

# “The marketing revolution of Tim Tebow: a celebrity endorsement case study”

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| ARTICLE INFO | Mark E. Moore, Chris Keller, James E. Zemanek and Jr. (2011). The marketing revolution of Tim Tebow: a celebrity endorsement case study. <i>Innovative Marketing</i> , 7(1) |
| RELEASED ON  | Friday, 25 March 2011                                                                                                                                                       |
| JOURNAL      | "Innovative Marketing "                                                                                                                                                     |
| FOUNDER      | LLC “Consulting Publishing Company “Business Perspectives”                                                                                                                  |



NUMBER OF REFERENCES

0



NUMBER OF FIGURES

0



NUMBER OF TABLES

0

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## The marketing revolution of Tim Tebow: a celebrity endorsement case study

### Abstract

American professional football player Tim Tebow is quickly becoming a premier product endorser in the corporate sector. Mr. Tebow is generally regarded as one of the best college athletes of his time, noted for his performance, positive leadership, character, and personal religious beliefs. Since ending his collegiate career and prior to any actual professional accomplishments, Mr. Tebow has both secured and demurred large brand endorsement contracts. These successful brand endorsements have been generally aligned with Mr. Tebow's character as opposed to specifically aligned with Mr. Tebow's accomplishments. This case study examines his marketing success from a consumer bonding theoretical approach. To conduct this examination, an array of documents was assessed and the results indicated that image congruency between the product and endorser evoked the consumer bonding levels. Findings also communicated that consumer bonding of Tebow with his consumer base is derived through a sequence of bonding levels and that Tebow, as a celebrity spokesperson, is influencing the behaviors of customers. The authors conclude that this capability is fostered through his wholesome image. Also, in this paper implications to theory and practice are discussed.

**Keywords:** Tim Tebow, American football, celebrity endorsement, marketing through sport, character, brand, marketing, promotion.

### Introduction

**Research aim.** Ex-Florida Gator and current Denver Broncos quarterback Tim Tebow has grown accustomed to the spotlight during his playing career. Success in the National Football League (NFL) is often measured by a commitment to constantly improve and adjust. Tebow's determination and will to succeed not only have helped him become a starting quarterback in the NFL but also have helped him become a valuable commodity to Fortune 500 companies and their marketing campaigns. Presently, Tebow is embarking on a new level of remarkable success as a unique marketing power. He has both secured and demurred large brand endorsement contracts.

Brand endorsements have been generally aligned with Mr. Tebow's character as opposed to specifically aligned with his accomplishments. These successes have occurred when many executives in the corporate communities cannot allocate an optimal level of funds to their promotional mix because of challenging economic conditions. Consequently, Mr. Tebow has had an endorsement success in a period when celebrity endorsements are carefully analyzed. Corporate decision-makers are becoming increasingly more concerned with congruency between the brand and the endorser (Yeung-Jo and June-Hee, 2007). When a match exists between the brand and the spokesperson, consumers have been shown to be more willing to make a purchase (Anderson and Zahaf, 2008). Yeung-Jo and June-Hee (2007) stressed that a brand has been found to be less favorable when the brand and the endorser

are not comparable. In such situations, an endorser can be viewed as a mistrusted source thus resulting in a subpar marketing investment (Amos, Holmes and Strutton, 2008; MarketWatch, 2006). Further, Temperley and Tangen (2006) cited the "Pinocchio factor", emphasizing that the consumer perceives the celebrity spokesperson as Pinocchio, wherein his or her nose grows when he or she is not telling the truth. The ambivalent outcomes in celebrity endorsements suggest there should be additional assessments to better understand the anatomy of a product endorsement from an investment orientation. The research aim of this study is to perform a critical analysis of Tebow's promotional contributions to corporate marketing activities through the focus of consumer bonding theory.

### 1. The initial assumptions of the paper

Since the beginning of the new century, celebrities have increasingly been in demand as product spokespersons. Ranjbarian, Shekarchizade and Momeni (2010) indicated that celebrities can influence the attitudes of prospective consumers toward the promoted products. As such, we assume that Mr. Tebow as a corporate spokesperson had been swaying the perceptions of prospects favorably toward the solicited offerings. We also assume that these individuals have positively perceived the products endorsed by Tim because this communication has enabled them to establish a vicarious relationship through him. Prendergast and Chan (2008) suggested that a customer's motivation for viewing advertisements is often linked to the propensity for imitating and bonding with the celebrity. Hence, we are further assuming that the relational exchange between the customer and celebrity can be explained through consumer bonding theory.

## 2. Reasoning for the focus of this study

There is currently an emphasis on gauging celebrity endorsements from a consumer response focus (Yeung-Jo and June-Hee, 2007). Recent studies have focused on developing an attitudinal forecasting model (Sheu, 2010), the influence of celebrity endorsements on consumer behavior and purchase intentions (Shuart, 2007), and the effectiveness of celebrity-product endorsement on influencing consumers buying decision process (Alnawas, 2010). As such, we assume our present investigation will make a contribution to efforts to better gauge the celebrity-customer exchange. Despite the importance of better understanding the effect of the celebrity endorser on behavioral outcome, there has been just a paucity of case studies focused toward this area (Chia-Chen, 2005; Darnell and Sparks, 2007; Jowdy and McDonald, 2002). Hence, we believe a critical case analysis of Tebow's prowess as an endorser can expand a marketer's insight of why customers connect with certain celebrities. Additionally, further assessment of the effectiveness of product endorsements in reaching target markets is needed from a consumer bonding thrust.

## 3. Previous research

Celebrity endorsement research begun to evolve during the mid 1990s as Michael Jordan's prowess as a spokesperson becoming visible and more valued as an investment option within the corporate community (Kellner, 1996). At the turn of the century, female athletes also begun to widespread appeal as corporate marketing personalities (Fink, Cunningham, and Kensicki, 2004). During the middle of the past decade, attention began to be directed toward aligning the endorser with the brand. Research began to question whether celebrity endorsement was an effective means for stimulating brand recall (Costanzo and Goodnight, 2005); the impact of celebrity endorsements on brand enhancement (Choi and Rifon, 2007); and the effect of endorser and brand images as mediators to product endorsement-brand equity association (Seno and Lukas, 2007).

During the latter segment of the past decade, researchers started to examine the effects of celebrity endorsements on customer responses. Ranjbarian, Shekarchizade and Momeni (2010) found that celebrities often directly or indirectly influence customer attitudes to particular brands. Eisend and Langner (2010) determined that attractiveness and expertise of the celebrity source can affect perceived attitudes toward solicited brands. In addition, the effects of the celebrity on purchase intentions and perceived effectiveness responses were assessed. Glover (2009) suggested linkages between the celebrity and destination awareness as well as purchase decisions in examining

tourist destinations. Amos, Holmes and Strutton (2008) indicated that celebrity trustworthiness, celebrity expertise, and celebrity attractiveness appears to capture the three most influential source effects on purchase intentions. Despite the importance given to assessing the effect of celebrity endorsements on consumer behavior, there has been few case studies focusing on the influence of an individual athlete: the endorsement potential of the female weightlifter Tara Nott after her 2000 Olympic Games appearance (Jowdy and McDonald, 2002); the endorsement trends with soccer star, David Beckham, from an international perspective (Chia-Chen, 2005); and capitalization by corporate sponsors on the media image of Canadian gold medalist, Simon Whitfield, in the inaugural men's triathlon during the 2000 Olympic Games (Darnell and Sparks, 2007). Further, there has been no examination of why customers form bonds with particular celebrity endorsers despite that consumer bonding theory has been tested in other areas of the marketing field. Consumer bonding has gained the attention of supply-chain researchers (Buttle, Ahmad, and Aldaigan, 2002), and Arantola (2002) conceptualized the types of bonds as they relate to the buyer and seller. Further, Cross (1992) explored the levels of consumer bonding in the direct marketing sector. The five levels included in Cross' (1992) depiction of bonding are awareness, identity, relationship, community and advocacy. These studies provide the framework for testing this theory from an endorsement perspective.

## 4. Research and epistemological approach

According to Perry (2001), case studies provide realistic relevance to answering "*why some endorsers are more effective than others in reaching the target market*" and also "*how this level of effectiveness is sustained by the endorser.*" As such, we believe that critical case analysis is an appropriate method to analyze one's potency as an endorser. The purpose of this study is to increase the level of knowledge regarding Tim Tebow as a celebrity spokesperson through interpreting the case analysis from a consumer bonding approach.

## 5. Originality of the paper and contribution to knowledge

In the corporate sector, endorsement contracts are foreseen as worthy investments when an organization engages the services of an effective endorser (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995). Given these financial implications, our study possesses originality in that it makes assumptions on why some celebrities are effective endorsers while others are not too potent. Further our investigation is original in that it performs a critical case analysis of a spokesperson as a

prospective marketing star. Finally, our study expands the knowledge base through considering the celebrity-customer linkage from a theoretical realm. We believe studying the effect of the endorsement source-consumer relationship from a consumer bondage perspective will make a significant contribution to the extant literature.

## 6. Theoretical and conceptual framework

**6.1. Consumer bonding theory.** A consumer bond is a relationship that arises to create value through partnering activities that evolve over time (Buttle, Ahmad and Aldaigan, 2002; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). We are positing that consumer bonding is the reason some celebrities, particularly certain professional athletes, are having an incredible degree of marketing success in their roles as product endorsers. Celebrity endorsers have been shown to stimulate interaction with targeted consumers. The establishment of this binding can shape whether and how consumers' needs are fulfilled (Thrassou and Vrontis, 2009), and this exchange can create a reciprocal association between the endorser and the consumer base. In a reciprocal situation, an endorsement investment offers added value for the endorser and consumer. Thus, the relationship becomes a reflexive collaboration in which both parties contribute to the success of the relationship (Beckett and Nayak, 2008). The underpinning of this bondage is the endorsers' image and its ability to connect with target consumers.

**6.2. Adopted theoretical perspective.** Our customer bonding theoretical perspective is based on image congruency. Image congruency is operationalized as congruency between the solicited brand image and the image of the product endorser. The endorsers' images are generally shaped by the products through which they have an association. As such, a celebrity must be considerate of how their own image can be impacted by a prospective endorsement opportunity (Till, 2001). Hence, the fit between the celebrity source and the nature of the products being endorsed has significance in determining the degree of bondage with targeted consumers (Yeung-Jo and June-Hee, 2007).

Yeung-Jo and June-Hee (2007) emphasized that a brand has been found to be less favorable when brand and endorser are not comparable. Hence it is our theoretical postulation that degree of fit between the celebrity source and the characterization of the product/brand determines the degree to which consumer bondage is activated. When the images of products and the product endorsers firmly correspond, we posit that the levels of consumer bonding (e.g. awareness, identity, relationship, community and advocacy) will be strengthened. These assumptions are supported through the past work of the

scholars (Buttle, Ahmad, and Aldaigan, 2002; Jo, 2005; Tripp, Jensen, and Carlson, 1994; van der Veen, and Haiyan, 2010; White, Goddard, and Wilbur, 2009) that foresaw image congruency between the endorser and the product or brand as the antecedent to consumer bonding.

*RQ1: Does image congruency between the solicited product(s) and the endorser strengthen the levels of consumer bonding?*

For the purpose of offering additional insight and criteria for evaluating the degree of bonding among the endorser and the consumer base, we have prepared rationales and respective research questions in the forthcoming Sections. These items have been organized according to Cross' (1992) levels of consumer bonding.

According to Cross (1992), the first level of consumer bonding is formation of an awareness bond. During this level of relationship building, the customer is becoming knowledgeable about the celebrity as an endorser. Thus, the interested prospect will likely consider why the celebrity should be taken as a credible source and whether the image of the spokesperson is consistent with the solicited product. To stimulate a level of awareness toward the celebrity, the marketers will have to effectively utilize the promotional mix since the customer is in a period of learning (Arantola, 2002). This mode of communication, required to sustain an awareness bond, can be an expensive and time-consuming proposition (Arantola, 2002). Additionally Arantola suggested that as customers become knowledgeable about the product, they initially lack loyalty to the offering; however as more familiarity is gained, customers tend to evoke a stronger propensity to establish a commitment. We believe that this heuristic is adaptable to the endorsement setting. As customers' level of awareness toward the celebrity is enhanced, they generally more apt to initiate the bonding process. Hence, the customers' level of awareness toward Tim Tebow will shape his future reputation as a marketer.

*RQ2: Has an awareness bond been established between Tim Tebow and customers?*

At the identity level, the customers have the higher propensity for belonging, status and self-fulfillment (Cross, 1992); thus, when these values are shared, identities are formed. From an endorsement perspective, when customers perceive themselves as assimilation with the values that the celebrity projects, they are likelier to establish an identity with the person. This identity can enable the customers to vicariously satisfy their belonging needs; thus establishing further bonding with the celebrity source (Arantola, 2002). However, when there is a negative identity associated



with the source there will be no further relationship development (Arantola, 2002). For all of the aforementioned reasons, we assume that Tebow's character is prompting customers to identify with his promotional messages. As such, this association could be fulfilling their needs for belonging and self-actualization, and, therefore, strengthening the desire to broaden the relationship with Tebow.

*RQ3: Has an identity bond been established between Tim Tebow and customers?*

The relationship level creates a direct exchange between the celebrity and the customer base (Cross, 1992). This exchange can create a reciprocal association between the endorser and the customers. Hence, in a relationship bond, an endorsement arrangement offers added value for the endorser and customers that cannot be created at the awareness and identity levels (Arantola, 2002). A relationship bond is, therefore, foreseen as being reflexive in that the association is mutually beneficial for all entities involved (Beckett and Nayak, 2008). For the endorser, the bond can provide enhanced marketing prowess. As such, it enables the celebrity to enhance her or his reputation as a marketer (Shuart, 2007). For the consumers, the relationship can provide a sense of personalization with the endorser (Sylvia and Suri, 2007). This can result in hedonic feelings that often further the bonding process (Bloemer, Odekerken-Schröder and Kestens, 2003). Given this rationale, we assume that Tebow's endorsement agreements possess enough positives to motivate each party to progress the bond into the next level.

*RQ4: Has a relationship bond been established between Tim Tebow and customers?*

The communal aspect integrates the marketing item into an integral part of the customer's life (Cross, 1992). Positive communal bonds are created when they have strong means to a group (Arantola, 2002). This prompts individuals to have interactions with others who seek out the same experiences (Cross, 1992). The corporate sector often seeks to increase awareness toward their products through developing a community bond between the celebrity endorser and the customer (Madrigal, 2001). In the NASCAR (National Association for Stock Car Automobile Racing) circles, fans create a sense of community with drivers that share their values (Amato, Bodkin, and Peters, 2010). This relationship can provide the drivers marketing potency in soliciting corporate products

and enables corporate marketers to organize events that can facilitate further bonding among the fans and the drivers. As such, this bonding could result in enhanced involvement between the fans and drivers as product endorsers. On and off the football field, Tim Tebow has exhibited a positive attitude, admirable character and diligent work ethic. In considering his abilities as a marketer, we are suggesting that he has the skills to attract a community of individuals to his marketing causes.

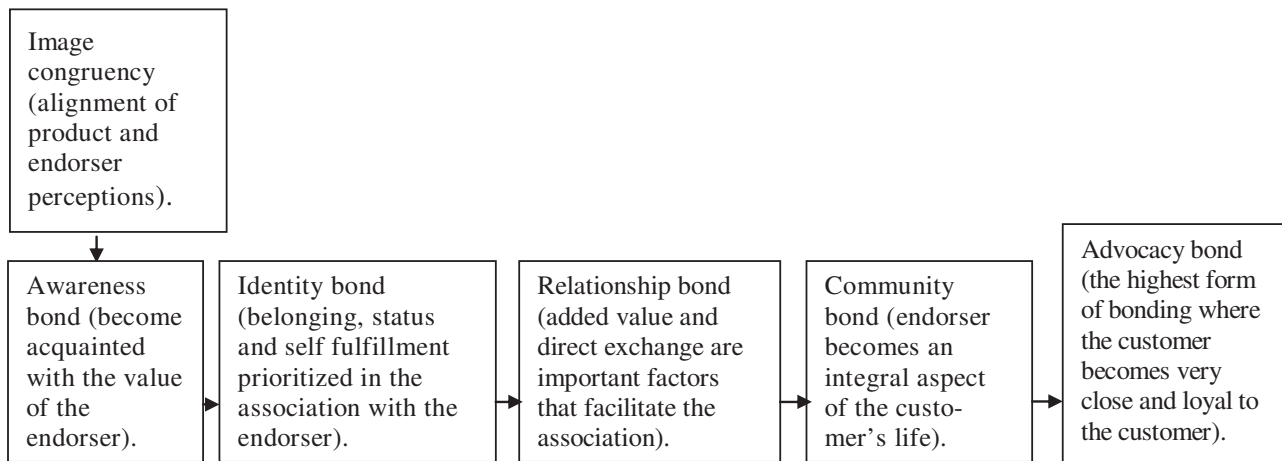
*RQ5: Has a community bond been established between Tim Tebow and customers?*

According to Cross (1992), advocacy is the highest level of consumer bonding and most sought after level. In this stage, customers experience extreme closeness and trust with the product or marketing source; thus, Cross (1992) emphasized that word of mouth promotion is viral when the advocacy level is reached. Due to notoriety, popularity and trustworthiness, celebrity endorsers frequently realize success in forging an alliance with targeted customers (Van der Veen, and Haiyan, 2010). However, we are cognizant that some celebrities will be more capable than others in reaching their audiences. As such, we believe it is important for marketers to know if there is sufficient mutual commitment between Tebow and his customer base to establish a bond of advocacy.

*RQ6: Has an advocacy bond been established between Tim Tebow and customers?*

**6.3. Definitions and assumptions.** To assist the reader in understanding this study, we are offering the following definitions of key concepts which are illustrated in Figure 1:

- ◆ Image congruency is the degree of comparability between Tim Tebow's image and the images of products he is endorsing.
- ◆ Awareness bond is the degree of familiarity associated to Tebow as a product endorser.
- ◆ Identity bond is the degree to which Tebow's endorsements of products resonates in the marketplace.
- ◆ Relationship bond is the degree to which the association of Tebow to the customer is mutually beneficial.
- ◆ Community bond is the degree to which Tebow can mobilize individuals to his marketing efforts.
- ◆ Advocacy bond is the degree to which personally disseminate and promote Tebow and his messages as a product endorser.



Note: modified from Cross, R.H. (1992).

Source: *Direct Marketing*, 55 (6), pp. 33-7.

**Fig. 1. Consumer bonding process. The five degrees of customer bonding.**

Through the model depiction, we suggest that when congruency exists between the images of the solicited product and the celebrity, the levels of consumer bonding is activated. Once the congruency is achieved, we believe that customers begin to learn about the endorser (e.g., Tim Tebow). Subsequently, we feel that the awareness level can lead to an identity bond with an endorsement. Through this identity, we expect a direct exchange to develop between the customer and the endorser that accumulates worth for both entities. Additionally, we posit that the relationship bond will lead to a sense of community where the endorser is given an important position within the life of the customers. Finally, we suggest that advocacy is the highest level of consumer bonding that underscores and creates loyalty and closeness of the customer to the endorser.

## 7. Methodology and analysis

**7.1. Research method.** Our research method is critical case analysis. This form of inquiry has been utilized in this study because our investigation focused upon a single individual, Tim Tebow, and a marketing concept, consumer bonding. Other researchers have applied this method to examine a selection of marketing issues. Such examinations have included search engine optimization (SEO) as an online technique (Spais, 2010), customer relationship management practices (Das, Parmar and Otis, 2009) and promotion of broadband networks (Tapia, Powell and Ortiz, 2009).

**7.2. Selection of the critical case and determination of data gathering and analysis.** As our critical case, we examined the marketing potency of American football star Tim Tebow through viewing his endorsement activities from a consumer bonding perspective. We conducted this assessment through the utilization of three data sources: articles (e.g.,

Bedinger, 2010; Fusfeld, 2010, Gordon, 2010; Kruse, 2010; Support Tebow's Super Bowl Ad' Group, 2010; Wilson, 2010); an e-poll conducted by USA today (Not even in NFL yet, Tim Tebow, 2010); and the DBI (Schoettle, 2010). In assessing this documentation, we followed Flyvberg's (2006) methodological guidelines for researchers to follow in order to understand the impact on social action. This strategy is executed through four questions that the research should ask according to Flyvberg (2006) in implementing the study: (1) Where are we going? (2) Is this development desirable? (3) Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power? (4) What, if anything, should we do about it?

**7.3. Where are we going?** Results suggest that congruency is being established between Tebow's image and the images of the products promoted through his endorsements. Fusfeld (2010) recently emphasized that Tim does not accept just any endorsement opportunity but carefully scrutinizes proposals to determine which ones permit him to speak truly. Tebow's selectivity is occurring at the time when corporate executives are becoming prudent concerning their investments in celebrity endorsers. In the aftermath of the Michael Vick and Tiger Woods scandals, corporations are focused more than ever on hiring the right athletes to represent their companies. For a corporation to put a face on their brand, this guy (Tebow) is the real deal. "He's the one guy who's not going to be involved in a scandal two or three years from now" stated a corporate executive (Cobb, 2010). Making ill-advised selections can quickly shift the public's perception of a business and cripple its viability in the marketplace. Tebow is adept at evoking customer attention due to demonstration of many positive characteristics. Given his skill to connect in the marketplace, there is evidence that Tim has started the process of bonding with customers.

**7.4. Is this development desirable?** Results suggest a desirable state as evidence exists that bonding is active between Tebow and his customer base. Kruse (2010) reported that Tim is more known than most quarterbacks in the NFL according to a survey conducted by e-poll market research. Another e-poll indicated that 25% of the respondents are aware of Tebow (Not even in NFL yet, Tim Tebow, 2010) (See Table 1). Additionally, the USA today e-poll indicated that 27% of those surveyed perceived Tebow as being “compassionate” and 31% associated him with a “sincere” identity (Not even in NFL yet, Tim Tebow, 2010) (See Table 1). Further evidence of an identity bond is suggested by Kruse (2010) whom stated Tim is the most influential athlete in America.

Table 1. Marketability comparison of Tim Tebow and Michael Jordan

|               | Tebow | Jordan |
|---------------|-------|--------|
| Awareness     | 24%   | 78%    |
| Compassionate | 27%   | 7%     |
| Down to earth | 31%   | 11%    |
| Influential   | 28%   | 35%    |
| Overexposed   | 23%   | 9%     |
| Sincere       | 32%   | 9%     |
| Stylish       | 10%   | 19%    |
| Trendsetter   | 10%   | 21%    |
| Trustworthy   | 28%   | 8%     |

Source: Not even in NFL yet, Tim Tebow (2010).

The Davie-Brown Index (DBI) reveals that Tebow is receiving direct exchange benefits from his marketing activities. The DBI is an independent index that determines a celebrity’s ability to influence brand affinity and consumer purchase intent. Created from the brand perspective, the DBI provides brands, agencies, and media properties with a systematic approach for quantifying and qualifying the use of celebrities in their communications platforms. When presenting a representative sample of 1,000 people around the country with the name and face of athletes and celebrities, Tebow scored off the charts on the DBI. According to Darin David, account director for The Marketing Arm agency, “nobody seems to have popped out quite like Tebow” (Tim Tebow is in Underwear War, 2010). David stated further “expect to see him often in print and television advertisements as the NFL season prepares to begin”. The analysis also offers evidence that the corporate community is receiving benefits of direct exchange from its involvement with Tebow since the DBI measures imply enhanced brand messaging and positive returns on investments from endorsement arrangements. Also, customers are receiving direct exchange remunerations from their associations with the Tebow image. Take, for example, Tebow’s recently released Nike cross trainer shoe sold on-line exclusively at the Nike Store. Customers were allowed to place orders at

1:50 am on August 6, 2010. In less than five minutes, all 500 pairs of the limited edition orange and blue shoes were sold out (Wilson, 2010). Collectors are now offering Tebow’s shoe for sale in excess of \$1,000.00 on websites like eBay and Craigslist (Bedinger, 2010), indicating promise for Tebow memorabilia to be prized possessions like baseball cards of years past.

Further analysis implies that the relationship bond is facilitating an enhanced sense of community between Tebow and his marketplace followers. According to Gordon (2010), the new Facebook group, “Support Tebow’s Super Bowl Ad”, devoted to supporting focus on the family’s right to free speech grew by the minute when it was first launched on the social networking site. In addition, his new Facebook and Tweeter pages are receiving record numbers of visitors (New way for Tebow to push his marketing, 2010). Another indicator that Tebow is a community builder is the following, he has amassed in the Christian community because of his values and life priorities (Kruse, 2010). This community bond has strengthened the degree of advocacy and loyalty toward Tebow the endorser. According to Kruse (2010), Tebow’s Q ratings for popularity and appeal have generated unprecedented ratings. In addition, Kruse (2010) underscored his above average DBI scores as further proof that customers attach significant loyalty to Tebow as a corporate spokesperson.

**7.5. Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power?** Mr. Tebow is gaining in shares of endorsement opportunities in the corporate realm. He reportedly turned down a number of seven-figures per year endorsement opportunities because he doesn’t want anything to get in between him and his focus on football (Cobb, 2010). Our analysis also indicates that corporations that have hired Tim as a spokesperson are also gaining through their power to select an individual who will be good ambassador for their products. Given their failure selecting endorsers in the past, corporations are focused more than ever on hiring the right athletes to represent their companies. The losers are the celebrities who have previously had deals with scandalous issues in their lives. These individuals no longer possess considerable leverage to contemplate endorsing opportunities since corporate leaders no longer have tolerate for making ill-advised selections that can quickly shift the public’s perception of a business and cripple its viability in the marketplace.

**7.6. What, if anything, should we do about it?** Marketers should understand the importance of having congruency between the images of their products and the images of the endorser. Additionally, celebrities should become more cognizant of how their images are perceived in marketplace, and select opportunities that will assist in developing a favorable image.



## Discussion

We confirmed that Tim Tebow, the marketer could be effectively analyzed through critical case analysis. This examination supports our initial assumption that individuals are vicariously relating to Mr. Tebow's promotional messages. Hence, the outcomes of this analysis support another assumption that Tebow is changing perceptions about the products being solicited. This transformation is salient because there is image congruency between Tim's reputation and perceptions of the products being solicited. This image consistency is prompting bonding between Tebow and his followers. The bonding levels appear to be sequence from lowest to the highest; thus supporting the assumption that bonding process relating to celebrity endorsers is hierarchically structured.

In conclusion, results show that Tebow's wholesome images are influencing customer actions. His influence on customers' behavioral outcomes supports of previous investigators (Costanzo and Goodnight, 2005; Choi and Rifon, 2007; Seno and Lukas, 2007). Based on our findings, we also concluded that another reason for Tebow's marketing success is his ability to select endorsement opportunities that fit his image. His selectivity offers support for the work of Till (2001) who determined that celebrity must be considerate of how their own image can be impacted by a prospective endorsement opportunity. Tebow's selectivity also supports past works (Yeung-Jo and June-Hee, 2007) that indicated that brands are less favorable when the endorser and the brand are not comparable.

Further analysis of our results suggests that Tebow and his customer base have formed bonds at various levels. Such outcomes are supportive of Cross' (1992) theoretical postulations that bonding occurs through the stages of awareness, identity, relationship, community and advocacy. Our results indicating that customers possess a high degree of knowledge about Tebow's marketing exploits reinforces Arantola's (2002) postulation that learning is an important element in the bonding element. Results showing that customers are forming an identity with Tebow are congruent with Cross' (1992) belief that individuals create identities in the bonding process to fulfill needs for belonging. According to our findings, the identity bond enables further bonding to occur through direct exchange. Tebow scored high on DBI indicators while customers satisfy their belonging needs though the procurement of Tebow's merchandise. As such, the relationship bond provides benefits to both parties thus offering acceptance of past works (Arantola, 2002; Bloemer, Odekerken-Schröder and

Kestens, 2003). Results have shown communal bonding with Tebow on social networking sites. The fact that this type of bonding has been developed to reinforce the prior arguments of scholars (Amato, Bodkin, and Peters, 2010; Arantola, 2002) that a communal association bring about shared values and a sense of meaning to the participants. Finally, we believe the analysis suggests that an advocacy bond is formulating because of strong loyalty between Tebow and his followers. Given this allegiance, our findings are supportive of the indications from van der Veen, and Haiyan (2010) celebrity endorsers commonly are able to enter a bond with targeted customers due to the amount of trust bestowed of these spokespersons.

## Implications, limitations, and further research

Our findings show support for consumer bonding theory as a plausible explanation why Mr. Tebow has achieved success in corporate marketing at the beginning of his career. Previous applications of the theory have been formulated in supply-chain marketing (Buttle, Ahmad and Aldaigan, 2002), direct marketing (Cross, 1992) and general marketing (Arantola, 2002). Consequently, we have extended the testing of consumer bonding studies to the field of celebrity endorsements. Further, in performing our examination, we deciphered individualized levels of bonding in order to advance Cross' (1992) initial efforts and to offer scholars more insight on this process.

Our investigation suggests the importance of the careful selection of celebrity endorsers that are in alignment with the products being solicited and have an ability to relate to target consumers. From this perspective, corporate marketers should become more aware of consumer bonding and how this process relates to endorsement effects.

The first limitation is the use of secondary data to assess the exploits of Tim Tebow as a celebrity endorser. Hence, future efforts should apply survey designs to gauge perceptions of Tebow from a consumer bondage standpoint. The second limitation is the analysis of a singular celebrity to study consumer bondage theory. As such subsequent studies could examine multiple athletes as product endorsers through mixed model designs. Thus, this approach could utilize techniques as surveys, experiments, focus groups and personal interviews to receive better comprehension of celebrities as product advocates. Finally, our examination is limited in that we were unable to evaluate the appeal of Tim Tebow over time. Consequently, further examinations of athletes as endorsers should be longitudinally formulated.



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