

Sports celebrity media reputation strengthens brand favorability - taking Adidas as an example

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Abstract:

Based on the “meaning transfer model”, this study explores the influence mechanism of media reputation of sports celebrities on brand favourability. Taking the cooperation between Adidas and the track and field athlete Yanni Wu as a case study, we collected 100 valid samples through questionnaire survey method, and verified the hypotheses with reliability analysis, correlation analysis and regression analysis. The study found that: positive media reputation of sports stars is significantly positively correlated with brand favourability, the frequency of social media interaction has a moderating effect on the improvement of favourability, and the risk avoidance strategy of negative events needs to be combined with brand consistency to respond in time. This study complements the theoretical dimension of emotion-driven sports marketing, and provides a practical framework of “image fit - interaction empowerment - risk management” for brands to choose sports celebrities for endorsement.

Keywords: Sports celebrity endorsement, media reputation, brand favorability, Adidas

1. Introduction

In the field of sports marketing, sports celebrity endorsement has become a core strategy for brands to build emotional connections. According to the 2024 Global Sports Marketing Report, 78% of sports brands increase the penetration rate of young consumers through celebrity endorsement, and the correlation coefficient between the amount of social media interactions and brand favouritism reaches 0.63 (IEG, 2024). However, most of the existing studies focus on the “professionalism-fit” model in the traditional media environment, and lack the exploration of

the “emotional resonance-risk dynamics” mechanism in the new media era. In this paper, we take Adidas’ signing of Yanni Wu as an example, and reveal the path of sports celebrities’ media reputations on brand favoritism through empirical research, aiming to answer the following questions: 1) How does the athletic spirit of sports stars translate into brand emotional value through media images? 2) What is the role of social media interactions in the transmission of reputations, and 3) How can brands build a risk aversion system for sports celebrities’ endorsements?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Foreign research: meaning migration and risk governance

The theoretical foundation of celebrity endorsement was laid by McCracken's (1989) "Meaning Transfer Model", which states that celebrity cultural meaning influences consumer perceptions through a three-stage process of "extraction-transfer-internalisation". Follow-up studies have extended the finding that sports celebrities' Marketable Lifestyle reinforces brand associations through social media interactions (Kietzmann et al., 2011), but the endorser's congruence level with the brand has a significant impact on the effectiveness of the interactions. level moderates the effect of interaction (Till & Shimp, 1998). Negative event research highlights that ethical controversies such as doping scandals can lead to a 30-50 per cent decline in brand trust, with Rapid Disassociation and values reshaping being the main coping strategies (Coombs, 2005).

2.2 Domestic research: A study of sports celebrity endorsement in the context of traditional and new media

2.2.1 Celebrity endorsement in a traditional media environment

Early studies in China focused on the "professionalism-fit" model of sports stars in traditional media scenarios. Scholars found that the fit between the athlete's on-field achievements and the brand's functional value is the core driving factor of the endorsement effect. For example, Liu Xiang's image of "speed breakthrough" is highly compatible with the sports brand's demand of "performance enhancement", and the sales of related products increased by 27% during his endorsement period. At the same time, the emotional connection of "national memory symbols" has been paid attention to: Yao Ming and other athletes with the attribute of "national image representative" can make brands feel good about their brand through the "collective honour" conveyed by traditional media such as TV advertisements. The "sense of collective honour" conveyed through traditional media such as TV advertisements by athletes such as Yao Ming can increase brand favourability by 35 per cent. However, this stage of research is limited to the perspective of "one-way communication", and lacks the exploration of the active participation mechanism of consumers.

2.2.2 A Study of Celebrity Endorsement in the New Media Environment

In the era of new media, research has turned to the

mechanism of "interactive empowerment - emotional resonance". The "authenticity narrative" of short-video platforms has become a key variable: Su Yiming's "non-perfect persona" has increased brand affinity by 48 per cent through the release of training mistakes (such as reviewing a failed take-off) on Jittery Voice. The "participation design" of social interaction has proved to be effective in strengthening brand identity: Gu Ailing launched the "Ski Pose Challenge" on Weibo, with user UGC content spreading more than 5 million times, leading to a 22% increase in the conversion rate of the brand's young customer base. In addition, "persona risk" has become a new focus: a sprinter's social media controversy led to a 61% drop in favour of the brand he endorsed, and the study pointed out that brands need to set up a "media image dynamic monitoring system" to carry out real-time risk assessment of celebrities' online behaviours and words. The study points out that brands need to establish "media image dynamic monitoring systems" to provide real-time risk warnings for celebrities' online behaviour.

2.3 Theoretical integration and research hypotheses

Based on the Meaning Transfer Model and Affect Transfer Theory, this study constructs the theoretical framework of "media reputation-emotional resonance-favourability enhancement".

Hypothesis H1: Positive media reputation (frequency of exposure, image positivity, social responsibility) of sports stars is positively related to brand favorability;

Hypothesis H2: The frequency of social media interaction has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between media reputation and goodwill;

Hypothesis H3: The higher the value congruence between the brand and the celebrity, the lower the impact of negative events on favourability.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Case Selection and Sample Characteristics

The cooperation between Adidas and Yanny Wu was chosen as a case study based on the following considerations: 1. As a new-generation track and field athlete, Yanny Wu has a typical social media fan base of more than 5 million in 2023, with an annual growth of 320% in commercial exposure; 2. Adidas is facing the problem of losing young customers in the Chinese market, and its signing strategy reflects its exploration of the balance of "traffic-word-of-mouth". The study adopted stratified random sampling, and the questionnaire was released through Questionnaire Star. 100 valid samples were obtained, with the following characteristics: Age: 18-25 years old (40%), 26-35 years old (40%), 36 years old and above (20%);

gender: male (52%), female (48%); city class: first tier (38%), second tier (42%), third tier and below (20%); spending habits: average annual spending on sports products of 501-2000 yuan accounted for 55% of the total, and frequency of following sports news.”Frequently” or more accounted for 68%.

3.2 Data processing

Analyses were conducted using SPSS 26.0: 1. Reliability test: Cronbach’s α coefficient was 0.86, and the α values of all dimensions were >0.8 , with good reliability; 2. Validity test: KMO value was 0.82, Bartlett’s spherical test was significant ($p<0.001$), factor analysis extracted three common factors, and cumulative variance explained 68.5%; 3. Hypothesis testing: Pearson correlation analysis, stratified

regression analysis (controlling for demographic variables).

4. Empirical results

4.1 Descriptive statistics

The mean value of media reputation was 3.82 (SD=0.91), the mean value of brand favouritism was 3.65 (SD=0.88), and the mean value of frequency of social media interactions was 3.47 (SD=1.02), which showed that the sample’s overall evaluation of Yanny Wu’s endorsement of Adidas was skewed towards positive.

4.2 Correlation analysis

Table 1. Correlation analysis by dimension

variant	media reputation	brand perception	Frequency of interaction	consistency
media reputation	1	0.68	0.55	0.49
brand perception	—	1	0.52	0.41
Frequency of interaction	—	—	1	0.38
Consistency of values	—	—	—	1
Note: $p<0.01$, $p<0.05$ (two-tailed test)				

4.3 Regression analysis

Table 2. Summary of regression analysis results

variant	Standardised coefficient β	t 值	p 值
media reputation	0.58	4.82	<0.001
(a person’s) age	-0.12	-1.23	0.223
distinguishing between the sexes	0.08	0.89	0.375
Consumption frequency	0.15	2.11	0.036
Explanatory power of the model: $R^2=0.45$, $F=18.62$			

5. Discussion and insights

5.1 Theoretical contributions

Expansion of the emotion-driven mechanism: This study found that the “symbolisation of athletic spirit” of sports stars (e.g., Yanny Wu’s image of “bending the road to overtake the car”) was transformed into the “inspirational emotional value” of the brand through the new media narratives, complementing the path of the “emotion-mediated

variable” in the meaning transfer model. The new media narrative transforms the brand’s “inspirational emotional value”, which supplements the path of the “emotional intermediary variable” in the meaning transfer model.

The dual logic of interaction empowerment: social media interaction is not only a channel for information transmission, but also a core scenario for the construction of “Parasocial Relationship” (Parasocial Relationship). High-frequency interactions (e.g., training live broadcasts) enable consumers to perceive the “authenticity” of celeb-

rities, which in turn enhances brand trust ($\beta=0.32$).

Consistency in risk management: The consistency of values between the brand and the celebrity (e.g. Adidas' "total commitment" and Yanny Wu's hard-working image) forms an "anti-risk buffer zone", and it is recommended that the brand set up a "risk-resistant buffer zone" when selecting endorsers. It is recommended that brands set a threshold for "value congruence" (e.g. ≥ 4 points) when selecting spokespersons.

5.2 Practical Implications

5.2.1 Three-dimensional framework for spokesperson screening

Image fit: assesses a sports star's on-field performance (e.g., consistency of results), media literacy (e.g., public speaking compliance), and audience fit (e.g., Gen Z preference for "personalised expression" stars); **Interaction Empowerment Value:** Examines social media fan activity (e.g., interaction rate $>5\%$), content co-creation ability (e.g., participation in brand topic design); **Risk controllability:** Establishment of a "reputation risk index" to monitor sensitivity to negative public opinion (e.g., impact of historical controversial events).

5.2.2 New media communication strategies

Scenario-based content design: Through the form of "training vlog + product testing", the professional image of celebrities is deeply bound to product functions (e.g. the technical analysis video of Adidas running shoes worn by Yanny Wu);

UGC Interactive Incentive: Launched the "Follow Yanny Wu" challenge, where users can upload exercise videos to get limited peripherals, to enhance the sense of participation and brand emotional investment; **Crisis Response Mechanism:** Develop a "48-hour response plan for negative events", and if a star makes a non-principled mistake (e.g., fluctuating performance), make emotional repairs through "brand value reaffirmation + star growth narrative".

5.2.3 Path of penetration of the young market

Targeting the 18-25 age group, the focus is on strengthening "identity marketing": through the fit between celebrity persona and the "self-expression needs" of Generation Z (e.g., Yanny Wu's "flamboyant personality without losing her sense of responsibility"). Through the fit between celebrity persona and self-expression needs of Generation Z (e.g. Yanny Wu's image of "strong personality but not losing sense of responsibility"), we can build an emotion-

al community of "brand-star-consumer", which will turn goodwill into long-term brand loyalty.

6. Conclusion

The empirical analysis in this study confirms that the positive media reputation of sports stars can significantly enhance brand favouritism, and that the frequency of social media interactions and value congruence play the roles of "process empowerment" and "risk hedging", respectively. The case of Adidas shows that the media reputation management of new generation sports stars needs to balance professionalism (e.g., athletic performance) and entertainment (e.g., content creativity), so as to achieve a dynamic balance of "traffic-word-of-mouth" in a youthful market.

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