The Influence of an Athlete on Donation: The Mediating Role of Trust

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Numerous professional athletes are actively involved with fundraising or donations for a cause of their interest (Wilson, Glier, Kepner, & Shipigel, 2005, Kim, Walker, & Kim, 2010). For example, Kevin Garnett (current NBA player) donated $1.2 million to Katrina victims (Krawczynski, 2005) and Dwight Howard and Samuel Dalembert donated $100,000 for children in Haiti (Gonzalez, 2010). Additionally, some professional athletes donate their time and money through their own charitable organizations. Babiak et al. (2007) reported that more than 400 public charities and private foundations are associated with professional athletes and teams. Athlete charitable involvement is one of the many ways they give back to their communities and this involvement is likely to encourage others to become interested because of the athletes’ community visibility and "high profile" stature. Only a limited amount of research however, has focused on how athletes influence donor perceptions of the charity and subsequent behavior directed towards the charity. For example, Kim et al. (2010) conceptually suggested that athletes have the ability to positively influence donor behavior but empirical support for this assertion is lacking. Building off this conceptual model to identify the factors that contribute to donor behavior, this study will assess the relationships between athlete identification, image, and reputation mediated by the donors’ trust level of the athlete which might ultimately affect the donor behavior.

Stryker (1980) explained that various social structures have an impact on an individual's social behavior. Later, Burke (1991) examined the identity process and discussed it as “… a set of meanings applied to the self in a social role or situation defining what it means to be who one is” (p.837). Consequentially, these two limbs of the identity theory have been unified to help scholars better understand the influence of internal and external factors on an individual’s beliefs, which play significant roles in creating an individual's identity (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Trail et al. (2005) found that strong team identification leads to self-esteem responses, which ultimately influences conative loyalty toward the team. Further, Zhang and Won (2010) found a significant association between fan identification and trust. In light of these works, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 1: Identification with an athlete will positively influence the level of trust toward the athlete.

Dichter (1985, p.75) noted that “… (image) describes not individual traits or qualities, but the total impression an entity makes on the mind of others” and highlighted that image has a significant influence on how people perceive things. Researchers have found that brand image can positively impact brand loyalty (e.g., Gladden & Funk, 2001; Bauer, Sauer, & Exler, 2005) and Flavian, Guinaliu, and Torres (2005) found that image positively influenced consumer trust. In the advertising literature, since athlete endorsers have their own image, researchers have recognized that these individuals have a power to increase awareness of products, improve product image, and ultimately bolster consumer purchase intentions (e.g., Ohanian, 1991; Till, 2001; Jowdy & McDonald, 2002). These findings lead to the development of our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: An athlete’s image will positively influence the level of trust toward the athlete.

According to Bromley (2001, p.317), reputation is defined as “… a distribution of opinions (the overt expressions of a collective image) about a person or other entity, in a stakeholder or interest group.” Some have found that reputation has a positive influence on financial performances such as maintaining greater profits over time (Roberts & Dowling, 2002) and influencing consumers to pay price premiums (Rindova, Williamson, Petkova, & Sever, 2005). Williams and Barrett (2000) also found a positive relationship between corporate giving programs and reputation. Further, previous research has revealed the strong association between corporate reputation and consumers’ level of trust toward the corporation, which eventually influences consumer intentions (Eastlick, Lotz, & Warrington, 2006; Keh and Xie, 2009). Borrowing these ideas from business literature, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 3: An athlete’s reputation will positively influence the level of trust toward the athlete.

Trust is “… a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence” (Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992, p.315). In the relationship marketing literature, trust is one of the most salient factors for relationships to be successful (Berry, 1995; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In terms of donor behavior, trust should play a significant role in the donor intentions dynamic. As an example, Sargeant and Lee (2004) found that although commitment mediated the relationship between trust and donor behavior, trust had a significant influence on donor behavior. Bekkers (2003) also found that people who have high level...
of trust tend to donate more money to charitable causes, and Waters (2008) revealed that major donors showed higher level of trust than regular donors. Based on these findings, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 4: Trust toward an athlete will positively influence donor behavior.

To test our hypotheses, data will be collected from actual and potential donors to non-profit organizations represented by athletes. The questionnaire will include the Points of Attachment Index (PAI) developed by Trail et al. (2003) to measure the identification with an athlete, Nguyen and Leblanc’s (2001) scales to measure image and reputation, and the scale to measure trust toward an athlete from Palmatier et al. (2007) s. To test the proposed hypotheses, structural equation modeling will be used and the data will be analyzed with AMOS Graphics.

Identifying factors that influence donor behavior will help to clarify what factors contribute to the promotion of future donations. The findings of this study will hopefully aid sport-related non-profit organizations which are represented by an athlete to develop effective and appropriate fundraising strategies for their program. In addition, the findings will add to the growing body of literature aimed at reveling consumer preferences toward non-profit entities.