Applying Sport Brand Equity to College Athletes

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Marketing  Friday, May 30, 2014  20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2014-096  8:55 AM  (Phipps)

Significance of study
Recently, there has been an emergence of noteworthy scholarly contributions in the area of athlete brand management (e.g., Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2013; Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2013) to go along with the proliferation of the athlete as a brand in the sport industry. To date, however, no scholars have examined the formation of brand equity in regard to the collegiate athlete. Furthermore, there are various aspects of amateurism that limit previous athlete brand frameworks from appropriately examining the college athlete as a brand in terms of the role that the NCAA and its member institutions have on the antecedents and benefits of establishing brand equity.

Literature Review
A brand is considered as the name and/or symbols intended to identify a product or service, as well as differentiate it from other products or services in the marketplace. Moreover, Thomson (2006) defined the human brand as any well-known person who is the subject of marketing communication efforts. Whether human or product, a brand is comprised of the tangible and intangible elements that are combined to add value to the brand. In addition, branding enables a company or person to attach meaning to a product or his/herself, respectively (Aaker, 1991). For instance, it may be beneficial to attach the intangible associations (e.g., thoughts, feelings and attitudes) people have with an athlete to tangible items such as mantras, symbols and colors. The differential effect that the tangible and intangible elements of the brand provide that adds or subtracts from the value of the brand is known as brand equity. The creation and managing of brand equity has become an increasingly important component in determining the marketing strategies of sport organizations. While there are several conceptualizations of brand equity, given the experience-based service that sport provides, a consumer-based approach to brand equity is often used when conceptualizing and measuring brand equity in sport. Therefore, consistent with previous research (e.g., Bauer, Sauer, & Exler, 2008; Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998; Ross, 2006) we contend that brand equity is created when a consumer is familiar with the brand, and holds favorable, unique, and strong brand associations in mind.

A plethora of research has been conducted on brand equity. With the exception of a few, most of the research done in a sport context has focused primarily on spectator sport organizations. 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. In the context of athletes branding—based on Keller’s (1993) customer-based brand equity framework—Arai, Ko, and Ross (2013) proposed a conceptual Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI). The MABI is comprised of three dimensions considered crucial in developing consumer brand equity for athletes: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. Subsequently, Arai, Ko, and Kaplanidou (2013) found the model to be applicable in the context of sport (i.e., athletes). Given the unique landscape of collegiate sports, a gap in the literature exists as to the applicability of the MABI in the context of collegiate athletes and a conceptualization of the antecedents and implications of college athlete-brand equity.

Purpose
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). While recent research has examined the components of brand equity for professional athletes, a gap in the research exists in terms of the factors that lead to the creation of brand equity—and the benefits thereof—in relation to collegiate athletes. Therefore, the purpose of this presentation is to apply previously proposed brand equity constructs as they relate to a collegiate athlete’s and his or her stakeholder’s ability to create, control, and manage brand equity. Moreover, this presentation will detail the unique organization-related and market-related opportunities and restrictions posed by
the NCAA and its member institution on an athlete’s ability to leverage the equity in his/her brand, as well as present the positive and negative consequences of doing so.

Conceptual framework

The proposed conceptual framework acknowledges the precursors that contribute to the formation of brand equity for collegiate athletes through organization-related, market-related, and athlete-related antecedents (Berry, 2000 & Ross, 2006). Here, the organization-related antecedents are delineated by the components of the market mix (i.e., price, place, product, promotion, public relations) that are produced and controlled by the NCAA, its affiliates and member institutions. The market-related antecedents, which is information about the athlete that is unsolicited by the athlete and his/her stakeholders, is denoted by the traditional and new media coverage the athlete receives. Lastly the athlete-related antecedent consists of any information about the athlete that is directly produced and controlled by the athlete, such as athlete-generated social media content and in-person interactions with consumers. Consistent with previous brand equity models, athlete-based brand equity is comprised of athlete-brand awareness and athlete-brand associations. Consequently, we propose that the combined effect of high or low athlete-brand equity results in implications that may positively or negatively affect the collegiate athlete-brand. In the same vein, the implications are denoted based on their acceptability under current NCAA rules and regulations governing amateurism. These implications may include athlete/university-brand loyalty, merchandise sales, ticket sales, media exposure, draft stock, ability to enter draft early, future endorsement opportunities, and awards/accolades.

Implications

Based on the precursors that underwrite the formation of brand equity for collegiate athletes, most notably the NCAA, our conceptual framework suggest a concerte joint function between the athletes themselves and other stakeholders. This is in contrast to professional athletes who may have fewer restrictions in regard to the creation of their brand. In particular, we believe our framework provides collegiate athletes (and other stakeholders involved in the brand management strategy) with an enhanced understanding to maximize their brand equity. Future research should investigate which antecedents shape the brand associations consumers hold with the athlete and the benefits they provide for the athlete, the university and the NCAA.