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Sport Management Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/smr



Branding athletes: Exploration and conceptualization of athlete brand image

Akiko Arai^a, Yong Jae Ko^{a,*}, Stephen Ross^b

^a University of Florida, United States

^b University of Minnesota, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 December 2011

Received in revised form 26 April 2013

Accepted 27 April 2013

Keywords:

Athlete

Brand management

Brand image

Conceptual model

ABSTRACT

In this study, the current issues of athlete brand management are discussed and the construct of athlete brand image is conceptualized. A conceptual model of athlete brand image (MABI) is developed incorporating three key dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. These dimensions are defined by an athlete's on-field characteristics, attractive external appearance, and off-field marketable attributes. This study contributes to the sport branding literature by providing the first comprehensive conceptual framework of athlete brand image and offering managerial implications for building and managing the brand image of individual athletes.

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1. Introduction

Recently, many athletes have been expanding their influence beyond their sport by getting involved in a variety of social activities and businesses. In light of modern media culture, those athletes are considered “a social sign, carrying cultural meanings and ideological values, which express the intimacies of individual personality, inviting desire and identification; an emblem of national celebrity, founded on the body, fashion and personal style” (Gledhill, 1991, p. xiii). The concept of ‘athlete brand’ has emerged from their multi-functional and multi-platform nature. Athletes are considered not only as vehicles for advertisements or product endorsement, but also as cultural products that can be sold as “brands” (Gilchrist, 2005). In fact, there are numerous sport agencies currently in existence that provide a vast range of client level services. In this highly competitive industry, managing brands for athletes is becoming an essential task for agents (IBIS World Industry reports, 2008). For example, IMG, the world's largest sport agency announced their mission statement as “Today, we help hundreds of elite athletes, coaches, industry executives and prestigious sports organizations maximize their earnings potential and build strong personal brands” (IMG, n.d.).

The brand management for athletes has grown in importance because the concept of branding is well suited for athletes as products. Previous branding studies have documented positive consequences of successful branding such as: influencing the probability of brand choice, willingness to pay premium price, marketing communication effectiveness, and promotion of positive word of mouth (Aaker, 1996; Berry, 2000; Keller, 1993; Rein, Kotler, & Shields, 2006a). These benefits are also highly applicable to individual athletes, with well-branded athletes attaining price premiums on their salary, transfer fees, contract monies, and the ability to maintain fan support even when their performance has declined (Gladden & Funk, 2001). Well-branded athletes who carry symbolic messages can attract companies seeking effective endorsers. Furthermore, the

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 352 392 4042; fax: +1 352 392 7588.

E-mail address: yongko@ufl.edu (Y.J. Ko).

established brand value of the athlete will help his/her post-athletic career because well-branded athletes can leverage their brand value through their post-athletic career (Rein et al., 2006a). Rein et al. (2006a) pointed out the advantage of viewing athletes as a brand, stating “because there are a growing number of distribution opportunities available, the athlete has the potential to enter into a variety of sectors and use his or her sports career as a platform for other endeavors.” Additionally, athletes are considered to be unstable products in the sport industry because of the potential risks for unexpected injuries or performance slumps. Considering those risks, athletes are truly in need of strong branding strategies. Even though winning is one of the major factors in the sports brand mix, win-loss cycles are an inevitable condition for athlete brands. Sports marketers should seek other branding strategies (e.g., establishing of a strong brand identity) to overcome losing records and sustain loyalty (Rein, Kotler, & Shields, 2006b; Richelieu & Pons, 2006). Acknowledging the unique nature of the sports products including those of athletes, Rein et al. (2006b) emphasized that “sports products can only survive with new brand thinking” (p.30).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the construct of athlete brand image and propose a conceptual model of athlete brand image (MABI). This study identifies specific dimensions of athlete brand image through an extensive literature review. The MABI provides a theoretical understanding of athlete brand image and offers a structural framework for managers and agents in the development and management of athlete brands.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Definition of athlete brand

Defining an athlete brand is a fundamental step in the process of model development. Several scholars have attempted to define “human brand”, but a common consensus has not yet been achieved. A brand in sports is defined as “a name, design, symbol, or any combination that a sports organization uses to help differentiate its product from the competition” (Shank, 1999, p. 239). According to this definition, all individual athletes can be considered as brands because every athlete has a name, distinctive appearance, and a personality. Consistent with this, Thomson (2006) broadly defined the human brand as “any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts” (p.104). On the other hand, according to Keller, “A brand is something that has actually created a certain amount of awareness, reputation, prominence, and so on in the market place” (Keller, 2008, p. 2). Till (2001) discussed athlete brand in a limited sense, and implied that only athletes who have earned a significant amount of money from endorsement contracts can be considered as brands.

By applying these basic concepts, we define an athlete brand as a public persona of an individual athlete who has established their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face or other brand elements in the market.

2.2. Brand equity and athlete brand image

Branding is generally understood to be a strategy for establishing a trademark the public associates exclusively with an entity (Storie, 2008). From an academic perspective, branding is often discussed in terms of developing, building, managing, and measuring brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Ross, 2006). Brand equity is often defined as the added value attached to the brand name or other brand elements (Aaker, 1996), and includes both financial and customer-based perspectives of value (Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998). However, recent brand management literature tends to understand ‘brand equity’ focusing only on the consumer’s perspective, while ‘brand value’ indicates quantifiable elements in relation to its financial worth (Raggio & Leone, 2009). Although consensus for a definition of brand equity has yet to be reached, consistent with the majority of previous studies (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993), this study concentrates on the consumer’s perspective of brand equity.

Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) have conducted extensive research on brand equity, and are viewed as perhaps the two foremost authorities on the topic. Aaker’s (1991) framework emphasizes the contents of brand equity, and includes brand name awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand associations. Alternatively, Keller (1993) developed a customer-based brand equity model, suggesting that positive equity is developed when customers have high levels of awareness and familiarity with the brand, and hold strong, favorable, and unique brand associations in memory. Although Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) have taken different approaches in understanding brand equity, both emphasized the importance of brand associations in the process of building a strong brand. In fact, subsequent marketing studies have found that brand choice and brand loyalty are highly influenced by the image that consumers make with a brand (Bauer, Sauer, & Exler, 2005; Bauer, Sauer, & Exler, 2008; Chen, 2001; Low & Lamb, 2000). Importantly, marketing a sport property (e.g., team or individual athlete) is “all about selling an image” while other product brands may have many other tangible brand elements (e.g., quality and price) that could be managed (Cordiner, 2001, p. 13). Given this important distinction, the focus of this study is an athlete’s brand image.

Brand image has been defined as the reasoned or emotional perceptions consumers attach to specific brands (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990), and involves the perceptions of a particular brand as reflected by the brand associations held in a consumer’s memory (Keller, 1993). Based on these definitions, ‘brand image’ and ‘brand association’ are often used interchangeably in the literature (e.g., Bauer, Sauer, et al., 2005). Keller (1993) further classified the types of brand associations into overall brand attitudes, brand attributes (i.e., product-related attributes and non-product-related attributes), and brand benefits (i.e., functional benefit, symbolic benefit, experiential benefits). Brand attributes are “those descriptive features that characterize a product or service – what a consumer thinks the product or service is or has and what is involved with its

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