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Alan D. Schaefer

R. Stephen Parker

John L. Kent

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A Comparison of American and Chinese Consumers' Attitudes Toward Athlete Celebrity Endorsers

Allen D. Schaefer, R. Stephen Parker, & John L. Kent

KEYWORDS:

Celebrities, Endorsements, Spokespersons, Advertising, Athletes, China, Consumer attitudes, Global

ABSTRACT

China is home to one of the fastest growing sport industries in the world (Yang, Sparks, & Li, 2008). To reach this market, international marketers are increasingly turning to athlete celebrity endorsers (ACEs) (Tschang, 2009). However, little is known about Chinese consumers' receptiveness to this strategy. The purpose of this study is to test for differences between Chinese and U.S. consumers' general attitudes towards ACEs. Results from a classroom administered survey of 147 college students in the U.S. and China provide insight into how consumers in those two nations differ in their responsiveness to ACEs.

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Allen D. Schaefer, Ph.D., is a professor of marketing at Missouri State University.

R. Stephen Parker, D.B.A., is a professor of marketing at Missouri State University.

John L. Kent, Ph.D., is a professor of marketing at Missouri State University.

Introduction

Celebrity endorsements are one of the most popular advertising strategies used in today's global marketplace (White, 2004). In the United States, about a quarter of all ads feature a celebrity endorser (Shimp, 2000). To capture the potential benefits of this practice, U.S. firms make substantial monetary investments in celebrity endorsements, sometimes running into the millions of dollars per endorsement deal (Simmers, Damron-Martinez & Haytko, 2009). Benefits of this approach include enhanced ad recall, increased product desirability, and enhanced product glamour (Spielman, 1981). Other research has shown celebrity endorsements to be an effective strategy for gaining and holding consumers' attention (Atkin & Block, 1983), improving brand attitude and increasing purchase likelihood (Friedman & Friedman, 1979), and increasing brand loyalty/enhancing favorable word-of-mouth (Bush, Martin, & Bush, 2004). Additionally, McCracken (1986) argued that

celebrity endorsers can serve to transfer cultural meaning from the celebrity to the advertised product. This finding suggests that advertisers may benefit from knowing the cultural meanings contained in potential ACEs or may otherwise risk the association of undesirable meanings with their products.

While the prevalence of celebrity endorsements in the U.S. has been well documented, such endorsements are by no means a unique American phenomenon. Indeed, the percentage of television commercials worldwide featuring a celebrity has doubled during the past decade to 17 percent (White, 2004). Past research suggests that celebrity endorsements may occur in greater frequencies in some other countries than in the U.S. For example, in a cross-cultural comparative study involving content analysis, Choi, Lee, & Kim (2005) found that 59 percent of prime time television commercials airing on the three major Korean television networks involved celebrity endorsements, which far exceeded the 9.6 percent they found for ads

running on American networks during these time slots. In Japan, celebrities are featured in approximately 70 percent of television commercials (Kilburn, 1998). Celebrity endorsements are also prevalent in Ireland (O'Mahony & Meenaghan, 1997/98) and the UK (Erdogan, Baker, & Tagg, 2001).

Ads involving celebrity endorsements are commonplace in China, with many of these featuring celebrity athletes (Tschang, 2009). Houston Rockets basketball star Yao Ming is arguably the most notable Chinese athlete celebrity endorser (ACE). Yao is reported to have endorsement deals with Reebok, Apple, VISA, TAG Heuer, Gatorade, and McDonald's totaling more than \$20 million (Liu, Huang, & Minghua, 2007). Yao topped the 2008 Forbes China's celebrity rankings, which was based on income (salaries, endorsements) and appearances in print publications, Web sites, and other media (Burkitt, 2008). In fact, three of the top five ranked celebrities in China were athletes (Burkitt, 2008).

Much of the Chinese athletes' rise to prominence may be attributed to China's rapidly growing sport industry, which has been fueled by a massive government funding of elite sport development (Yang, Sparks & Li, 2008). At the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Chinese Olympic team captured 51 gold medals, the most of any nation (Roberts, 2008). In addition to the Olympics, several other top tier international sporting events (e.g., Formula One Grand Prix Racing, Masters Tennis Cup, NBA pre-season games, World Golf Championship) have been held on Chinese soil since 2004 (Liu, Huang & Minghau, 2007).

While Chinese ACEs are commonly featured as endorsers in ads targeting Chinese markets, U.S. athletes are increasingly endorsing Chinese brands directed at the Chinese market. For example, Baron Davis and Shaquille O'Neal of the NBA signed endorsement deals with Chinese sportswear manufacturer Li Ning

(Tschang, 2009). Marquee NBA star Kobe Bryant also recently committed to a deal with Chinese-language portal Sina.com to write a blog for the Chinese Web site (Tschang, 2009). Other U.S. celebrity athletes endorse non-U.S. or non-Chinese brands to the Chinese market. For example, after his Beijing Olympic successes, American swimmer Michael Phelps signed a deal with Japanese automaker Mazda to endorse their cars in China (Tschang, 2009).

The prevalence of global advertising strategies involving ACEs highlights the need for global advertising managers to understand how consumers' perceptions of celebrity endorsements vary cross-culturally. According to La Ferle & Choi (2005), despite the growing importance of the Asian consumer market and the pervasiveness of celebrity endorsements in that region, little knowledge exists concerning consumers' responsiveness to advertising appeals there, especially those involving celebrity endorsements. Perhaps even less knowledge exists about the overall nature of celebrity endorsements in China. Indeed, an exhaustive review of the celebrity endorsement literature uncovered no cross-national studies comparing U.S. and Chinese consumer's perceptions of celebrity endorsers, and more specifically, *athlete* celebrity endorsers, a remarkable phenomenon considering that China is one of the world's fastest growing sportswear markets (Tong & Hawley, 2009). Indeed, annual sales revenues of China's sporting goods was 30-40 billion Chinese yuan (approximately \$4.4-5.9 billion U.S.), and the country's sporting goods markets achieved an annual growth rate of 10 percent in recent years (Business Wire, 2007).

The purpose of this study is to assist in filling this research gap by testing for differences between Chinese and U.S. consumers' general attitudes towards ACEs. The findings of this research potentially benefit global advertising strategists considering using ACEs by providing

insight concerning how consumers in China and the U.S. differ in their responsiveness to ACEs.

Literature Review

According to McCracken (1986), a *celebrity endorser* is any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement. A *celebrity sports endorser* is defined as “a famous [athlete or coach] who uses public recognition to recommend or co-present with a product in an ad” (Stafford, Spears, & Hsu, 2003, p. 13). These athletes may be active, retired or deceased (Constanzo & Goodnight 2005).

One approach used by international advertisers is the standardized campaign, which involves firms operating as if the world’s markets were homogeneous, and thus the same things were sold the same way everywhere (Levitt, 1983). Such an approach might involve the use of ACEs to establish cross-border continuity. Considering the high cost of using these kinds of strategies, their execution thus becomes fraught with financial risk when undertaken without a sufficient understanding of consumers’ reactions to celebrity endorsements in the targeted countries. To date, only a limited number of cross-cultural comparative studies involving celebrity endorsements have been published, and these tend to be content analytical in nature (e.g., Choi, Lee & Kim, 2005), and none have involved specific examinations of markets in China. However, while lacking a cross-cultural element, one study examined consumer responses to ACEs in China using an experimental design (Liu, Huang, & Minghau, 2007).

Cross-cultural research has stressed the importance of culture in explaining consumer responses to advertising (e.g., Choi, Lee,

& Kim, 2005). Because of this, the role of national culture in influencing consumer buying behavior is increasingly attracting the attention of researchers. A substantial amount of this research has involved the five dimensions of national culture introduced by Hofstede (2001) and (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Hofstede (2001) studied a large number of employee values scores collected by IBM between 1967 and 1973 in approximately 70 countries. From these results, a model was developed identifying the cultural dimensions of *power distance*, *individualism*, *masculinity*, and *uncertainty avoidance* (Hofstede, 1980). Later, Hofstede & Bond (1988) conducted an additional study with a questionnaire designed for the Chinese employees and managers. Based on these findings, a fifth dimension of *long-term orientation* was added to the model (Hofstede & Bond, 1988).

Hofstede’s power distance dimension involves the extent to which people accept the unequal distribution of power in society and organizations (Hofstede, 1980). Hofstede (1980) argued that power distance explains how different societies have dealt with basic human inequalities involving social status, prestige, wealth, and power. As such, relative to low power distance cultures, persons in high power distance cultures (e.g., China) tend to be more tolerant of hierarchies and autocratic leadership and are more likely to expect clear directions from leaders. In contrast, in low power distance cultures (e.g., U.S.), people are more likely to seek factual evidence and reasoning relative to a specific course of action (Hofstede, 1991). Compared to low power distance cultures, people in high power distance cultures tend to unquestioningly follow the advice of authority figures (e.g., parents, teachers, bosses, celebrities) and other high-status individuals (Zandupor, Campos, Catalano, & Chang, 1994). In high power distance cultures, people with power are considered to be right/correct,

and they tend to perform a reference group function (Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996).

Present research focuses on the power distance dimension in developing a research hypothesis as to how U.S. and Chinese consumers may differ in their general attitudes towards ACEs. U.S. and Chinese cultures exhibit wide variations in the Hofstede index scores for power distance. The U.S. represents one of the lowest scoring countries on Hofstede's power distance index (PDI 40). In contrast, China rates significantly higher on the power distance index (PDI 80) (Hofstede, 1991). Therefore, Chinese respondents would more unquestioningly look to the high status ACEs for product opinion leadership, since they would view the ACEs as product authorities.

Thus, this study will examine the following hypotheses:

H1: Chinese consumers will have more favorable attitudes towards ACEs than will U.S. consumers.

Methodology

The present study involved a comparison of U.S. and Chinese college students' general attitudes towards celebrity endorsers (see Table 1 for sample description). The Chinese sample consisted of native Chinese college-aged students enrolled in a business course offered at the Chinese branch campus of a Midwestern American university. The U.S. sample was drawn from U.S.-born college-aged students enrolled in a business course offered at the main American campus associated with the Chinese branch campus. On both campuses, questionnaires were administered to respondents in a classroom setting. For this study, 147 usable questionnaires were returned, with 71 from the U.S. and 76 from China (a description of the sample can be found in Table 1).

A convenience sample of college students was drawn for both the U.S. and Chinese samples. While the use of student samples has received criticism in terms of generalizability, the use of these two convenience samples were deemed appropriate as they provided homogeneity (Calder, Philips & Tybout, 1981), which is important for cross-cultural research (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Marketers are likely attracted to these groups for their future earnings potential. This may be especially true in the case of China, since the size of China's middle class (\$6K to \$25K annual income) is projected to increase from 130 million to 340 million between the years 2006 to 2016 (Cui & Song, 2009). China's young college graduates may represent to marketers an especially desirable sub-segment of this emerging middle class because China's college graduates tend to be early adopters of new products as well as trend-setters (Cui & Song, 2009). Moreover, college students in both the U.S. and China may be a highly desirable target market segment for the types of consumer products typically endorsed by athletes (e.g., sporting goods, sportswear, personal hygiene products, financial services, consumer electronics, soft drinks, fast food, etc.)

Table 1
Sample Characteristics

	China	U.S.	Total
Sample Size	76	71	147
Gender			
Male	19	40	59
Female	53	30	83
Age			
Under 21	9	37	46
21-22	47	25	72
23-up	19	9	28

Measures: The survey instrument included a nine-item scale designed to measure respondents' general attitudes towards ACEs. An exhaustive literature review uncovered no existing scales specifically designed to measuring general attitudes towards ACEs, so each of the items developed for this study were either modifications of existing scale items or items created specifically for this study. Five items were modified from a scale developed to measure consumers' attitudes towards advertising (Petrovici & Marinov, 2007). The five modified items from this scale include:

I get more pleasure from ads that have celebrity athlete endorsers.

Celebrity athlete endorsers make the ads they appear in more entertaining.

Celebrity athlete endorsers contribute to my knowledge of quality products.

Celebrity athlete endorsers tell me which products have the features I want.

Ads with celebrity athlete endorsers serve as valuable information sources.

The remaining four items were developed specifically for this study including:

I prefer products endorsed by celebrity athletes that are experts on the products.

Likable celebrity athletes in ads attract my attention more than unlikable sports stars.

I desire products endorsed by likable celebrity athlete endorsers.

In general, I like ads that use celebrity athletes as endorsers.

Respondents rated their levels of agreement with each of the nine items. Responses were measured on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Because English fluency was a requirement for admission to the Chinese branch campus of the U.S. institution where the survey was administered, all participants were administered the same questionnaire, which was written in English. This fact simplified the questionnaire construction process by eliminating the need for instrument translation, which attempted to avoid the translation limitations typical to cross-cultural consumer research.

Findings

Because the sample revealed differences in the number of female versus male respondents, a Chi-square test was used to examine the possibility of a gender bias in the sample by country. The result of the Chi-square test revealed no significant difference in the composition of each of the country groups for all nine items. However, for the total sample (i.e., two countries combined), a significant effect was found for only one of the items: "Ads with celebrity endorsements serve as valuable product information sources" (Pearson's $\chi^2 = 14.494$, $df=6$, $p<.025$).

A principle components factor analysis was run to test for the dimensionality of the scale

Table 2
Test of Mean differences of Athlete Celebrity Endorsers (ACEs)

Endorser Influence Item	Chinese Mean Score	United States Mean Score	T Value	df	Significance Level
AttACE1 - I prefer products endorsed by athlete celebrity endorsers (ACEs) that are experts on the products they endorse.	4.76	4.13	2.536	144	.012
AttACE2 - Ads with ACEs serve as valuable product information sources.	4.58	2.86	7.784	142	.000
AttACE3 - ACEs tell me which products have the features I want.	4.18	2.90	5.491	143	.000
AttACE4 - ACEs contribute to my knowledge of quality products.	4.28	2.83	6.22	143	.000
AttACE5 - Likable ACEs in ads attract my attention more than unlikable sports stars.	5.09	4.80	1.086	144	.279
AttACE6 - I desire products endorsed by likable ACEs.	4.47	3.48	3.938	143	.000
AttACE7 - ACEs make the ads they appear in more entertaining.	5.00	4.79	.903	142	.368
AttACE8 - I get more pleasure from ads that have ACEs.	4.91	4.04	3.42	142	.001
AttACE9 - In general, I like ads that use ACEs.	4.32	3.90	1.639	144	.103

and results showed that all nine items loaded on one dimension with item loadings ranging from .656 to .824. Chronbach's alpha for this scale was .908.

The single hypothesis in this study posited that relative to U.S. consumers, Chinese consumers will have more favorable attitudes toward ACEs, supporting this hypothesis in six of the nine scale items. As shown in Table 2, the Chinese sample reported significantly higher levels of agreement with six of the nine items.

Responses from the first item (AttACE1)

indicate that relative to the U.S. respondents, Chinese respondents preferred products endorsed by ACEs that are perceived as product experts ($p=.012$; China $\mu = 4.76$, U.S. $\mu = 4.13$). For AttACE2, relative to U.S. respondents, Chinese respondents agreed more strongly with the statement that ACEs serve as valuable information sources ($p=.000$; China $\mu = 4.58$, U.S. $\mu = 2.86$). Concerning AttACE3, which states that ACEs tell which products have the features they want, Chinese again agreed more strongly than the U.S. sample ($p=.000$; China $\mu = 4.18$, U.S. $\mu =$

2.90). Chinese respondents also agreed more strongly with AttACE4, which stated that ACEs contributed to their knowledge of quality products ($p=.000$; China $\mu = 4.28$, U.S. $\mu = 2.83$). Finally, Chinese respondents agreed more strongly with AttACE6, i.e., that they desired products endorsed by ACEs ($p=.000$; China $\mu = 4.47$, U.S. $\mu = 3.48$), and AttACE8, i.e., that they get more pleasure from ads featuring ACEs ($p=.001$; China $\mu = 4.91$, U.S. $\mu = 4.04$).

Discussion and Implications

These findings support the premise that Chinese consumers, being from a high power distance culture, may tend to more willingly accept the recommendations of ACEs than those in the U.S. Therefore, Chinese consumers may be especially likely to refer to celebrities for guidance when faced with purchase decisions.

The Chinese sample agreed more strongly than the U.S. sample with each of the five items pertaining to the information value of ACEs (AttACE1 - AttACE5), which suggests that celebrity endorsements are potentially effective methods for communicating product information through advertising. While ACEs are excellent ways to attract attention to advertisements in cluttered marketing environments, product information may also be communicated via ACEs a number of different ways, such as when celebrities share testimonials about their personal experience with the endorsed product or when a celebrity with a certain image is matched up with particular products desiring that image. For example, Chevy trucks employed the ACE services of former Baltimore Orioles short stop Cal Ripken, who holds the record for most consecutive Major League Baseball games played, to communicate the selling message of their brand's durability. A print advertisement from the campaign featured a visual of Ripken standing beside a Chevy pickup with

the headline: "The Cal Ripken of trucks. The Chevy truck of ball players."

While the results of this study suggest that Chinese consumers are especially open to the information value of ACEs, marketers considering the use of ACEs in their advertising strategies to reach the Chinese markets should exercise caution in the manner in which this information is communicated. The concept of cultural context becomes critical when considering this issue. In low context cultures (e.g., the U.S.), advertising (including celebrity endorsements) tends to be more informational, direct, hard-sell and rhetorical in its approach. For example, a low-context celebrity endorsement might involve using the celebrity as a spokesperson speaking directly to his/her audience, perhaps in the form of a testimonial.

In high context cultures (e.g., China), advertising tends to be more indirect, soft-sell, emotional and symbolic (Choi, Lee & Kim, 2005). Thus, in high context cultures (e.g., China), celebrity endorsers as cultural icons can effectively imply and convey informational messages to consumers without overstating them (Choi, et al., 2005). Accordingly, the symbolic nature of ACEs facilitates the communication of advertising information in a high context culture. For example, an advertisement that simply consists of a visual metaphor showing highly accomplished professional golfer Tiger Woods with a Tag Heuer watch transfers Woods' image to the product by implying this quality of achievement and accomplishment through the selection of this endorser.

China's high context culture implies that advertisers must be aware of the cultural meaning contained in the selected ACEs and that such meaning be appropriately crafted to send the intended message. One way for companies to communicate product information is through the selection of ACEs

that are well-matched to the endorsed product (Till & Busler, 2000). For example, Garmin used Yao Ming to endorse its navigation system in the U.S., which resulted in an exceptionally strong endorser/product match, since Yao had recently move to the U.S. and was, according to the campaign, learning his way around the country by using his Garmin (Cozzens, 2006).

Conclusions

This study compared U.S. and Chinese consumer responses to questions regarding their general attitudes towards ACEs. Further research is needed to examine such attitudes in the context of specific product types. Such research would provide insight into the advisability of using ACEs to endorse high involvement glamour and technology products, as well as non-sports related low involvement products such as pain relievers and soft drinks.

Findings of this research serve as an initial cross-cultural study comparing consumers' perceptions of celebrity endorsers and ACEs in the U.S. and China. The results suggest that relative to U.S. consumers, Chinese consumers are considerably more receptive to ads featuring ACEs, especially toward the information contained in these ads. Thus, in today's business climate, China seems to offer a large and receptive market for ads with ACEs. Therefore, companies targeting Chinese markets with such ads must clearly understand how these markets may respond, since initial indications from this study predict a high level of receptiveness to such marketing techniques.

This study's results support the idea that consumers from high power distance cultures

(e.g., China) tend to be more receptive to ACEs than consumers from low power distance cultures (e.g., the U.S.). The findings also concur with previous literature (e.g., Hofstede, 1991) which claims consumers in low power distance cultures are more comfortable questioning those in power (i.e., high status), such as ACEs.

Limitations

The findings of this study may not generalize well to broader consumer markets in the U.S. and China. First, although college students are a highly sought-after and frequently targeted consumer market, as well as a frequently utilized sample population for similar studies (Zhou & Nakamoto, 2001; Watchravesringkan, 2007), the use of student subjects may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations. Thus, a replication of the study with non-student subjects would be appropriate. Second, the Chinese sample was drawn from college students based in the country's more affluent and cosmopolitan eastern coastal area. Cui and Liu (2000) argued that significant regional differences in purchasing power, lifestyles, media usage, and consumption patterns exist among Chinese consumers. Therefore, different findings may have resulted had the sample been drawn from the less developed, less affluent, more pastoral interior regions of China. Thus, the ability to generalize the findings of this study to the larger populations of the respective nations may be limited and additional research is needed to solidify its conclusions before implementation into marketing strategy formulation.

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RESEARCH THAT MATTERS!

A COMPARISON OF AMERICAN AND CHINESE CONSUMERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD AN ATHLETE CELEBRITY ENDORSER

*Allen D. Schaefer
Missouri State University*

*R. Stephen Parker
Missouri State University*

*John L. Kent
Missouri State University*

*Allen D. Schaefer, Ph.D.
Department of Marketing
Missouri State University
901 S. National Ave.
Springfield, MO 65897
allenschaefer@missouristate.edu
417-836-4116*

Research Problem

Fueled by massive governmental funding for elite sport development, the Chinese sport industry is in a rapid growth phase. These governmental efforts seem to be bearing fruit. At the 2008 Summer Olympics held in Beijing, the Chinese Olympic team captured 51 gold medals, the most of any nation. Additionally, several top-tier international sporting events (e.g., Formula One Grand Prix Racing, Masters Tennis Cup, NBA pre-season games, World Golf Championship - HSBC) have recently been held on Chinese soil.

Global marketers utilize celebrity athletes involved in many of these sporting events as product endorsers in their efforts to target increasingly affluent Chinese consumers. For example, American swimmer Michael Phelps recently signed an endorsement deal with Japanese automaker Mazda to endorse their cars in China. Despite these developments, the topic of celebrity sports endorsements in China has not received significant academic research attention. Thus, global marketers using athlete celebrity endorsements (ACEs) in China may lack insight into how ACEs are perceived by the Chinese consumer. The purpose of the present study is to help fill this void by testing for differences between Chinese and U.S. consumers' attitudes towards athlete celebrity endorsers. This research can potentially provide global marketers and advertisers with insight into how to more effectively develop advertising strategies to target the Chinese consumer.

Issues

Despite the growing importance of the Asian consumer market and the prevalence of celebrity endorsements in that region, little is known about consumers' responsiveness to advertising appeals there, especially those involving celebrity endorsements. Even less knowledge exists regarding celebrity endorsements in China. An exhaustive review of the celebrity endorsement academic literature uncovered no cross-cultural comparative studies involving U.S. and Chinese consumer's perceptions of celebrity endorsers, and more specifically, *athlete* celebrity endorsers.

To date, only a limited number of cross-cultural comparative studies involving celebrity endorsements have been published, and none of these have involved China.

Prior academic research has identified a power distance dimension, which involves the extent to which people accept the unequal distribution of power in society and organizations. It has been argued that the power distance construct explains how different societies have dealt with basic human inequalities involving social status, prestige, wealth and power. As such, relative to low power distance cultures, persons in high power distance cultures (e.g., China) tend to be more tolerant of hierarchies and autocratic leadership and are more likely to expect clear directions from leaders. In contrast, in low power distance cultures (e.g., U.S.), people are more likely to seek factual evidence and reasoning regarding a specific course of action. Compared to low power distance cultures, individuals in high power distance cultures tend to unquestioningly follow the advice of authority figures (e.g., parents, teachers, bosses, celebrities) and other high-status individuals. In high power distance cultures, people with power are considered to be right, and they tend to perform a reference group function.

The present research focuses on Hofstede's (1991) power distance dimension in developing a research hypothesis concerning how American and Chinese consumers may differ in their attitudes towards ACEs. Based on prior research findings, American and Chinese cultures exhibit wide variations in power distance index (PDI) scores. The U.S. represents one of world's lowest PDI scoring nations, while China represents one of the highest. Thus, the hypothesis in this study states that relative to U.S. consumers, Chinese consumers have more favorable attitudes towards ACEs.

Summary

The present study involved a comparison of U.S. and Chinese college students' attitudes towards ACEs. The Chinese sample consisted of college-aged Chinese national students enrolled in a business course offered at a China branch campus of an American university. The U.S. sample was drawn from U.S.-born college-aged students enrolled in a business course taught at the main U.S. campus associated with the China branch campus. The Chinese sample reported significantly higher levels of agreement than did the U.S. sample with six of the nine statements presented to them in the questionnaire. Relative to the U.S. respondents, the Chinese respondents agreed more strongly that they preferred products endorsed by product expert ACEs, that ACEs serve as valuable information sources, that ACEs tell which products have the features they want, that ACEs contributed to their knowledge of quality products, that they desired products endorsed by ACEs, and that they get more pleasure from ads that have ACEs.

Analysis

These findings support the premise that Chinese consumers, being from a high power distance culture, tend to more willingly accept the recommendations of ACEs than those from the U.S. Therefore, Chinese consumers may be especially likely to utilize ACEs as reference groups when in the market for products.

The Chinese sample agreed more strongly than the U.S. sample with each of the five items pertaining to the information value of ACEs. This suggests that celebrity endorsements are a potentially effective means for communicating product information through advertising in China. While ACEs are an excellent means for attracting attention to the advertisement and the product itself in a cluttered marketing environment, product information may also be communicated with this approach in a number of different ways, such as when celebrities share testimonials about their personal experience with the endorsed product.

While the results suggest that Chinese consumers are especially open to the information value of ACEs, marketers considering using ACEs in their advertising strategy to reach the Chinese marketplace should be careful in the manner in which this information is communicated. The concept of cultural context is useful in considering this issue. In low context cultures (e.g., the U.S.), advertising (including celebrity endorsements) tends to be more hard-sell and rhetorical in its approach. In high context cultures (e.g., China), advertising tends to be more indirect, soft-sell, emotional and symbolic. Thus, in high context cultures (e.g., China), celebrity endorsers, as cultural icons, can be used effectively as an implicit means of conveying informational messages to consumers without overstating them. Thus, the symbolic nature of ACEs allows an opportunity to communicate advertising information in a high

context culture. However, the fact that China is a high context culture implies advertisers need to be aware of the cultural meaning contained in the selected ACEs and that such meaning may or may not be appropriate for the intended message. One way for companies to communicate product information is through the selection of ACEs that are well matched to the endorsed product. For example, Garmin used Yao Ming to endorse its navigation system in the U.S., which resulted in an exceptionally good endorser/product match because Yao had recently move to the U.S. and was, according to the campaign, learning his way around the country by using his Garmin.

Discussion/Implications

The findings of this research serve as the initial cross-cultural study comparing consumers' perceptions of celebrity endorsers and ACEs in the U.S. and China. The results suggest that, relative to U.S. consumers, Chinese consumers are considerably more receptive to ads featuring ACEs, especially the information contained in these ads. Thus, in today's business climate, China seems to offer a large and receptive market for advertisements with ACEs. Therefore, companies targeting the Chinese market with such ads must clearly understand how this market may respond.

The results of the present study support the premise that consumers from high power distance cultures (e.g., China) tend to be more receptive to ACEs than consumers from low power distance cultures (e.g., the U.S.). The premise that consumers in low power distance cultures are more comfortable questioning those in power (i.e., high status) such as ACEs is supported by the findings of this research.