I Donate Money because I Trust You: Influence of Athlete

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Many athletes are donating money, raising funds, and volunteering through private and public charity organizations, or donation and fundraising programs in their teams and leagues (e.g., NBA Cares, Baseball Tomorrow Fund, Hockey Fights Cancer, NFL Charities, and Tiger Wood Foundation). Numerous athletes participate in fundraising or donation for a cause of their interests such as Katrina relief, children's hospital, and humane society (Wilson, Glier, Kepner, & Shpigel, 2005). Also, some professional athletes parlay their money and time through their own charity organizations. According to USA Today (2001), more than 350 public charities and private foundations are connected to professional teams or athletes. For example, Michael Jordan has been involved with several charities and many charitable organizations such as the Michael Jordan Charity International Golf Tournament, the James R. Jordan Boys and Girls Club, and Family Life Center (White, 2006), and Tiger Woods has actively involved with community-based programs such as Tiger Woods Learning Center, Tiger's Action Plan, and Tiger’s Block Party. Fundraising and donation of these athletes probably encourage others to be interested in causes and donate money. Strode (2006) found that highly identified fans would donate more than fans who have low level of identification. Also, involvement with athletics is one of the most significant factors to donate to the athletic programs (Tsotsou, 1998). Although numerous athletes involve in charities or fundraising, limited research has been conducted to explore the effects of athletes on donation. The purpose of the current study, therefore, is to explore how identification with athlete and athlete's brand image will influence the level of trust in athlete which may ultimately affect the donating behavior.

Identity with Athlete

According to identity theory, an individual’s concept of self is composed of multiple role-identities (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Ervin and Stryker (2001) noted that the multiple role-identities have different levels of identity salience based on an individual’s value on each role and identity salience positively influences one’s future behavior. Fink, Trail, and Anderson (2002) found that fans with strong team identification, which is an important source of sport fans’ behavior, are more likely to attend games, pay more for tickets, and buy more team-related products. Also, fan’s identification with the athlete, or celebrity, has positive influence on endorsement, and brand- and team-related intentions (Kamins et al., 1989; Carlson & Donavan, 2008). Further, fan identity studies showed that fans often evaluated the performance or abilities of their teams or athletes favorably and positively (Branscombe & Wann, 1994), which is an antecedent of trustworthiness (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). That is, an individual who is highly identified with an athlete will be more likely to think positively about the ability of the athlete, which will lead to the high level of trust. Thus, we proposed:

H1: Identity with athlete will positively influence the level of trust in athlete.

Athlete’s Brand Image

Rein, Kotler, and Shields (2006) defined sport brand as “synthesis of facts and images that comprise a sports products and is often defined by slogans, themes, positions, symbols, product characteristics, and a number of other tangible and intangible attributes.” Researchers identified that the brand image have positive influence on the brand loyalty (Gladen & Funk, 2001; Bauer, Sauer, & Exler, 2005). Further, some studies found out that corporate image and trust have significant effect on individual behavior (e.g., Ratnasingham, 1998). Specifically, Flavian and Guinaliu (2005) found that perceived image of a corporation had positive influence on consumer’s trust. According to Keller (2008, p21), “public figures such as politicians, entertainers and professional athletes who have well-defined images that are easily understood and liked (or disliked) by others can be seen as brands.” Indeed, researchers and practitioners believe that athlete endorsers can increase consumers’ awareness, improve product image, and influence consumers in purchase intention (Jowdy & McDonald, 2002). These findings imply that an individual athlete has his or her own image and can be a brand itself. Also, positive brand image of an athlete can lead to the higher level of trust in that athlete. In this respect, we hypothesized that:
H2: An individual athlete’s brand image will positively influence the level of trust in athlete.

Trust

In most cases, trust is an essential factor for successful relationships (Berry 1995; Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh 1987; Moorman, Deshpande, & Zaltman 1993; Morgan & Hunt 1994). According to Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman (1993, p. 82), trust is defined as "a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence." Also, Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 23) stated that trust "exists when one party has confidence in the exchange partner’s reliability and integrity." In the service marketing literature, Berry and Parasuraman (1991, p. 144) found out that "effective services marketing depends on the management of trust because the customer typically must buy a service before experiencing it." We believe that relationship between trust in athlete and donation behavior will be similar to trust relationship in service marketing. Indeed, Andaleeb and Basu (1995) indicated that the level of trust that individuals had in blood banks positively influenced the blood donating behavior. Moreover, Waters (2008) found major gift donors, those who gave more than $5,000 per year, had stronger feelings of trust than regular donors (e.g., those who give less than $5,000). Furthermore, Sargeant and Lee (2002) noted that trust played a significant role in the relationship between a fundraising organization and its donors. Based on these findings, we propose that:

H3: Trust in athletes will positively influence donating behavior.

Method

To investigate the relationships among identity with athlete, athlete’s brand image, trust in athletes, and donation behavior, surveys will be sent to individuals who donate money to a charity program represented by a professional athlete. The survey questionnaire will include the Points of Attachment Index (PAI, Trail, 2003) to measure the athlete identity, Keller’s (1993) customer-based brand equity scale to measure athlete’s brand image, and Palmatier, Dant, and Grewal’s (2007) scale to measure trust along with a section for demographic information and donation behavior. Then, the survey data will be analyzed with AMOS 16 SEM technique to test the proposed hypotheses.

Conclusion

Identifying the factors influencing donation behaviors and understanding the donors’ motivation are critical to raise more money and promote donation. The findings of this study will help sport organizations as well as non-profit organizations to develop fundraising strategies and determine appropriate athletes for fundraising and charities.