Understanding Athlete Brand Image in Global Sport Markets: A Cross-National Study among Japan, South Korea, and USA

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In light of the modern media culture, star athletes are recognized not only just product endorsers but cultural products to be sold as "brands" (Gilchrist, 2005). Especially, within the growing global sport market, the role of those star athletes who can carry clear messages and cultural values are becoming vastly more important (Markovits, 2010). In marketing literature, how to develop a global brand has been one of a major focuses. According Hsieh (2004), “global brands are likely to embody special credibility, value, power, and enhanced preference because of their global availability and recognition” (p.28). These benefits derived from developing a global brand are also applicable to global athlete brand. Despite the increased importance of global brand development for athletes, systematic research on brand image and management lags behind. Therefore, this study investigated whether athlete brand image perceptions are different in global market by conducting cross-national survey research in Japan, South Korea and the US.

In selling a product brand, there are many tangible brand elements (e.g., quality or price) the marketers have to consider. However, in selling a sporting property such as a team or an individual athlete, it is all about their images (Cordiner, 2001). Brand image involves the consumer’s perceptions about the brand, as reflected by the set of brand associations held in consumer’s memory (Keller, 1993). Brand equity can be developed based on the positive associations customers make with a brand (Aaker, 1996). Thus, understanding brand associations is an important task for the brand equity creation. Based on the comprehensive literature review, the researchers previously developed the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) and empirically examined (Arai et al., 2010). The MABI consists of three dimensions (i.e., Athletic Performance, Attractive Appearance, and Marketable Lifestyle) and a total of ten sub-dimensions. The first dimension, Athletic Performance consists of four sub-dimensions (i.e., Athletic Expertise, Competition Style, Sportsmanship and Rivalry). The second dimension Attractive Appearance is defined by three sub-dimensions (i.e., Physical Attractiveness, Symbol and Body Fitness). The third dimension, Marketable Lifestyle includes three sub-dimensions (i.e., Life Story, Role Model, and Relationship Effort).

Hsieh (2002) insisted that as the global market becomes more integrated, it becomes more and more important to develop applicable constructs to global segments in managing the progress of brand globalization. Athlete brand image needs to be examined based on the consumers in different cultural settings (Aaker, 1996). Hoek et al. (2000) also suggested that brands should develop distinct images which will attract specific consumer segment. The current study focused on cultural differences because product brands can be perceived differently across different cultures (Hsieh, 2002). The results of this study enable sport agents and athletes to effectively develop and manage their global brand.

The 2010 FIFA World Cup was chosen as a target event because this event is one of the biggest sporting events with the greatest level of interest among people all over the world. (Portlock & Rose, 2009). A total of 680 college students were successfully completed the survey and therefore included in the data analyses (The U.S.: 250, Japan: 258 and Korea: 172). The questionnaire is modified from the existing Scale of Athlete Brand Image (SABI: Arai et al., 2010) to fit the context of world cup soccer event in 2010. As targets of evaluation four athletes (Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Wayne Rooney and Ricardo Kaka) were selected based on their popularity as a brand or amount of media coverage on the credible Internet sites before the World Cup 2010. In the survey, the participants were asked to pick one of the most familiar athletes on the list of four athletes and answer the items in the survey in terms of the athlete. All items are formatted by 7-points Likert-type scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree).
The data was analyzed using SPSS 18.0 and AMOS 18. The first step in assessing the conceptual model will be to test a measurement model of athlete brand image through a confirmatory factor analysis. Second, one-way ANOVA was employed to compare the athlete brand image among groups in three countries.

The results of CFA showed reasonable fit of the model to the data ($\chi^2/df = 1561/361 = 4.32$, RMSEA = .070, CFI = .907). The result of the series of ANOVA showed significant differences among countries on the perception of Competition Style [$F(1, 680) = 15.18, p < .000$], Rivalry [$F(1, 680) = 16.38, p < .000$], Physical Attractiveness [$F(1, 680) = 5.71, p < .003$], Symbol [$F(1, 680) = 14.69, p < .000$], Body Fitness [$F(1, 680) = 54.35, p < .000$], and Life Story [$F(1, 680) = 10.24, p < .000$]. Specifically, the results showed that Japanese consumers rated significantly higher on Competition Style and Life Story and South Korean consumers rated higher on Rivalry and Symbol than other two countries. Consumers in the US rated significantly higher on Physical Attractiveness and Body Fit.

The results are consistent with previous research which argued that the brand image perception is different among different cultures. The result also showed very interesting patterns among three countries. Japanese consumers rated significantly higher on Competition Style and Life Story. This indicates that Japanese consumers value the narratives and stories behind the athletes as brands. In introducing the global brand to Japanese market, the narrative processing strategy (Escalas, 2004) can be the most effective strategy. On the other hand, South Korean consumers rated higher on Rivalry and Symbol and this implies that Korean consumers are more likely attracted to exciting rivalry matches and symbolic elements (e.g., style, novel, and emotion) of athlete brands. Lastly, the US consumers rated significantly higher on Physical Attractiveness and Body Fit than the other two groups. In introducing the global brand, the visual campaign highlighting strong body image would be more effective than focusing on narratives and styles of athletes.

The comparison of these athletes image in three countries provides a numbers of theoretical and practical implications. Further discussions, taking into account the soccer introduction level and cultural characteristics of each country, will be provided at the presentation.