What Children Love About Athletes: An Assessment of Athlete Brand Associations in Youth Sport Consumers

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In today's sport landscape teams, leagues, and athletes are consistently looking for ways to add values to their brand and create brand loyalty. While a number of studies have advanced our knowledge of how strong brands can be built in sport (e.g., Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt, 2005; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998; Ross, 2006), the focus of those studies has been limited in the team sport and adult consumers. However, as brand associations, the consumption-influencing thoughts or images that consumers have about a particular brand (Aaker, 1996), are varying in different types and categories of products and services (Berry, 2000; Filo, Funk, & Alexandris, 2008), further examination beyond sport team (e.g., athlete brand) is encouraging. Moreover, while different customer segments may have different brand associations (Ross, 2007), the brand associations of youth consumer segment are still unknown. Therefore, in order to fill the voids in the previous studies in sport branding, this study aimed to examine the brand associations that youth sport consumers hold about their favorite athlete and how those are similar or different from the associations found in previous literature.

While athletes have been viewed as effective endorsers who influence customers’ perception and communicators who increase awareness, recall, and positive associations (Erdogan, 1999; Jowdy & McDonald, 2002; Shank, 2004), they have not been regarded as individually manageable brands. However, abundant evidence in sport has shown that many athletes have managed themselves as a personal brand and have enjoyed benefits in their careers (Arai et al., 2013; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). Further, considering the significant values they add to teams, leagues and themselves, athletes and their constituents must have knowledge of their overall brand image from a consumer’s perspective and what influences this image.

Many scholars have acknowledged that youth are a valuable segment of consumers, due to their considerable size, great buying power, and their impact on the family’s consumption decisions (Calvert, 2005; Dotson & Hyatt, 2005; Roper & Shah, 2007). More importantly, they possess potential for long-term brand relationships, in which a brand can build strong brand equity (Ji, 2008; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2005). Therefore, it is important for sport brands to understand the brand associations held by youth sport consumers. According to James (2001), children begin to have preferences for sport brands and have preferences for sport teams at the age of five.

From cognitive and social developmental perspectives, John (1999) explained the unique nature of youth as consumers and characterized what youth know and how they think as consumers at different stages: perceptual (3-7 years old), analytical (7-11) and retrospective (11-16). In each stage of knowledge development, youth consumers possess different levels of skills and knowledge about brands and as they mature, they can recognize/recall more brands (i.e., brand awareness) and create a sophisticated image of a brand in their minds (i.e., brand association) (Achenreiner & John, 2003; Chaplin & John, 2005; John, 1999). However, as youth are novice consumers, who tend to associate a brand with perceptual attributes (Cowley & Mitchell, 2005; Mitchell & Dacin, 1996), differences may exist between youth and adult consumers in regards to their brand associations.

In sport branding literature, various models and scales have been developed for the team sport brand (Gladden et al., 1998; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross, 2006) and athlete brand (Arai et al., 2013). While those studies aided our understanding on adult consumers, particularly in a team sport context, because of the different type of brands (i.e., athlete vs. team) and the group of consumers (i.e., adult vs. youth), applying those concepts/models directly to the youth-focused athlete brands may not be appropriate (Ross, 2006). Those studies, however, provided a fundamental basis for this study, which suggested that there may be the commonly shared nature of sport brands and consumers in regards to brand associations.
This study utilized a free-thought listing survey, which allowed us to explore not only the brand associations in consumer minds, but also those that may exist but were not previously found from different samples or brand categories (Ross, 2006). Data were collected from youth sport camps (i.e., basketball and soccer) in the Midwestern United States. Children were asked to write their favorite athlete’s name and the first things they think of when they think about the athlete. After the data collection, two trained independent coders conducted content analysis to identify the association categories presented in the data set and then fit the data into Keller’s three brand association dimensions (i.e., attribute, benefit, and attitude). The identified association categories were then compared to the associations found in previous sport branding literature.

A total of 47 children completed the survey and were included in the analysis. The majority of the respondents were in analytical stage between 6 and 11 years old (83.0%, M = 8.5, SD = 2.5), and boys (78.7%, n = 37). Twenty seven (57.4%) of the athletes selected by the children were football players, fourteen (29.8%) basketball, three (6.4%) baseball, two (4.3%) soccer, and one (2.1%) ice hockey. The results of the content analysis revealed eight brand association categories and attribute-related associations [i.e., competition style/skill (39.1%), athlete’s affiliation (12.5%), success (9.4%), brand mark (9.4%), body fit (4.7%), and rivalry (1.6%)] were found most frequently (76.7%), followed by attitudes-related associations (18.8%) and benefit-related associations (4.7%).

By matching those associations to the most recent brand association models in team brand (TBAS: Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006) and athlete brand (MABI: Arai et al., 2013), we found that most of the youth athlete brand associations were reflected in TBAS and/or MABI. This finding implied that the association of youth associations shared with TBAS and MABI (e.g., competition style/skill, relationship, and rivalry) may represent important associations across ages and types of brands (i.e., athlete vs. team). However, some associations did not match with TBAS (i.e., abstract attitudes and body fit) or MABI (i.e., athlete affiliation, success, and brand mark), and those may represent the unique associations that youth have with athlete brands. These findings also implied the need of further development of instrument specified to youth sport consumers.

By acknowledging the differences between youth and adult consumers through the youth cognitive development and socialization perspective (John, 1999), this study explored athlete brand associations held by youth sport consumers. The result indicated that children develop brand associations primarily based on athlete attributes rather than attitude or benefit-related associations. This result is in line with Chaplin and John (2005) which stated that children age 7 to 11 develop brand associations by gathering information related to product attributes. This findings can provide a base line from which the athletes and their managers should start to build a strong athlete brand for youth consumers. Also, the findings provided a rough sketch about with whom, what and how youth’s athlete brand associations may be composed. The detailed implications, limitations and future directions will be further discussed in the presentation.