Branding on Tour: Examining the Evolution, Maintenance, and Life-Cycle of Personal Branding and Endorsements

Courtney Hodge, Texas A&M University
Brandon Brown, University of Tampa
Matthew Walker (Advisor), Texas A&M University
 Gregg Bennett (Advisor), Texas A&M University

Marketing  
Friday, May 30, 2014  
20-minute oral presentation  
(including questions)
(Phipps)

Abstract 2014-174  
3:35 PM
(Phipps)

Over the years, it has become increasingly important for professional athletes to build and promote their personal brands. Facilitating this trend has been the uptick in new media, which has helped many professional athletes achieve much broader notoriety by providing additional outlets for personal expression, interactivity, and fan connections (Elberse, Norman, Via, Picciotto, & O’Hagan, 2011). Athletes such as Tiger Woods, Kobe Bryant, Maria Sharapova, and Michael Phelps represent unique identities and attributes similar to organizational brands. The use of brands assists individuals (and organizations) in initiating and bolstering relationships and cultivating feelings of attachment (Aaker, 1996). According to Arai, Ko, and Ross (in press), the athlete brand is “… a public persona of an individual athlete who has established their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face, or other brand elements in the market” (p. 2). Whether empirically examined or anecdotally discussed, professional athletes possess unique attributes capable of influencing consumer behavior (Carlson & Donavan, 2013). However, human branding research has been predominately conducted through the lens of the consumer (e.g. Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2013; Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Thompson, 2006), and there is a paucity of research that has examined branding strategies from the professional athlete level-of-analysis.

Similar to traditional branding, athlete branding “… involves the interaction, reaction, and emotional experience fans feel when they engage with an athlete brand” (Balloui & Hutchinson, 2012, p. 59). The feelings and emotions evoked by unique athlete brands make them desirable prospects for an array of endorsements. However, according to Carlson and Donavan (2013), an endorser’s ability to persuade consumers depends on the development and management of his or her own brand personality. The authors went on to define brand personality as “… observable characteristics such as media depictions, endorsed product associations, and sport associations” (p. 196). Based on this commentary, it is reasonable to assume athlete brands are extensions of their endorsement brands and vice-versa. This is potentially problematic when considering the professional career life-cycle of a celebrity athlete endorser, because many are not focused on developing their personal brands – especially those in the infancy of their careers. While athletes and celebrities often employ marketing firms devoted to building and promoting their brands, it is ultimately up to each athlete on how to best implement their personal brand strategies. Based on the foregoing, the purpose of this study is twofold: (1) explore personal branding and personal brand development strategies from the perspective of several professional athletes, and (2) understand how endorsement deals shape and influence professional athlete brands.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study and limited available data, the authors will adopt a qualitative approach. Data collection will consist of two-stages to accomplish data triangulation: (1) in-depth interviews with key athlete informants, and (2) content analysis of the athlete’s personal media exposure. The latter aspect will include a detailed examination of professional athletes’ social media accounts, websites, and overall media presence. Purposeful sampling techniques were employed in order to deliberately select athletes with current endorsements and professional playing status. Patton (1990) suggested that such samples yield rich data that can contribute to the central purpose of the study. At this point in the research process, the researchers have recruited N=15 professional golfers (i.e., at varying competition levels and career stages) to participate in the study. For example, participants were recruited from the Web.com Tour (n=5), the PGA Tour (n=5), and the Champions Tour (n=5), and vary based on age and demography. According to Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2012), this number should be adequate to achieve data saturation; however, this can only be determined after the data collection (and analysis) is underway. The authors drew from literature on athlete branding and athlete endorsements to construct the interview guide (e.g. Arai et al., 2013; Boyd & Shank, 2004; Carlson & Donovan, 2013; McCracken, 1989; Shuart, 2007; Thompson,
To date, one interview has been completed and the rest are scheduled for November and December of this year. All the data will be collected, analyzed, and interpreted within 6-months. Interviews are being audio-taped and transcribed, and the authors will adopt a grounded theory approach, analyzing the data using open, axial, and selective coding processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

This study will extend the knowledge on sport management regarding both human and athlete brands (Arai et al., 2013; Arai et al., in press; Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Maehle & Shneor, 2010; Thompson, 2006) and celebrity and athlete endorsements (Boyd & Shank, 2004; McCracken, 1989; Shuart, 2007; Stevens, Lathrop, & Bradish, 2003) by exploring these topics through the lens of professional athletes. A preliminary examination of athletes’ media presence suggested that those in the prime of their professional careers are more active in marketing and promoting their personal brands and endorsements. In general, athletes and endorsement brands share brand associations (Till, 1998). Thus, it is extremely important for sport marketers and sport organizations to understand how professional athletes balance and match the image of their personal brands with the endorsed product/service. We anticipate the findings from this study will provide a foundation for future research on personal athlete branding and endorsement promotion.