brands, their appearance in advertising compared to non-athletes could generate anticipated advertising effectiveness. In fact, in terms of attitudes toward the advertisement and also toward the endorsed brand or product, athlete endorsement was found more effective than non-athlete endorsement when the product is sports-related (Koernig & Boyd, 2009; Lee & Koo, 2015).

Despite the fact that athlete endorsers are capable of bringing about positive results, athlete endorsement is recognized as a double-edged sword. When negative information is attached to an endorser, it could potentially put the endorsed brand at risk (Erdogan & Baker, 2000; White, Goddard, & Wilbur, 2009). Campbell and Warren (2012) found that compared to positive associations, negativity associated with an endorser is more easily transferable to a brand, while Amos, Holmes, and Strutton (2008) concluded that negative information attached to an endorser can have a significant impact on consumer perceptions. Interestingly, empirical research in the sport management context suggests otherwise. For instance, Lee, Kwak, and Braunstein-Minkove (2016) found that due to strong fan identification serving as a mechanism, consumers suppress their negative moral emotions and evaluation of the endorsed brand shows only limited aspects of consumers' psychological response to the scandal. In a similar vein, most recently, Kim, Kang, and Kim (2020) investigated the role of a controversial endorser (Colin Kaepernick) and its effect on brand evaluations and found that both positive and negative meanings coexist. This type of athlete endorser can also be differently perceived in a particular demographic segment (Burton et al., 2000). Thus, although there exists speculation

that controversial endorsers may be perceived in a negative light, potentially deteriorating overall marketing efforts, this study manifested that controversy does not always lead to negativity.

In recent years, Colin Kaepernick emerged as both a controversial figure and a cultural icon. Although consumers hold conflicting attitudes toward Kaepernick, from a marketing standpoint he is marketable in a sense that he portrays a particular meaning, perhaps the reason Nike intentionally used him to represent the brand. Known as the meaning transfer model, McCracken (1989) emphasized that the endorsement process and outcome are dependent upon the meaning or significance that the celebrity communicates. Further, the meaning associated with an endorser has also been noted as one of the most important criteria in selecting the right endorser (Batra & Homer, 2004; Erodgan, Baker, & Tagg, 2001). As empirically supported in Kim, Kang, and Kim (2020) study, a controversial endorser conveys both positive and negative meanings, while the overwhelming majority of cognitions were positive associations. Additionally, Nike is considered as a controversial brand in some occasion. Featuring Colin Kaepernic in the campaign might diminish the controversial image, and draw consumers' attention to the brand instead of spokes person. Author should address this issue more clearly.

Collectively, extant literature suggests somewhat contradictory perspectives that prompt further investigation, particularly concerning a controversial endorser. Applying the notion that individuals have a tendency to maintain cognitive consistency to achieve a balanced psychological state (Heider, 1946), it is conceivable that if a consumer displays a favorable attitude toward a celebrity, individual's responses toward a brand is likely to be positive to ensure balanced cognitive links among oneself, celebrity, and brand. Thus, building on the MTM and previous literature about celebrity endorsement effects, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Attitudes toward the endorser will be positively associated with attitudes toward advertising.

H2: Attitudes toward the endorser will be positively associated with attitudes toward the advertised brand.

H3: Attitudes toward the endorser will be positively associated with the consumer's social cause intention.

### 2.2 Attitudinal and Behavioral Impact of Advertising

In academia, the attitude construct has received a considerable amount of attention. As a key variable in predicting consumers' behavior (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989), attitudes toward advertising can be defined as "a predisposition to respond in a favourable or unfavourable manner to a particular advertising stimulus during a particular exposure occasion" (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989, p. 49). In general, attitudes include two components, namely, cognition and affection, which denote thinking and feelings respectively (Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999).

Given that one's predisposition toward an object can subsequently affect his/her attitude toward another object with which it is associated

(Hoyer & MacInnis, 1997), previous studies examined how it affects consumer's attitudes toward the brand and purchase intention. Shimp (1981) highlighted the importance between consumers' attitudes towards advertising and attitudes toward the brand. Speck and Elliott (1997) supported this early work and showed that in the case of negative attitudes toward advertising, consumers tend to have negative attitudes toward the advertised brand. The relationship between the two constructs has also been empirically confirmed in the sport management context. Lee et al. (2016) found that consumer's evaluation of golf-product advertising directly affected their brand attitude. More recently, Gaber, Wright, and Kooli (2019) explored and expanded to social media context and confirmed that favorable attitudes toward advertising can be effective in enhancing consumer's relationships with the brand.In particular, Carrillat al. (2019) showed that consumers tend to have positive attitudes toward a luxury fashion when using a negative publicized celebrity endorser is consistent with the brand's positing strategy.

In prior research, rigorous evidence of a positive association between consumers' advertising attitudes and behavior intentions exist. In general terms, behavioral intention is one's probability of performing a behavior. More specifically, purchase intention can be defined as an individual's conscious plan to exert effort to purchase a brand (Spears & Singh, 2004). Kim and Han (2014) used purchase intention to identify the final purpose of transmitting an advertisement, while Li, Daugherty, and Biocca (2002) used the construct to assess advertising impact. Further, Goldsmith,

Lafferty, and Newell (2000) manifested that, regardless of the consumers' brand familiarity, consumers' attitudes toward advertising could directly affect their purchase intentions. Based on the proposition that human behavior is guided by attitudes, the majority of prior studies focused primarily on the linkage between Aad and purchase intention. Such a premise, however, suggests that advertising attitude can serve as a predictor beyond the product purchase context. Although not directly applicable, within the context of cause-related marketing and/or in the non-profit sector, cause participation intentions have been examined (e.g., de los Salmones & Dominguez, 2016; Wheeler, 2009). In the same vein, social cause behavior intention can be understood as an individual's conscious plan to exert effort to support a social cause, in our case, racial equality. Extending these lines of thoughts and on the basis of the preceding discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

> H4: Attitudes toward advertising will positively influence attitudes toward the advertised brand.

> H5: Attitudes toward advertising will positively affect the consumer's purchase intention.

> H6: Attitudes toward advertising will positively affect the consumer's social cause intention.

### 2.3 Brand Attitude and Purchase Intention

An extensive amount of empirical evidence supports that there is a significant influence of brand attitude on purchase intention (Batra &

Ray, 1986; Phelps & Hoy, 1996; Spears & Singh, 2004). Within the context of advertising effectiveness, brand attitude is identified as an antecedent affecting the purchase intention (MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986). Given that attitudes toward the brand are commonly conceptualized as an individual's evaluation of the brand, which presumably energizes and directs behavior, it has been considered useful in predicting consumer behavior. In fact, the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) suggest that purchase intention is an outcome of the attitude one holds about the brand. In line with the TRA, Summers, Belleau, and Xu (2006) found that when the attitude is favorable, it leads to higher purchase intention and confirmed its important role in affecting consumer purchase intention. Based on these discussions, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> H7: Attitudes toward the advertised brand will positively affect the consumer's purchase intentions.

### 2.4 Social Cause Behavior and Purchase Intention

The relationship between social cause behavior and brand behavior has been widely observed. Generally, extant literature suggests a positive effect of cause involvement on attitudes toward advertisement and brand, and purchase intentions (Broderick, Jogi, & Garry, 2003; Patel, Gadhavi, & Shukla, 2017). Particularly the consumer's level of cause involvement significantly affects advertising effectiveness, such that it determines the degree of consumers' attention to the advertising message (Greenwald & Leavitt, 1984). Likewise, Gill, Grossbart, and Laczniak(1988) found that high involvement positively affects the

consumers' evaluations on advertising elements. Not only does the level of involvement enhance the consumer's perceived message believability (O'Cass & Griffin, 2006), but also awareness, and attitudes toward a cause-related marketing campaign (Broderick, Jogi, & Garry, 2003).

Further, when consumers are more concerned about a cause, they are more likely to involve in the cause. The individuals more involved in a social cause tend to be more interested in partaking in helping the cause. Specifically, their behavioral intention toward the cause can trigger individuals' behavioral intentions toward the brand supporting the cause (Dickson, 2000). Extending these lines of thoughts and based on extant literature, it is reasonable to construct and necessary to examine the link between social cause behavioral intention and brand purchase intention.

> H8: Social cause intention will be positively associated with purchase intention toward the brand.

### 2.5 Moderating Role of Social Cause Involvement

Recognized as an important construct to explain consumer behavior, involvement has been widely studied in various contexts. While there is no universally agreed upon definition of involvement, it has been generally conceptualized as personal relevance or importance (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). Applying this notion to the social cause context, this study regards social cause involvement as the degree to which individuals find the cause to be personally relevant. Personal relevance could be an outcome of past experiences with a cause, values, needs, or features of the individual's self-concept (Grau &

Folse, 2007).

In general, consumers show a more positive attitude when they perceive personal relevance or importance (Lafferty, 1996). Scholars have suggested that depending on the individual's level of involvement, the strength or form of the relationship can be varied. Interestingly, however, prior research shows mixed results. For instance, de los Salmones and Dominguez (2016) investigated whether social cause involvement can explain the differences in the valuation and effects of the celebrity endorsement strategy. The study results indicated that subjects with high involvement were not influenced by the celebrity endorsement strategy whereas the behaviors of the low involved subjects were significantly affected by the advertisement with celebrities. On the other hand, in a study examining the effects of cause involvement on various attitude formation and behavioral responses, Patel, Gadhavi, and Shukla (2017) demonstrated that attitude formation and purchase intention link is more explained when individuals are more involved with the cause. On a related note, Grau and Folse (2007) discovered that consumers are more attracted to cause-related marketing campaigns when they find the cause to be relevant.

In addition, the literature has emphasized the moderating role of social cause involvement within the cause-related marketing context (Bigné-Alcañiz et al., 2010; Landreth & Garretson, 2007). In their study, Bigné-Alcañiz et al. manifested that the relationship between consumer-company (C-C) identification and consumers' responses to a company were influenced by their cause involvement. Specifically, when consumers highly involved in a social cause, C-C identification significantly increased their purchase intentions. However, when they had low involvement, C-C-identification positively influenced their support to a non-profit organization. Such findings entail that social cause involvement affects and extends to individuals' intention to participate or support a social cause. It also implies a conclusion that the influence of involvement can vary by situations and with new marketing tactics developed, consumer research on the subject of involvement needs continuous investigation. Hence, based on the nature of involvement and extant research, it is expected that consumer's social cause involvement may moderate the celebrity endorsement effects, which leads to the following hypothesis:

> H9: Social cause involvement will moderate relationships among research constructs in the conceptual model.

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Participants and Procedure

Data were collected using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which has higher representativeness of the population than samples of college students or online panels (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Participants were instructed to take the survey only once and was limited to those who were over 18 years old. To encourage participation and also as a token of appreciation, respondents received $.50 incentive for completing the survey. Initially, 305 individuals were recruited. Upon eliminating 41 surveys failing to meet the aforementioned criteria, a total of 264 surveys were retained for data analysis. The participants were mostly White (72.0%) and male

(56.8%). The majority of the participants also reported having a bachelor's degree or higher (63.3%), while ages ranging between 21 and 40 represented 73.9% of participants.

Before completing the survey, participants were explained the purpose of the study and asked their consent to participate in the survey. First asked to answer questions about their at-

titudes toward Colin Kaepernick supporting a social cause. Thereafter, prior to responding to subsequent questions, they watched the Nike commercial featuring Colin Kaepernick. The survey questionnaire contained items that corresponded with research variables identified in this study, including several demographic measures.

*3.2 Measurement*

**Table 1** *Sample Characteristics*

|  |  | Total Frequency (%) |
| --- | --- | --- |
| N |  | 264(100.0) |
| Sex |  |  |
|  | Female | 114(43.2) |
|  | Male | 150(56.8) |
| Age |  |  |
|  | >= 20 | 6(2.3) |
|  | 21-30 | 109(41.3) |
|  | 31-40 | 86(32.6) |
|  | 41-50 | 34(12.9) |
|  | 51-60 | 22(8.3) |
|  | 60< | 7(2.7) |
| Ethnicity |  |  |
|  | Black/African American | 279(10.2) |
|  | White/Caucasian | 190(72.0) |
|  | Hispanic | 16(6.1) |
|  | Asian or Pacific Islander | 20(7.6) |
|  | Native American | 7(2.7) |
|  | Other | 4(1.5) |
| Education |  |  |
|  | High School Grad | 26(9.8) |
|  | Some College | 69(26.1) |
|  | College Grad | 127(48.1) |
|  | Post Grad | 40(15.2) |
|  | Other | 2(.8) |

The survey was composed of five major sections: (1) behavior intention toward social cause, (2) attitudes toward endorser, (3) consumer attitudinal responses to advertising and brand, (4) purchase intention, and (5) social cause involvement (see Table 2).

Adopted from Silvera and Austad (2004), both attitudes toward endorser (4 items) and the attitudes toward advertisement (3 items) were measured on a 7-point semantic differential scale. Similarly, brand attitudes (unappealing/appealing; unpleasant/pleasant; unattractive/attractive; uninteresting/interesting) and purchase intention (unlikely/likely; improbable/probable; uncertain/certain; definitely not/definitely) were measured using four items on a 7-point semantic differential scale developed by Bruner (1998) and Bearden, Lichtenstein, and Teel (1984), respectively. Four 7-point Likert scale items assessed the participants' behavioral support for racial equality Nowak and Washburn (2000) from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). For social cause involvement, three items on a 7-point semantic differential scale were adopted from Mittal (1995) to measure the participants' involvement with a social cause. Specifically, the following question included "The racial equality movement is ..." To determine the level of social cause involvement, the median score of cause involvement was used to group all participants for further analysis. The level of social cause involvement for each participant was then recoded as 1 (high involvement) and 0 (low involvement).

## 3.3 Data Analyses and Results

A two-step approach was adopted to test the hypothesized relationships in the proposed research model and measurement scale. First, a measurement model was tested to denote the conceptual distinctions among latent variables and to establish construct validity. Second, a structural model was tested to examine the overall model, including the relationships among research variables. Anderson and Gerbing (1988) noted that the two-step approach allows researchers to gain a proper assessment of construct and nomological validity by separately estimating the measurement model prior to the estimation of the structural model. Thus, the properties of the measurement model and the structural model were tested separately. Following guidelines from Preacher and Hayes (2008) on multiple mediation models, we used bootstrapping procedures to examine the total effects containing both the direct and indirect effects of variables in the model. In the bootstrapping procedures, the path coefficients, standard errors, 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals were produced with 5000 times re-sampled data (Cheung, 2007). The Sobel test (Sobel, 1982) was employed to calculate the indirect effects in the model. Lastly, multi-group analysis was performed to discover any moderating effects. Before conducting the multi-group path analysis, the configural, metric, and scalar invariance tests of the model were conducted to examine whether the factor structure of the model is consistent across social cause involvement: High and Low involvement. After confirming the prerequisites for a multi-group path analysis, group differences in the path coefficients of latent variables were

estimated by using the specification of cross-group equality constraints (Ho, 2006). Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted using analysis of moment structure 24 with the maximum likelihood method of estimation.

### 3.4 Measurement Model

To verify the appropriateness of measurement models for the current study, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed. The data met the linearity assumption, and severe multicollinearity was not detected. The measurement model was assessed using various fit indices and cutoff criteria recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999): Comparative Fit Index (CFI) > .95, Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) > .95, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) < .08, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) < .06. The CFA results revealed that the five-factor model fits well with the sample data (S-B $\chi^2$/df = 377.45/157 = 2.40, CFI = .97, TLI = .97, SRMR = .05, RMSEA = .07).

**Table 2** *Measurement Model*

| Factors and Items | $\Lambda$ | AVE | CR |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Attitude toward Endorser* | | *0.91* | *0.97* |
| Bad – Good | .96 | | |
| Not likeable – Likeable | .87 | | |
| Unpleasant – Pleasant | .97 | | |
| Unattractive – Attractive | .96 | | |
| *Attitude toward Advertising* | | *0.95* | *0.98* |
| Not likeable – Likeable | .95 | | |
| Unpleasant – Pleasant | .95 | | |
| Uninteresting – Interesting | .92 | | |
| *Attitude toward Brand* | | *0.94* | *0.99* |
| Unappealing – Appealing | .89 | | |
| Unpleasant – Pleasant | .93 | | |
| Unattractive – Attractive | .94 | | |
| Uninteresting – Interesting | .95 | | |
| *Purchase Intention* | | *0.89* | *0.97* |
| Unlikely / likely | .97 | | |
| Improbable / probable | .96 | | |
| Uncertain / certain | .90 | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Definitely not / definitely | .95 | |
| *Social Cause Intention* | | 0.94    0.98 |
| It is very likely that in the future I will donate time to the racial equality movement. | .93 | |
| It is very likely that in the future I will donate money to the racial equality movement. | .93 | |
| It is very likely that in the future I will tell my friends and families to donate time to the racial equality movement. | .96 | |
| It is very likely that in the future I will tell my friends and families to donate money to the racial equality movement. | .95 | |

*Note.* Average variance extracted (AVE), Construct reliability (CR)

As shown in Table 2, all factor loadings were high ranged from .87 to .97. All reliability coefficients were larger than .70 (ranging from .97 to 99). The average variance extracted (AVE) estimates for each construct ranged from .89 to .95, indicating that the amount of variance explained by the constructs was greater than the variance explained by measurement error (Hair et al., 2010). In addition, the square roots of AVE values for all constructs were larger than the corresponding inter-construct correlations (Table 3), supporting the discriminant validity of the measurement platform. Based on the overall results of the CFAs, it is deemed that the measurement model was acceptable with good model fitness. The analysis also demonstrated strong evidence of reliability and validity in the scale.

**Table 3** *Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD), Correlations, and Squared Roots of AVE*

| Construct | *M* | *SD* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Attitude toward Endorser | 4.68 | 2.01 | **.95** | | | | |
| 2. Advertising attitude | 5.58 | 1.59 | .61 | **.97** | | | |
| 3. Brand Attitude | 5.34 | 1.60 | .56 | .86 | **.97** | | |
| 4. Purchase Intention | 5.38 | 1.82 | .50 | .61 | .77 | **.94** | |
| 5. Social Cause Intention | 4.22 | 1.87 | .59 | .48 | .48 | .62 | **.97** |

*Note.* The square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (AVEs) for each construct appear in boldface on the diagonal of the correlation matrix.

*3.5 Structural Model*

A structural equation model (SEM) analysis was conducted to test the overall research model and hypothesized relationships among the research constructs. The goodness-of-fit indices of the structural model fitted well with the total data (S-B $\chi2$/df = 553.39/282 = 1.96, CFI = .95, TLI = .94, SRMR = .06, RMSEA = .06). All hypothesized paths except the path of Endorser Attitude → Brand Attitude were significant and in expected directions: Endorser Attitude → Ad Attitude ($\beta$ = .62, $p$ < .000), Endorser Attitude →Social Behavior Intention ($\beta$ = .54, $p$ < .000), Ad Attitude →Brand Attitude ($\beta$ = .83, $p$ < .000), Ad Attitude → Purchase Intention ($\beta$ = .31, $p$ < .01), Ad Attitude → Social Behavior Intention ($\beta$ = .26, SE = .06), Brand Attitude → Purchase Intention ($\beta$ = .98, $p$ < .000), and Social Behavior Intention → Purchase Intention ($\beta$ = .15, $p$ < .01). However, the path of Endorser Attitude → Brand Attitude was not statistically significant ($\beta$ = .07, $p$ = n.s.).

Furthermore, all indirect effects of endorser attitude were significant. The squared multiple correlations demonstrated that endorser attitude explained 29.7% of ad attitudes in a direct relationship. The variance of brand attitude (73.5%), purchase intention (63.5%), and social cause behavior intention (45.5%) were explained in the model.

3.5.1 Hypotheses Testing for Low Social Cause Involvement Group

For this study, respondents were divided into two different groups regarding their involvement in a social cause: High and low social cause groups. For each involvement group, a path analysis using SEM was employed to examine the research hypotheses.

The SEM results revealed that all hypothesized paths except the path of endorser attitudes-brand attitudes were significant and in expected directions supporting: Attitudes to endorser → Ad Attitude ($\beta$ = .49, $p$ < .000: H1 supported), Attitudes toward endorser → Social behavior intention ($\beta$ = .43, $p$ < .000: H3 supported), Ad attitudes → Brand attitudes ($\beta$ = .83, $p$ < .000: H4 supported), Ad attitudes → Purchase intention ($\beta$ = .34, $p$ < .01: H5 supported), Ad attitudes → Social behavior intention ($\beta$ = .23, $p$ < .05: H6 supported), Brand attitudes → Purchase intention ($\beta$ = .99, $p$ < .000: H7 supported), and Social behavior intention → Purchase intention ($\beta$ = .20, $p$ < .01: H8 supported). As displayed in Table 4, confidence intervals indicate the significance of the relationship between the constructs, which do not contain zero between upper and lower bound distribution estimates. However, the following paths were not statistically significant: Attitudes to endorser → Brand Attitudes ($\beta$ = -.00, n.s.: H2 not supported). Using the bootstrapping technique, the indirect effects of attitudes toward endorser on brand attitudes, purchase intention, and social behavior intention through Ad attitudes were tested. As shown in Table 4, all indirect effects of attitudes toward endorser were significant.

**Table 4** *Hypothesized Structural Model (Low Involvement Group)*

| | Bootstrap Estimate | | 95% Confidence Interval Bias-corrected | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hypothesis: Path | B | SE | Lower | Upper |
| H1: Endorser Attitude → Ad Attitude | .489*** | .077 | .286 | .607 |
| H2: Endorser Attitude → Brand Attitude | -.004 | .082 | -.188 | .144 |
| H3: Endorser Attitude → Social Cause Intention | .429*** | .084 | .265 | .581 |
| H4: Ad Attitude → Brand Attitude | .828*** | .060 | .711 | .949 |
| H5: Ad Attitude → Purchase Intention | .338** | .122 | -.655 | -.098 |
| H6: Ad Attitude → Social Cause Intention | .232* | .094 | .041 | .417 |
| H7: Brand Attitude → Purchase Intention | .985*** | .112 | .723 | 1.193 |
| H8: Social Cause Intention → Purchase Intention | .200** | .084 | .041 | .404 |
| | | | | |
| Indirect Effect Testing | | | | |
| Endorser Attitude → … → Brand Attitude | .397* | .073 | .254 | .554 |
| Endorser Attitude → … → Purchase Intention | .333* | .080 | .164 | .476 |
| Endorser Attitude → … → Social Cause Intention | .111* | .051 | .019 | .223 |

*Note*. Two-tailed tests of significance - *$p$< .05, **$p$< .01, ***$p$< .001

### 3.5.2 Hypotheses Testing for High Social Cause Involvement Group

As shown in Table 5, it is confirmed that attitudes toward endorser had a positive relationship with Social behavior intention ($\beta$ = .25, $p$ < .05), supporting H3. However, attitudes toward endorser did not exhibit a significant influence on ad attitude ($\beta$ = .15, *n.s.*: H1 not supported) and brand attitudes ($\beta$ = .08, *n.s.*: H2 not supported). As expected, ad attitudes had a significant influence on brand attitudes ($\beta$ = .71, $p$ < .000: H4 supported), whereas the relationships between ad attitude and purchase intention ($\beta$ = .15, *n.s.*: H5 not supported) and social behavior intention ($\beta$ = -.03, *n.s.*: H6 not supported) are not significant.

As predicted in hypothesis 7, brand attitudes had a strong relationship with purchase intention ($\beta$ = .72, $p$ < .000:H7 supported). Social behavior intention did not exhibit a significant influence on purchase intention ($\beta$ = .02, *n.s.*: H8 not supported). In addition, the indirect effect of attitudes toward endorser on brand attitude ($\beta$ = .11, $p$ < .05) and purchase intention ($\beta$ = .12, $p$ < .05) via Ad attitudes were statistically significant (see Table 5).

**Table 5** *Hypothesized Structural Model (High Involvement Group)*

| | Bootstrap Estimate | | 95% Confidence Interval Bias-corrected | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hypothesis: Path | B | SE | Lower | Upper |
| H1: Endorser Attitude → Ad Attitude | .150 | .064 | -.008 | .352 |
| H2: Endorser Attitude → Brand Attitude | .080 | .061 | -.137 | .292 |
| H3: Endorser Attitude → Social Cause Intention | .246* | .092 | .017 | .416 |
| H4: Ad Attitude → Brand Attitude | .714*** | .109 | .556 | 1.241 |
| H5: Ad Attitude → Purchase Intention | .149 | .243 | -.911 | .417 |
| H6: Ad Attitude → Social Cause Intention | -.030 | .131 | -.198 | .475 |
| H7: Brand Attitude → Purchase Intention | .720*** | .202 | .580 | 1.665 |
| H8: Social Cause Intention → Purchase Intention | .017 | .114 | -.200 | .309 |
| | | | | |
| Indirect Effect Testing | | | | |
| Endorser Attitude → … → Brand Attitude | .107* | .077 | .001 | .326 |
| Endorser Attitude → … → Purchase Intention | .117* | .107 | .023 | .481 |
| Endorser Attitude → … → Social Cause Intention | -.004 | .018 | -.049 | .036 |

*Note*. Two-tailed tests of significance - *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

### 3.5.3 Moderating Effect of Social Cause Involvement

Prior to conducting multi-group invariance testing, the invariant pattern of the structure model across the level of social cause involvement. As displayed in Table 6, the result indicated the assumptions of configural and metric invariance were confirmed. For the test of scalar invariance, the chi-square difference was statistically significant. However, all indicators of fit are still good. According to Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998), the scalar invariance test is not necessary for substantive analysis such as comparisons of path coefficients. Therefore, we continued to conduct the multi-group path analysis.

To test the statistical significance of the difference between the path coefficients for two groups (high vs low involvement), pairwise parameter comparisons were performed. Critical ratios for the difference between parameters revealed significant differences ($p > .05$) in a path from attitudes toward endorser to ad attitudes (-3.04). This indicated that social cause involvement has a moderating effect on the relationship between the variables. As for the path of endorser attitudes-ad attitudes, the effect was greater on the low involvement group (.48) than the high involvement group (.15) by a difference of .33. This confirmed that the hypothesized relationship between attitudes toward endorser and ad attitudes differently operated across levels of social cause involvement.

**Table 6** *Fit Indices and Results for Invariance Tests across Ad Perception*

| No | Model | $\chi^2$ | df | SRMR | RMSEA | TLI | CFI | Nested Models | $\Delta\chi2$ | $\Delta df$ | p |
|----|-------|----------|-----|------|-------|-----|-----|---------------|---------------|-------------|---|
| 1 | Configural invariance | 553.4 | 282 | .06 | .06 | .94 | .95 | | | | |
| 2 | Full metric invariance | 575.4 | 296 | .07 | .06 | .94 | .95 | 2-1 | 22.0 | 14 | > .05 |
| 3 | Full scalar invariance | 593.6 | 304 | .07 | .06 | .94 | .95 | 3-2 | 18.2 | 8 | < .05 |

*Note.* $X^2$ = Likelihood-ratio chi-square, *df* = Degree of Freedom, SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual, RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, TLI = Tucker Lewis Index, CFI = Comparative Fit Index.

**Figure 1.** *Hypotheses Testing Results: Low Involvement Group (High Involvement Group)*
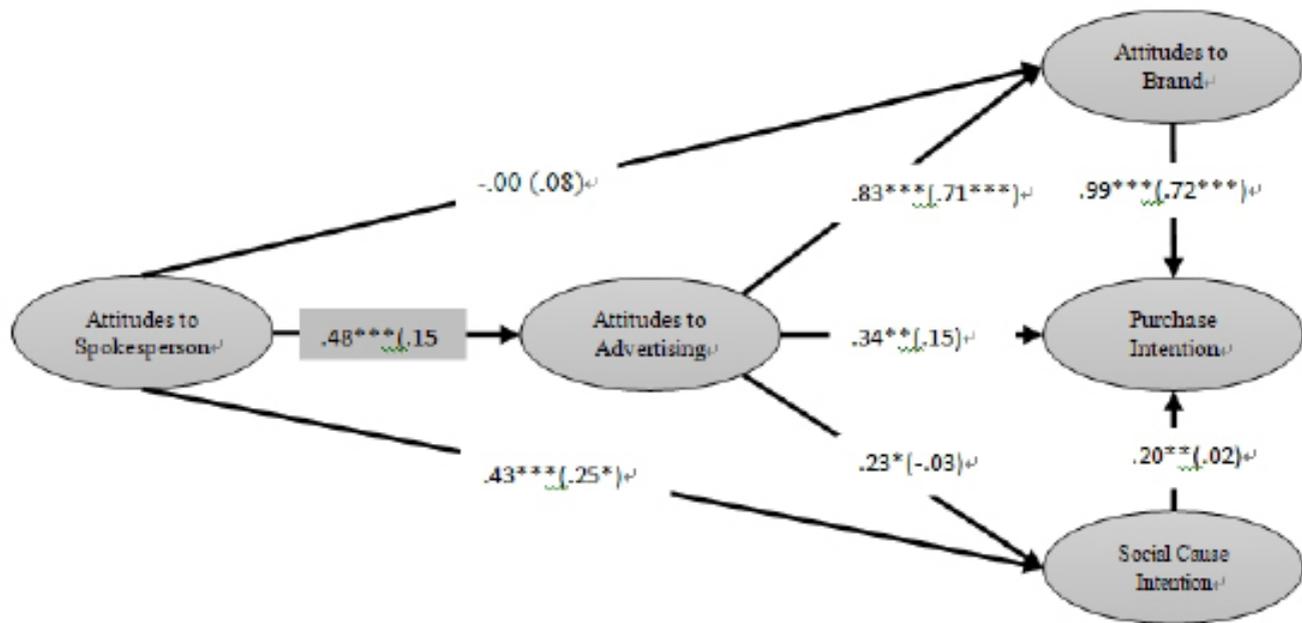


*Note:* Path coefficients with significant difference between groups were highlighted in Grey

## 4. Discussion and Implications

Extensive research concerning celebrity endorser effectiveness exist within marketing and communication literature, yet currently there exist little empirical research to fully explain the effect of using a controversial endorser on advertising effectiveness. Thus, to fill the conceptual void existing in this particular area of research on celebrity endorsements, a conceptual model delineating the relationships among the research constructs was proposed and tested.

The current study hypothesized and sought to examine the effectiveness of $A_{endorser}$ The result demonstrates that $A_{endorser}$ has an overarching effect on all hypothesized paths except the path of $A_{endorser} \rightarrow A_b$. Such findings reinforce and highlight the extensive impact of $A_{endorser}$ in the domain of celebrity endorsements. According to the MTM framework, celebrity's effectiveness stems from the endorser's meanings, wherein the transfer of meanings celebrities embody is facilitated and accomplished by advertising (Batra & Homer, 2004; McCracken, 1989). The significance of this study lies in that unlike previous studies which viewed and used attractiveness or likability to measure feelings toward the endorser (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Silvera & Austad, 2004), the current study applied the notion of MTM and examined individuals' specific $A_{endorser}$ based on images derived from and accumulated through a public role. Interestingly, contrary to the previous studies (Koernig & Boyd, 2009; Lee & Koo, 2015), a significant positive relationship between $A_{endorser}$ and $A_b$ was not found. Important to note is that nor did a negative relationship emerge having a significant impact on consumers when negativity is associated with the endorser (e.g., Amos, Holmes, & Strutton, 2008). This can be partially explained in that although the relationship between Kaepernick and Nike existed since 2011, not until the 30th "*Just do it*" anniversary commercial did the endorsement deal become prominent. Thus, for Nike to realize a significant relationship using their spokesperson that lead to improved $A_b$, Nike and Kaepernick may need to establish a stronger and continuous linkage.

In addition, as suggested in extant literature, the result of this study support a positive relationship between $A_{ad}$ and $A_b$ (Lee et al., 2016). Further to investigate the impact of $A_{ad}$ on behavioral responses, both purchase intention and social cause behavior was examined. This study confirms the notion that $A_{ad}$ affect subsequent behavioral responses. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000), yet to be noted is that even without an explicit message promoting a product or social cause in the ad, $A_{ad}$ can positively affect individual's behavior intentions.

In terms of the role of social cause involvement in consumers' attitudinal and behavioral responses in celebrity endorsement context, this study demonstrated limited moderating effects in the conceptual model. Specifically, the strength of the relationship between the $A_{endorser}$ and $A_{ad}$ is amplified in the low involvement group. Although in general, consumers show a more positive attitude when they perceive personal relevance or importance (Lafferty, 1996), the effects of cause involvement on various attitude formations have been mixed. The finding of this study is in line with de los Salmones and Dominguez (2016) as

highly involved in a social cause did not display a stronger association. Such a finding suggests that mere relevance may not lead to a more positive attitudinal response.

In addition, this study found an indirect effect of endorser attitudes on brand attitude and purchase intention via advertising attitude. The findings support the persuasion knowledge model (PKM) that establishes the important mediating role of advertising attitude in advertising effectiveness. According to the model, it is assumed that consumers tend to have doubts about a marketer's ultimate goal and motives in implementing marketing activities, and also question the trustworthiness of advertising messages when encountering persuasive communication (MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986). Consumers are generally skeptical of advertising, which may trigger negative Aad (Lee, 2013). However, when consumers perceive the credibility and attractiveness associated with endorser in advertising, they are more receptive and are more likely to positively evaluate the ad (Kamins, 1990; Lafferty, Goldsmith, & Newell, 2002). This provides speculation that the favorable attitudes toward Kaepernick's voluntary behavior supporting a social cause may affect consumer's cognitive and affective responses to the ad, and via the path, subsequently influenced brand attitude and purchase intention.

As per the results of the current research, several meaningful implications are suggested. First, in this study, $A_{endorser}$ is the most significant determinant of celebrity endorsement effectiveness. Despite speculation that controversial endorsers may lead to a negative outcome and potentially deteriorate the overall marketing ef-

forts, an encouraging finding of this study is that how individuals perceive the social significance is of an importance which dictates one's $A_{endorser}$. Kaepernick experienced verbal condemnation (Tennery, 2016) and was commonly labeled in a negative light (e.g., Peter, 2016), yet such negativity did not necessarily reflect in $A_{endorser}$. Indeed, a necessary condition may be that the controversy or negativity associated with the endorser is not explicit transgression, high in its severity that is deemed unethical or immoral (e.g., marital infidelity, physical assault). In fact, prior research has suggested that different responses could be evoked depending on the level of severity of the scandal or misbehavior (Umphress et al., 2013). As the findings in this study manifest and provide insight into the possibility of utilizing a controversial endorser to yield positive outcomes. It is suggested that sport organizations should make efforts in identifying the symbolic properties of the endorser and select an endorser that resonate well with both target consumers and the sponsor brand, that is, the consistency between a controversial endorser and the brand's positioning strategy.

Second, social cause involvement is found to play a moderating role in relation between the research construct in the conceptual model. An interesting finding of this study is that mere relevance with high involvement does not lead to a more positive attitudinal response. This can be partially explained as Wheeler (2009) revealed that consumers who are highly involved in the social cause process the message more critically and thoroughly. In other words, individuals highly involved in a social cause may scrutinize

the message and even be skeptical in viewing the endorser's motivation of the endorser (Samman, McAuliffe, & MacLachlan, 2009) which can potentially undermine the impact of celebrity endorsements. This suggests that when executing a marketing communication strategy, companies should be more cautious in all their efforts in decision making, from selecting the right endorser to tailoring a message that taps deep into their target audience values and beliefs.

## 5. Limitation/Future Research

As with all studies, several limitations need to be acknowledged in this study as it provides important guidelines for future research. First, the current study recruited participants via Amazon's crowdsourcing platform, MTurk. Although researchers have legitimized the use of MTurk in research as the respondent pool is known to be much more demographically diverse and representative than a typical student sample or online panels (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011), others have argued that using Mturk population is yet less diverse compared to the general population. Several scholars found that MTurk samples tend to be more politically liberal, younger, less religious, and less racially diverse compared to the U.S. population (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; Huff & Tingley, 2015). As such, cautious interpretation is needed in interpreting the results. Thus, to develop a more comprehensive view of celebrity endorser effects and to gain external validity, future studies should attempt to replicate this study by using a different sample.

Second, the current study explored celebrity effectiveness confined to one brand (Nike). Given

that the brand chosen in this study is a well-established and mature brand, it is plausible that other brands based on consumer's familiarity (e.g., an unknown, moderately known, mature brand) might produce different results. Accordingly, future research is suggested to validate the findings of this study based on various conditions of brand novelty to determine whether these results could be extended to different contexts.

Finally, to understand the phenomenon resulting from Nike's campaign using a rather controversial athlete, this study was also limited to the specific case, focusing only on one endorser. Given that athletes often engage in promoting progressive change which yields varying responses (i.e., positive, negative) depending on the type of activism they partake in (Schmidt, Shreffler, Hambrick, & Gordon, 2018), it would be interesting in future studies to further investigate the impact of these athletes and how the different types of engagement and meaning attached to the endorsers influence subsequent attitudinal and behavioral responses.

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