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**Sports Celebrity Endorsements of Luxury Brands: The Case of Chinese Consumers**

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## **Sports Celebrity Endorsements of Luxury Brands: The Case of Chinese Consumers**

### **Abstract**

With the pervasive use of sports celebrities in advertising as well as the fierce competition among luxury brands, finding the appropriate celebrity endorser is a crucial matter for many brands. This study contributes to the sports celebrity endorsement research stream, being one of the first to focus on the high-value yet underexplored Chinese luxury consumer market. Using survey data from 327 respondents, this study investigates the relationship between the attractiveness and credibility (that is, trustworthiness and expertise) of sports celebrities as endorsers of luxury products and purchase intentions and decisions of Chinese consumers. The analysis involved descriptive and non-parametric (Spearman correlation) statistics to determine the relationships' strength. The results provide insights regarding Chinese luxury consumers' characteristics and attitudes and empirically confirm a strong, positive and statistically significant association between credibility and attractiveness of sports celebrity endorsers and purchasing behavior. In addition, the knowledge produced regarding Chinese luxury consumer characteristics and attitudes can also be extended to include marketing promotion and luxury brand endorsements by non-sports endorsers.

**Keywords:** sports celebrity endorsement, luxury products, consumer behavior, China

## **Sports Celebrity Endorsements of Luxury Brands: The Case of Chinese Consumers**

### **Introduction**

Celebrity endorsement as a marketing strategy dates back to the 1970s (Baker and Churchill, 1977). Such a strategy increases the awareness of the endorsed products and strengthens the consumers' perceived association between the celebrity's attributes and the endorsed product (Doyle et al., 2014; Till, 1998). Moreover, empirical studies have shown that celebrity endorser credibility (that is, trustworthiness and expertise) and attractiveness have a positive impact on consumer buying behavior (Amos et al., 2008; Goldsmith et al., 2000; Liu et al., 2007; Ohanian, 1991).

Celebrity endorsements have become a worldwide phenomenon and a salient marketing strategy in China (Hung et al., 2011). In particular, due to China's rising sports industry (Yang et al., 2008), celebrity endorsements have increasingly become a prominent way for domestic and global businesses to promote their products in the Chinese consumer market (Schaefer et al., 2011). Sports celebrity endorsements are not limited to sport-related products, but include a variety of items that have no connection to sports, such as swimming star Michael Phelps and Japanese automaker Mazda, or Chinese basketball legend Yao Ming and McDonald's. Recently, sports celebrities have endorsed brands from the luxury market. Prominent examples directly addressing the Chinese market include tennis star Andre Agassi representing Omega watches, soccer star David Beckham representing car manufacturer Jaguar, and Chinese tennis star Li Na representing Rolex watches.

The luxury market, which broadly includes rare products of supreme price and quality (Heine, 2011), has become an important component of the worldwide economic activity (Coste-Maniere et al., 2011). The economic empowerment of Chinese consumers has significantly shaped the worldwide luxury market, accounting for one-fourth of global sales by the end of 2012 (Zhan and He, 2012). Despite its global growth, however, the luxury brand market is a relatively new area of academic inquiry (Heine, 2011). With particular regard to the Chinese luxury market, the extant literature has examined the underlying consumption motivations among the Chinese middle-class (Zhan and He, 2012), compared the purchasing habits of Chinese and US luxury consumers (Bian and Forsythe, 2012), and studied the pertinent effects of political

ideologies (Sun et al., 2014). Furthermore, relatively limited scholarly attention has been devoted to the intersection of sports celebrity endorsements with the luxury market in China. Research so far on the sports celebrity research stream in China has focused on the differences between American and Chinese consumers' attitudes towards athlete endorsers (Schaefer et al., 2011; Schaefer et al., 2010); the relationship between endorser attractiveness and purchase intention (Liu et al., 2007); and the effects of endorsement on China's "Generation Y" consumers (Hung et al., 2011).

While the above-mentioned empirical studies offered useful insights, the effects of sports celebrity endorsements on luxury brand consumption still remain under-researched. In addition, while credibility and attractiveness have been well tested in the sports endorsement literature (Braunstein and Zhang, 2005; Goldsmith et al., 2000; Hakimi et al., 2011; Kim and Na, 2007; Lafferty et al., 2002; Ohanian, 1990; Williams et al., 2015), there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding their importance in a different cultural context such as the Chinese market. Indeed, the Chinese market offers a particularly unique venue of exploration due to the following reasons. First, endorsements of various products by athletes have become an increasingly common practice in China (Liu et al., 2007; Schaefer et al., 2011; Tschang, 2009). However, there is a shortage of athlete celebrities compared to the demand of products. Chinese national celebrities often endorse more than 20 brands leading to the dilution of the commercial value of these brands (Hung et al., 2011). Second, previous findings supporting the importance of the congruence between endorser and endorsed product for the success of the endorsement strategy (Kamins, 1990; McCracken, 1989; Kahle and Homer, 1985; Caballero and Salomon, 1984; Baker and Churchill, 1977; Peterson and Kerin, 1977), are put under question in the Chinese market. For instance, several studies found that attractiveness plays a much more significant role in the purchasing behavior of Chinese consumers (Liu and Brock, 2011; Liu et al., 2007). Third, Chinese consumer culture is different to that of Western countries as it is shaped by a different political ideology which impacts on the habits of citizens by regulating permitted consumption (Sun et al., 2014; Zhao and Belk, 2008).

Given the above context, this paper's purpose is to extend current knowledge of sports celebrity endorsements into the Chinese luxury market by combining two interconnected objectives. The first is to examine the effects of attractiveness and credibility of sports celebrity luxury brand endorsers on the purchase intentions of Chinese consumers. The second is to examine the same effects on the actual decisions of those

consumers. This study will enhance the extant literature of celebrity endorsement by providing empirical evidence of the effects of athletes' attractiveness and credibility in the emerging luxury market of China. In addition, it will assist global marketers in offering the necessary insights to develop advertising strategies in order to effectively target the Chinese luxury consumer.

## **Review of Literature**

### ***Luxury market and China particulars***

Luxury is a relative term that could refer to almost any product depending on who is asked (Heine, 2011). An ongoing discussion about a definition of luxury is also evident in the marketing literature (Heine, 2011). For the purposes of this paper, we refer to Kapferer and Bastien (2012), who identified six defining luxury product features: hedonistic experience, high price, heritage, controlled distribution, personalized service, and social privilege. It can be inferred from this definition that a luxury product must be able to provide its consumers with values that satisfy their needs beyond the level of bare necessities (Heine, 2011).

Luxury has been a part of world culture since the dawn of human civilization (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012); the global luxury market has exceeded one trillion US dollars for the first time in history (Kollewe, 2015). China joined the global trend of luxury consumption at the beginning of this century and within a decade placed itself in the top two positions (Sun et al., 2014). As a result, the Chinese luxury market is one of the most sought-after markets for advertisers (KPMG, 2011). While China is still characterized by a significantly wealthier part of the population living in urban areas (Cai et al., 2010; Davis, 2013), the disparity between rich and poor regions has been reduced (Langlois and Barberio, 2013; Podoshen et al., 2011). Thus, the strong purchasing power of a relatively large population has found its way into the luxury consumerism (Langlois and Barberio, 2013).

A concurrent yet seemingly separate trend is China's rise as a sports power. For two consecutive summer Olympic Games, in 2008 and 2012, China has ranked in the top two positions, challenging US dominance. The sports industry in China grew from about \$1 billion a year in 1994 to \$63 billion in 2014 (Owen, 2014), and was mostly facilitated by generous governmental funding, thereby rendering sport an important social and commercial phenomenon in China (Chadwick, 2015; Yang et al., 2008).

The appeal of sports could not have been unnoticed by marketers and luxury brands in the Chinese commercial market. The influence of sports stars in China as a reference group (Liu et al., 2007) offers brand owners the opportunity to engage with them in product advertisements. While advertisements involving sports celebrities endorsements have become commonplace in China (Schaefer et al., 2011; Tschang, 2009), their influence on consumer behavior remains largely unknown. Given the differences of endorsers' effectiveness in different cultural contexts (Liu et al., 2004; Ohanian, 1990; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Sertoglu et al., 2014), there is a need for empirical insights from Chinese consumers in order to examine the cross-cultural generalizability of the effects of endorsers' attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise.

### ***Celebrity endorsement***

A celebrity endorser, in general, is defined as "any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement" (McCracken 1989, p. 310). In this paper, such an individual works in the sport industry and is more often than not either an athlete or a coach (Stafford et al., 2003, p. 13).

Celebrity endorsements are nowadays a prominent strategy of marketers and firms across the globe (Fink et al., 2012). The percentage of television commercials worldwide featuring a celebrity has doubled during the past decade to 17 percent (White, 2004), with many of these featuring sports celebrities (Kim and Na, 2007; Tschang, 2009). Researchers have approached the topic from various perspectives in order to do the following: understand marketers' views and benefits (Charbonneau and Garland, 2006; Yang et al., 2008); investigate its impact on the younger generations (Bush et al., 2004; Bush et al., 2005; Dix et al., 2010; Peetz et al., 2004); examine consumer responses to everyday products (Boyd and Shank, 2004; Koering and Boyd, 2009); and explore its implications in the retail (Lear et al., 2009) and the sports product market (Braunstein and Zhang, 2005). In addition, recognizing that sports celebrities are cultural symbols who reflect the values and ideas of a particular culture (Hung et al., 2011), several recent studies compared the attitudes of American and Chinese consumers toward athlete endorsers (Schaefer et al., 2010; Schaefer et al., 2011) and focused on the effects of sports celebrity endorsements in targeted (i.e. young consumers) and geographically restricted markets (Hung et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2007).

To verify the effectiveness of these endorsements, several researchers investigated the credibility, attractiveness and congruence (with the endorsed product) of celebrity athletes and their impact on consumer behavior (Charbonneau and Garland, 2006; Kim and Na, 2007; Liu et al., 2007). These attributes emerged from three basic models which have been developed to select appropriate celebrity endorsers (Erdogan, 1999): the Source Credibility Model (Hovland et al., 1953), the Source Attractiveness Model (McGuire, 1968), and the Match-Up Hypothesis Model (McCracken, 1989). This study focuses on the first two models. The Source Credibility Model is based on social psychology (Hovland et al., 1953) and asserts that endorsers exhibiting expertise and trustworthiness are credible and thus persuasive (McCracken, 1989). The Source Attractiveness Model contends that the effectiveness of a message depends on source familiarity, likeability, similarity, and physical attractiveness to the respondents (Ohanian, 1990).

### ***Celebrity credibility***

Credibility has been defined as the extent to which a celebrity is, “perceived as possessing expertise relevant to the communication topic and can be trusted to give an objective opinion on the subject” (Goldsmith et al., 2000, p. 43). The elements of expertise and trustworthiness of the endorser are consistently included in defining the concept of endorser credibility (Goldsmith et al., 2000). Expertise reflects the validity of the assertions made by the celebrity while trustworthiness reflects on the customer’s confidence in the celebrity’s intent to represent the most valid assertions (Hovland et al., 1953). The more favorable a consumer’s perception regarding the endorser’s credibility, the more the endorser is seen to be a credible source of product and brand information (Ohanian, 1990). Research indicates that the credibility of sports celebrities is important when there is a congruent relationship between the endorser and the product (Kim and Na, 2007). Endorser credibility has a positive impact on influencing consumer attitudes and buying intentions towards the endorsed products (Goldsmith et al., 2000; Lafferty et al., 2002; Ohanian, 1990; 1991). Trustworthiness and expertise were also positively related to sports attendance and merchandise sales (Braunstein and Zhang, 2005). Brands make use of athletes (Williams et al., 2015) even when they are engaged in socially unacceptable behavior, as the additional media coverage for such behaviors offers additional advertisement for the endorsed products (Shuart, 2007). Thus, it is proposed that the credibility of sports celebrity endorsers of luxury brands positively

impacts the purchase intention and decision of consumers. In particular, we hypothesize that:

H1a: The trustworthiness of sports celebrity endorsers of luxury brands positively impacts the purchase intention of Chinese luxury brand consumers

H1b: The trustworthiness of sports celebrity endorsers of luxury brands positively impacts the purchase decision of Chinese luxury brand consumers

H2a: The expertise of sports celebrity endorsers of luxury brands positively impacts the purchase intention of Chinese luxury brand consumers

H2b: The expertise of sports celebrity endorsers of luxury brands positively impacts the purchase decision of Chinese luxury brand consumers

### ***Celebrity attractiveness***

Attractiveness of the sports celebrity endorser does not only apply to physical beauty, but includes the personality, likeability, and similarity to the receiver (Ohanian, 1990). Physically attractive celebrity endorsers can improve a brand's image and stimulate purchases (Hakimi et al., 2011). Attractive sports celebrities are likely to enhance the effectiveness of the endorsement because of the dual benefit of their celebrity status and attractiveness (Kamins, 1990). Several studies have shown that sports endorser attractiveness has a positive effect on the associated products (Joseph, 1982), consumer attitudes towards the product (Kim and Na, 2007; Till and Busler, 1998) as well as purchase intentions towards the product (Kahle and Homer, 1985; Ohanian, 1991). Attractive sources tend to get more attention than less attractive sources and are therefore able to convey meaning effectively (Seno and Lukas, 2007). Sports celebrity attractiveness was also positively related to sports attendance and merchandise sales (Braunstein and Zhang, 2005). Therefore, our next hypotheses are stated as follows:

H3a: The attractiveness of sports celebrity endorsers of luxury brands positively impacts the purchase intention of Chinese luxury brand consumers

H3b: The attractiveness of sports celebrity endorsers of luxury brands positively impacts the purchase decision of Chinese luxury brand consumers

## **Methodology**

### ***Sample***

Participants were offered a list of fifteen (15) luxury brands as a point of reference. However, they were asked to use their favorite luxury brand sport endorsement as a point of reference in order to avoid framing all responses with a single example chosen by the authors. Only respondents who stated that they have been involved in at least one purchase transaction of luxury products during the past twelve months were included for further analysis.

### ***Questionnaire***

An online survey was used to test the study's hypotheses. Surveys have been widely used to collect consumer-related data specifically in the celebrity endorsement literature (Bush et al., 2004; 2005; Dwivedi et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2007), while their online forms allow gathering a large sample size from a wide geographic region (Bryman and Bell, 2011). The first survey section focused on the participants' demographic and social features while each of the remaining three sections focused on the attitudes and behavior of the participants towards the sports celebrity attributes of attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise. The survey was offered in the Chinese language and was pilot-tested by eight Chinese consumers before submitting it to a larger population. Subsequently, the survey was made available online from April 25 to September 25 of 2013. Chinese consumers were invited to participate using Weibo, the most popular Chinese social media tool (Statista, 2015). Social media can be used as on-line listening tools and for crowd sourcing (Burton and Soboleva, 2011) as well as environments to complete surveys (Patino et al., 2012; Pettit, 2011). Weibo is a social networking and microblogging service based in China and is often called the "Chinese Twitter". However, it is actually more versatile combining functions of both Facebook and Twitter. Subscribed users can interact with other users and exchange posts which can include photos, images, music, video clips and text with a 140-character limit. Using the snowball technique, survey participants were asked to recommend others who might be willing to respond. The snowball technique is a non random sampling technique during which the researchers make an initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the topic and then used these to establish contacts with others (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The responses were high in the first five weeks a flattened out afterwards as further referrals and invitations became less effective.

### **Process**

Respondents were asked about their intention (“I intend to buy luxury products endorsed by sports celebrities”) and decision (“I buy luxury products endorsed by sports celebrities”) to purchase a luxury brand endorsed by a sports celebrity. Trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness were measured using two items for each dimension (“I think celebrity sports athletes are trustworthy/have high professional expertise/are attractive”, “As luxury brand endorsers, I think celebrity sports athletes are trustworthy/have high professional expertise/are attractive”). All responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

### **Statistical analysis**

In total, 327 usable questionnaires were collected and subsequently analyzed using the statistical package SPSS19. Besides descriptive statistics, the analysis involved non-parametric tests (Spearman correlation  $\rho$ ) to test the association between athlete endorser credibility and attractiveness and Chinese luxury brand consumer purchase intention and decision.

## **Results**

Consumer demographics: The respondents were skewed in terms of gender with 64.5 percent being female. However, male respondents are more likely to purchase luxury products endorsed by sports celebrities than female respondents (12.9 percent and 5.7 percent, respectively). Drawing a profile from the sample, the results suggest that the typical Chinese luxury consumer is below 40 years old (66.9 percent), lives in the first-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (41.3 percent), has a university degree (95.5 percent), and belongs to the middle class (34.6 percent). The detailed results are presented in Table 1.

#H1a and #H1b: Sports celebrity trustworthiness and effects on purchase intention and decision: The participants were generally neutral about the trustworthiness of sports celebrities; however, when this was mentioned in association with luxury brand endorsements, the participants’ attitude became overall positive, with 58 percent of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. (Table 2). A Spearman’s correlation ( $\rho$ ) showed a strong and positive correlation between trustworthiness and purchase intention ( $\rho=.868$ ,  $N=327$ ,  $p<.001$ ), as well between trustworthiness and purchase decision ( $\rho=.863$ ,  $N=327$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Thus, both H1a and H1b are supported by the data.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of respondents ( $N=327$ ).

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>	<b>Variable</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
<b>Gender</b>			<b>Education</b>		
Female	211	64.5	Senior High	8	2.4
Male	116	35.5	Undergraduate	203	62.1
			Graduate	109	33.3
			Doctoral	7	2.1
<b>Age</b>			<b>Occupation</b>		
19-30	110	33.6	Management	41	12.5
31-40	109	33.3	Higher Educ.	17	5.2
41-50	82	25.1	Teachers		
51-60	24	7.3	Government	20	6.1
61-70	1	0.3	Student	30	9.2
71-80	1	0.3	Company Employee	97	29.7
<b>Marital Status</b>			Freelance	23	7
Single	153	46.8	Self-employed	25	7.6
Married	150	45.9	Other	74	22.6
Separated	18	5.5			
Other	6	1.8			
<b>Residential location</b>			<b>Monthly Income (Yuan)*</b>		
Beijing	57	17.4	1999 and below	80	24.5
Shanghai	44	13.5	2000-4999	51	15.6
Guangzhou	34	10.4	5000-14999	113	34.6
Tianjin	25	7.6	15000-24999	46	14.1
Hangzhou	30	9.2	25000-34999	12	3.7
Chongqing	18	5.5	35000-49999	11	3.4
Chengdu	22	6.7	50000 and above	14	4.3
Other	97	29.7			

\*Note: 1 Yuan was 0.14 Euro approximately at the time of the study

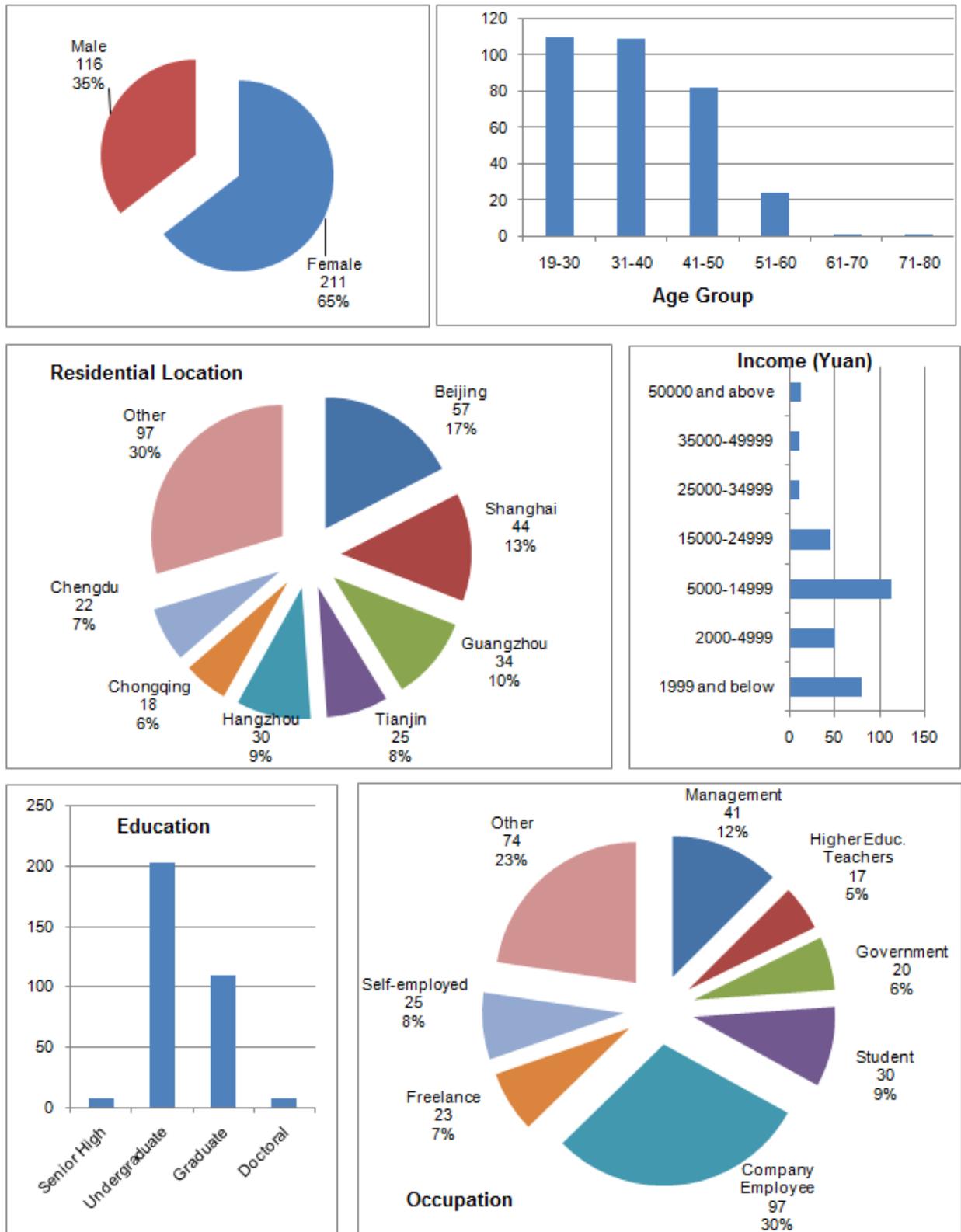


Figure 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents.

**Table 2.** Sports celebrity trustworthiness and customer behavior (N=327).

Questions	1	2	3	4	5	M	Median	Mode
Celebrity sports athletes are trustworthy.	33 10,09%	24 7,34%	137 41,9%	106 32,42%	27 8,26%	3.21	3	3
As luxury brand endorsers, celebrity athletes have rather high level of trustworthiness.	26 7,95%	28 8,56%	83 25,38%	130 39,76%	60 18,35%	3.52	4	4
The endorsing athletes whom I consider trustworthy easily influence my purchase intention.	43 13,15%	55 16,82%	120 36,7%	75 22,94%	34 10,4%	3.01	3	3
It is easier for me to decide buying the luxury product endorsed by a trustworthy athlete	60 18,35%	94 28,75%	113 34,56%	47 14,37%	13 3,98%	2.57	3	3

1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree

*#H2a and #H2b: Sports celebrity expertise and its effects on purchase intention and decision:* Regarding sports celebrity level of expertise, the overall attitude of the respondents was positive (42.8 percent agreed or strongly agreed). When expertise was associated with the commercial factor of luxury brands, the proportion of those who disagreed slightly increased. The overall attitude towards intention and decision of purchase skewed to the positive (Table 3). There was a strong, positive correlation between expertise and purchase intention ( $\rho=.868$ ,  $N=327$ ,  $p<.001$ ), as well as between expertise and purchase decision ( $\rho=.866$ ,  $N=327$ ,  $p<.001$ ), confirming both H2a and H2b (see Table 5).

**Table 3.** Sports celebrity expertise and customer behavior (N=327).

Questions	1	2	3	4	5	M	Median	Mode
Sports celebrities have rather high professional expertise.	28 8,56%	35 10,7%	124 37,93%	118 36,09%	22 6,73%	3.21	3	3
As luxury brand endorsers, celebrity athletes have rather high level of professional expertise.	47 14,37%	47 14,37%	126 38,53%	87 26,61%	20 6,12%	2.95	3	3
Sports celebrity endorsements to brands matching their professional expertise makes me willing to buy the products.	40 12,23%	52 15,9%	126 38,53%	82 25,08%	27 8,26%	3.01	3	3
Sports celebrity endorsements to brands matching their professional expertise makes me decide to buy the products.	43 13,15%	50 15,29%	206 63%	95 29,05%	33 10,09%	3.99	3	3

1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree

*#H3a and # H3b: Sports celebrity attractiveness and effects on purchase intention and decision:* More than 50 percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that a sports celebrity is attractive. However, respondents mainly disagreed or strongly disagreed (37 percent) when attractiveness was associated with the commercial concept of a luxury brand. The overall attitude of attractiveness towards intention and decision of purchase skewed to the positive (Table 4). The statistical analysis confirmed both H3a ( $\rho=.859$ , N=327,  $p<.001$ ) and H3b ( $\rho=.896$ , N=327,  $p<.001$ ) (see Table 5).

**Table 4.** Sports celebrity attractiveness and customer behavior ( $N=327$ ).

Questions	1	2	3	4	5	<i>M</i>	Median	Mode
Celebrity sports athletes are attractive.	21 6,42%	14 4,28%	126 38,53%	129 39,45%	37 11,31%	3.45	4	4
As luxury brand endorsers, celebrity athletes are attractive.	55 16,82%	66 20,18%	143 43,73%	49 14,98%	14 4,28%	2.70	3	3
I will be willing to buy the brand endorsed by the athletes who I consider attractive.	31 9,48%	26 7,95%	125 38,23%	116 35,47%	29 8,87%	3.26	3	3
Because I am a fan of an attractive athlete endorser, I will buy the endorsed brand.	41 12,54%	57 17,43%	142 43,43%	68 20,8%	19 5,81%	2.90	3	3

1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree

**Table 5.** Spearman  $\rho$  correlation values between expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness of sports celebrity endorsers and purchase intention and decision of Chinese consumers ( $N=327$ ).

Chinese consumer behavior	Sports celebrity endorser variables		
	Trustworthiness	Expertise	Attractiveness
Purchase intention	.868*	.868*	.859*
Purchase decision	.863*	.866*	.896*

\*Note: Significant at the 1 percent level (two-sided)

### Discussion

This study offers empirical insights on the impact of sports celebrity endorsers of luxury brands in the Chinese consumer market. In an attempt to draw a profile of the typical Chinese luxury consumer, the study suggests that these consumers are generally at the age between 19 and 40 and with income levels at the typical middle-class levels of the country. The sample further suggests that luxury consumers in China are predominantly female. However, a more careful look at the findings suggests that female consumers do not have the same level of income and purchasing power as male consumers, thus affecting their impact on the usually high-priced luxury market (Heine, 2011). In addition, in contrast to previous studies (Bush *et al.*, 2004; 2005), the current

findings suggest that men are more influenced by sports celebrities than women. For these reasons, men could be a more suitable target group for luxury brand owners. In line with previous demographic insights (Cai *et al.*, 2010), the geographic distribution of Chinese luxury consumers is mainly concentrated in the economically developed areas of the country, with Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou playing the most important role. However, a significant proportion lives in less wealthy cities; given their purchasing power (Podoshen *et al.*, 2011) as well as their “westernized” shopping behavior (Davis, 2013), they are equally important customers for luxury brands.

With regard to the credibility and attractiveness of athlete endorsers, the study revealed their strong, positive and statistically significant associations towards Chinese consumers’ purchase intention and decision. That is, consumers who found that an athlete endorser possess one of the variables of trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness are heavily influenced towards their buying decisions. The results are therefore consistent with the majority of previous studies that indicate that credibility (Dixon and Flynn, 2008; Fleming *et al.*, 2005; Kim and Na, 2007; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Sertoglu *et al.*, 2014) and attractiveness (Baker and Churchill, 1977; Caballero *et al.*, 1989; Caballero and Salomon, 1984; Dixon and Flynn, 2008; Fleming *et al.*, 2005; Kim and Na, 2007; Liu *et al.*, 2007) of endorsers elicit positive responses from target audiences. Thus, our study suggests that celebrity sports athletes *are* important to Chinese consumers with regard to their impact on luxury product consumption.

Such a result, however, must be discussed in the context of other, similar studies. For instance, Ohanian (1990) revealed that while celebrities’ perceived product expertise was related to the purchase intention for American respondents, attractiveness and trustworthiness were not. In contrast, Pornpitakpan (2004) showed that these three dimensions (expertise, attractiveness and trustworthiness) are positively related with purchase intention for Singaporean consumers. Sertoglu *et al.* (2014) came to a similar conclusion in their empirical study in Turkey, while Liu *et al.* (2007) suggested that athlete attractiveness plays an important role in the Chinese sports product market. In this context, this study suggests that different cultures may possess different attitudes towards celebrities’ endorsements and there is no “one size fits all” selection of endorser. This is particularly true for luxury brands which have an international appeal. In fact, the purchasing decision of consumers goes through a psychological journey to interpret the advertising message using personal, social and commercial characteristics (Lafferty *et al.*, 2002). For instance, socially related considerations include influences

from friends, social circumstances, and general economic development (Solomon *et al.*, 2012). Thus, if companies engage in sports celebrity endorsements, additional and more creative ways need to be employed. To be more precise, towards the development of global advertising and communications strategies, endorsing a product with multiple celebrities could be more effective for appealing to various audiences and cultures. Furthermore, different celebrities may be associated with different characteristics, even among customers of the same target market. For example, the level of attractiveness of celebrity athletes varied among the respondents of the sample. Thus, using the endorsement variables as complementary has the potential to affect sales figures even more positively and justify the high costs associated with celebrity endorsement deals.

In conclusion, this study validates the use of sports celebrity endorsers of luxury brands in the Chinese consumer market. Although the majority of the consumers surveyed had mainly neutral opinions about the variables of attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise of celebrity athletes, their attitude demonstrated a strong and positive correlation with their purchase intentions and decisions. Further, the stronger their conviction about the attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise of the athletes, the more they were inclined to buy the endorsed product. The establishment of a link between sports celebrity influence and measures such as purchase intention and decision demonstrates that celebrity athlete endorsement can manifest in consumers' actions around the endorsed product. While additional research is necessary to further explore these underlying relationships, the study encourages luxury brand managers to use sports celebrities as endorsers of their products.

## **Conclusions**

### ***Theoretical and managerial implications***

The use of sports celebrities as brand endorsers is not a new practice, but one that is gaining increased interest in the consumer behavior marketing literature. Particularly in China, sports celebrity endorsements of luxury brands are an increasingly adopted marketing strategy (Schaefer *et al.*, 2011; Tschang, 2009). However, the effectiveness of such campaigns remained largely unknown. Thus, at the theoretical level, this study contributed original knowledge to the area where sports marketing overlaps with luxury consumption, being the first attempt to examine the effects of expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness of a sports celebrity endorser on Chinese luxury consumers. It therefore extends previous research on sports celebrity

endorsements and fills an identified gap in the marketing literature. With the pervasive use of celebrities in luxury advertising as well as the fierce competition among luxury brands, finding the appropriate celebrity endorser is a crucial matter for many brands.

At a practical level, too, the current study should assist practitioners who are considering signing sports celebrity endorsers. Celebrity fans can be a core loyal group of customers and it is necessary for brand managers and advertising professionals to benefit from consumer-celebrity relationships (Hung *et al.*, 2011). However, selecting an athlete as an endorser should be approached with care vis-à-vis their credibility and attractiveness. At the same time, practitioners should be aware of the increasingly strong competition that comes with sports endorsers, which involves a chance of overspending and thus jeopardizing the profitability of the strategy. Finally, the knowledge produced regarding Chinese luxury consumer characteristics and attitudes can also be extended to include marketing promotion and luxury brand endorsements by non-sports endorsers.

### ***Limitations and further research directions***

As this study represents one of the first to examine the effects of sports celebrity endorsement in the luxury market, several opportunities and ideas exist to address any potential limitations. For instance, while the survey generated a wealth of useful data regarding consumers' demographics and attitudes, further research via qualitative interviews would provide additional insights, particularly vis-à-vis their disinclination towards such marketing strategies. Furthermore, this additional type of research would address the limitations of the sample selection method (snowball technique) as well as assumptions made towards the sample. Although such a sampling method has great merits in its feasibility and economy, the representativeness might be compromised. That is, the study infers that those who saw and accepted the survey invitations would naturally have a strong interest in luxury consumption-related topics and were therefore self-selected. Such non-response bias may threaten the study's results in terms of external validity (Jordan *et al.*, 2011). Finally, given China's evolution as a worldwide sports powerhouse, further research on the influence of local sports celebrities on the Chinese market would be not only academically interesting, but also valuable for marketing professionals.

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