Lead By Example: The Impact Of Athlete Endorsement On Perceptions Of Nutritional Values.

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LEAD BY EXAMPLE: THE IMPACT OF ATHLETE ENDORSEMENT ON PERCEPTIONS OF NUTRITIONAL VALUES

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There is a prevalence of unhealthy food and drink sponsors in sport. Athlete endorsement leads to the formation of favourable brand attitudes and through positive association may contribute to the formation of favourable attitudes towards unhealthy consumption. Sponsorship often generates a positive image for the sponsor, both at the corporate and brand level (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999). Indeed, previous research (e.g., Carison & Donavan, 2008) has demonstrated that athlete endorsement can impact the effectiveness of advertising and brand recognition. Additionally, athlete endorsement can influence the attitudes formed about the brand (Kamins et al., 1989; Till, Stanley & Priluck, 2008), purchase intentions and purchase behaviour (Bush, Martin & Bush, 2004; Spry, Pappu & Cornwell, 2011). Brands Through endorsement, brands aim to emotionally connect consumers with the products and by doing so achieve their own marketing objectives (McGhee, 2012). This study aimed to examine the impact of athlete endorsement on estimates of the nutritional content of meals. Using a repeated measures design, 209 participants (78 male, 131 female) were exposed to three stimuli on three separate occasions: (1) images of meals only (control condition); (2) athlete endorsed meals; (3) and public endorsed meals. After exposure to the stimuli, participants estimated the nutritional content of the meals (calories, fat, protein, carbohydrate, saturated fat, salt, sugar, fibre). The order of the conditions was counterbalanced. Repeated measures ANOVA's were conducted to assess differences across the three conditions and in relation to the grouping variables age and BMI. Paired t-tests were used to assess perceptions based on participants' gender. Participants perceived that the meals were lower in calories, fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt in the athlete endorsed condition compared to the control and public endorsed conditions ($P < .01$). Participants also perceived the meals to have more protein in the athlete endorsed condition compared to the control and public endorsed conditions ($P < .01$). Further analysis identified differences in the perceptions of nutritional content of food based on the variables gender, age and BMI. The findings suggest that athlete endorsement impacts the perceptions of nutritional values in food, where food is perceived to be healthier than public endorsement or no endorsement. Thus, in line with Flint et al. (2014),

food brands may use athletes to endorse their products to influence favourable brand attitudes, purchase intentions and purchase behaviour.