Brand Imagery and Athletes: Examining the Reinforcement of Stereotypes

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In order to examine stereotypes in a specific context or setting such as sport, it is necessary to understand first the factors responsible for the construction and perpetuation of stereotypes in society in general. Stereotypes are commonly accepted beliefs about certain social groups, or type of individuals. They are typically the product of an individual’s inability to completely understand the norms and behaviors of various other types of individuals or groups deemed as different in certain respects and for various reasons (Harrison, 2001). Despite this lack of understanding, the former often makes exaggerated or distorted assumptions about the latter based on certain attributes that are manifested through mass media rhetoric and imagery. These assumptions eventually lead to stereotypical views that become widely accepted as truths by majority of society.

There is perhaps no better illustration of this than in the context of sport where stereotypical views on the basis of race and gender are abundantly noticeable. Stereotypical claims of athleticism and physical ability as they relate to an individual’s race or gender are commonplace in sport even though many studies have found little scientific substantiation for many of the stigmas that commonly exist (Buffington & Fraley, 2008; Hall, 2002; Sailes, 1993). For example, many people still operate under the misconception that Black athletes have an innate biological predisposition which makes them better fit to participate in various ‘physical’ sports (Harrison, 2001), as well as an intellectual inferiority that restricts them from competing in other vastly “analytical” forms of competition (Hall, 2002). Conversely, the success of White athletes is often attributed to the misconception that White athletes are intellectually superior and harder workers than their Black athlete counterparts (Buffington & Fraley, 2008; Hall, 2002; Harrison, 2001; Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999).

There are numerous agents and processes responsible for the continued perpetuation and anti-progressive effects of stereotyping. Some of these include uneducated coaches and spectators (Rasmussen, Esgate, & Turner, 2005) along with ignorant beliefs of extreme physiological differences between groups (Hall, 2002). However, the role of product and corporate branding in the perpetuation of stereotypes has received limited attention in the field of sport management (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). In context of marketing, the term branding represents the efforts taken by organizations to elicit desirable thoughts, emotions, and responses from consumers towards a brand (Aaker, 1996). However, the outcome of branding is dependent primarily on how consumers receive and interpret the images and messages that are espoused by the branding messages. As these brand perceptions begin to take shape in the minds of consumers, organizations are responsible for either reinforcing or changing the image of the brand through subsequent branding strategies (Aaker, 1996).

One popular branding strategy adopted by organizations is the use of professional athlete endorsements, whereby athletes with distinguishing attributes and characteristics thought to be similar to those of the organization are used to represent the brand in various forms of media. As is commonly the case in other segments of society, traces of stereotyping permeate their way through the branding process resulting in brand images that convey various forms of prejudice. The media fixates on rhetoric and imagery that portrays athletes in ways that reaffirm stereotypical roles of race and gender in society, causing athletes to conform to societal norms and expectations (Buffington & Fraley, 2008). For example, many female athletes will engage in apologetic behaviors, such as looking feminine and apologizing for aggression on the playing field, to vigorously avoid the negative labels of lesbianism commonly associated with physically active women (Davis-Delano, Pollock, & Vose, 1992). While sponsors and marketers take pleasure in the attention garnered from the image transfer of these ‘sex symbols’, they do little to challenge gender stereotypes in the minds of their consumers. From our perspective, these organizations simply use these stereotypic images of athletes as means for building their brands.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways in which brands and brand images reinforce stereotypical views of athleticism and athletic success. Though the conceptual nature of the paper precludes primary data collection, a thorough review of both the branding and stereotyping literature was conducted and from this review a conceptual model was developed. This model proposes that there may be a linkage between the manner in which products use certain imagery to build their brands and thereby perpetuating stereotypical assumptions in sport. The implications of this model are discussed in regards to effects that brand stereotypes may have on participation and performance in sport, especially youth sport. These decisions to participate and perceptions of possible success in sport often occur at early ages in people’s lives, when they are young and impressionable. It is at these early stages of a person’s development when stereotypic beliefs about athleticism may begin to root themselves within a person’s psyche. The brand imagery of many products may further engrain stereotypic beliefs of athleticism in the minds of youth sport participants. When youthful minds perpetuate stereotypic thinking, the possibility of the younger generations of the population participating in a wide array sport and physical activity may begin to diminish; which in turn may also have an impact.
on participation in life-long physical activities (Harrison, 2001). This conceptual model may provide a basis for further investigation into the processes that lead to stereotypes becoming engrained in the fabric of society.