A Conceptual Framework for Assessing Brand Equity in Professional Athletes

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Thomson (2006) defined the human brand as any well-known person who is the subject of marketing communication efforts. In today’s sport landscape athletes have become more than stars in their individual leagues and teams. Many have transcended sport and become national and international brands. Previous research has focused on athletes as product endorsers, celebrities, and as part of the sport ensemble (Jones & Schumann, 2000; Stone, Joseph, & Jones, 2003; Boyd & Shank, 2004). However, as the focus on the aforementioned roles of athletes further develops it has become apparent that athletes have become more than brand extensions and brand associations, but viable brands themselves.

Aaker (1991) defines a brand as the name and/or symbols linked to a product or service that serves as a point of differentiation to aid consumer recognition and to distinguish the brand from its competitors in the marketplace. Furthermore, the use of brand marks enable a company to attach meaning to its products or services (Aaker, 1996). The meanings, liabilities, and assets that add or subtract from the value associated with the brand is considered to be brand equity (Aaker, 1991). Due to the benefits that maybe derived, the development and management of brand equity has become paramount in guiding the marketing strategies of companies, as well as the primary focus of brand-related scholarly research. Due to the intangible nature of the sport industry, this study employed Keller's (1993) brand equity model as the theoretical framework to explain the relationship between brand association and brand loyalty from a consumer's perspective. The primary function of Keller's customer-based brand equity model is to conceptualize and measure brand equity. The brand knowledge construct consists of two components; brand awareness and brand image. Keller's definition of brand equity differs from that of Aaker, and is defined as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on a consumer's response to the marketing of the brand" (p. 8).

A myriad of research has been conducted on brand equity in a traditional marketplace; however, few approach brand equity from a sport context. Most of the research done in a sport context has focused primarily on spectator sports. The brand equity models in spectator sport (e.g., Gladden & Milne, 1999; Gladden et al., 1998; Ross, 2006) have modified and applied Aaker’s (1991) and Keller’s (1993) models of brand equity. As such, this study will employ the same procedures in developing a conceptual framework for building professional athlete brand equity.

Previous brand equity research in sport has focused on the creation of conceptual models to measure brand equity in professional and collegiate team brands, as well as sport spectators and satellite fans (e.g., Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998; Gladden & Milne, 1999; Kerr & Gladden, 2008; Ross, 2006). To date, no research has focused on developing a conceptual framework for understanding athlete-based brand equity. However, previous research has acknowledged that the development and management of brand equity should not be restricted to leagues and teams, but should also be extended to include individual athletes (Ross, 2006). We propose that applying a conceptual framework to building brand equity among professional athletes will aid the individual athlete and their representation in developing a brand image that is unique and viable in the marketplace.

The proposed framework stems from the previous spectator-based brand equity model (Ross, 2006) in that it recognizes the distinctive characteristics of athlete brands through organization-related, market-related, and experience-related antecedents that contribute to the formation of athlete-based brand equity. The organization-related antecedents are categorized as athlete-induced (e.g. social media) and non-athlete induced (e.g. marketing mix, team identification, reputation and tradition, success, sponsors). The market-related antecedents include word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and the experience-related antecedent is the actual consumer experience. Similar to the previous sport-related brand equity models, athlete-based brand equity is comprised of athlete-brand awareness and athlete-brand associations. The combined implications of high or low athlete-brand equity are denoted as consequences, which may include athlete-brand loyalty, team/organization
loyalty, brand extensions, licensing, endorsements, and media exposure. The proposed conceptual framework differs greatly from sport-brand equity models proposed by Gladden and Milne (1999) and Ross (2006) through the modification of antecedents and consequences of brand equity to fit the unique aspect of athlete-brands.

From a practical point of view, it is important that athletes and their representation understand these antecedents and potential consequences. Knowing what may impact an athlete’s brand will allow the athlete’s and their marketing representatives to develop brand awareness and create a positive image by fostering and nurturing brand associations. Developing positive brand equity will lead to a number of positive consequences as noted in the model. In particular, this will allow the athlete to supplement the income they receive through their athletic endeavors by engaging in endorsements, extensions and licensing opportunities.

While there are a number of theoretical and practical implications, this the first known attempt to develop a brand equity model specific for professional athletes. As such, future research should empirically test some of the models assumptions that were developed through previous literature. Specifically, research should examine the antecedents and their impact on brand equity. As social media is an emerging research area in sport marketing that is generating significant responsiveness from sport consumers, assessing this athlete-induced antecedent may be of interest to various stakeholders.