

## Branding Individual Athletes: Development of a Conceptual Framework

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Branding 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). Previous studies found that positive brand image strongly influence the brand loyalty (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Bauer, Sauer, & Exler, 2005). The brand image refers to the cumulative product of brand associations (Keller, 1993). Brand association is informational nodes linked to the brand in memory and contains the meaning of the brand for consumer (Keller, 1993). Thus, identification of brand association dimensions is very important task to understand fan loyalty toward individual athletes.

In his seminal work, Keller (1993) developed Customer Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, which explains the role of brand association in the process of creating brand equity. Keller (1993) classified brand association into three categories: attribute, benefit, and attitude. Attributes are those descriptive features that characterize a product. The product attribute is further classified into product related (ingredients necessary for performing the product) and non-product related features (additional aspects of the product). Scholars identified criteria for source credibility which is one of the most important attributes of athlete endorsers; they include attractiveness (Baker & Churchill, 1977), trustworthiness (Giffin, 1967) and expertise (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Maddux & Rogers, 1980). Ohanian (1990, 1991) developed a scale for measuring celebrity endorsers' credibility based on the three dimensions. Highly credible sources produce more positive attitude changes toward the position advocated (Ohanian, 1990, 1991). Athletes and celebrities who have high source credibility will be effective brand endorsers. In this study, because the person itself is seen as a brand, the Ohanian's source credibility can be transferred as brand association dimension for individual athletes. Benefits refer to consumer's personal value and expectation of what the product or service can do for them. Benefits are classified into (a) problem-solving needs (functional), (b) desires for products that fulfill internally generated needs for self-enhancement, role position, group membership, and ego-identification (symbolic), and (c) desires for products that provide sensory pleasure, variety and cognitive stimulation (experiential). Scholars in sport literature attempted to find brand association dimensions in the context of team sport by using the CBBE model (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006; Bauer, Sauer, & Exler, 2008). For example, Gladden and Funk (2000) found sixteen dimensions of brand association in sport team (e.g., success, tradition, fan identification, escape).

Although a number of studies have examined brand management of sport teams, few studies have addressed the importance of branding individual athletes. In addition, previous brand management studies focused on individual athlete as brand endorsers, not brand itself (Ohanian, 1990, 1991; Yu, 2005; Charbonneau & Garland, 2006; Kim & Na, 2007). Recent studies suggested that individual athletes should be considered as a brand (Ammon, 2006; Carlson & Donovan, 2008; Thomson, 2006). This argument can be justified by Carlson and Donovan's (2008) study in which sport fans develop team loyalty through their identification with individual athletes. The players' unique "persona" has public meaning which is different from the original personality. In reality, athletes have additional associations and features of brands such as message, public appearance, and endorsement (Thomson, 2006). Managing athletes as a brand is important because the commercial values of athletes are intangible and difficult to measure. Frequently, the values of athletes are assessed not only by successful performance, but also by other factors such as players' character and their style. Tiger Woods can be a good example. Although his performance is excellent, his challenging play style and physical appearance add value on him as a professional sport player. On the other hand, athletes are different from more tangible products, such as shoes or training wear because athletes' performances are more unpredictable and uncontrollable product. This is true particularly when athletes are vulnerable to injury. Therefore, to obtain a stable following is more important for athletes. Brand loyalty ensures a more stable following even when the core product's performance falters (Gladden & Funk, 2002).

To identify the factors that contribute to brand association of individual athletes is a critical task for better understanding of sport consumers and their loyalty formation. The efforts will ultimately help sport agents and marketers in developing effective branding strategies of individual athletes. Accordingly, this study is designed to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework of brand association for an individual athlete by modifying existing conceptual frameworks of brand association in team sport (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006; Bauer, Sauer, & Exler, 2008) and individual brand endorser (Ohanian, 1990, 1991). As in other brand association research on sport team we incorporated brand attributes and benefits of Keller's (1993) Customer Based Brand Equity (CBBE). Through a comprehensive literature review, we identified dimensions of brand association that would match with our model of individual athlete brand from the brand association dimensions found in the

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team sport brand studies. The dimensions of brand association include four (4) performance related attributes (i.e., Winning Record, Expertise, Style of Competition, and Rivalry) and five (5) non-performance related attributes (i.e., Trustworthiness, Symbol, Physical Attractiveness, Relationship with Fans, Role Model, and Unique Personal Background). Benefits include one (1) functional benefit (i.e., Knowledge of Sport), three (3) symbolic benefits (i.e., Affiliation, Vicarious Achievement, and Self-Identification) and three (3) experiential benefits (i.e., Escape, Nostalgia, and Entertainment). In addition, along with positive attributes and benefits, consumers' brand attitude is hypothesized to have a positive influence psychological commitment to an athlete. The ultimate outcome of the enhanced brand association and psychological commitment will be increased behavioral loyalty. All in all, we believe that the factors included in the proposed framework are important for developing individual athletes as a brand (human brand). The authors will discuss theoretical and practical implications in the presentation.