Enhanced Market Value of American Athletes with International Teammates

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Marketing Friday, June 5, 2015 20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Chaudière)

Abstract 2015-138 2:35 PM

With the improvement of technology and transportation, firms are actively seeking opportunities to globalize their business, and sports organizations are no exception (Thibault, 2009). It is widely acknowledged that teams in North American sports leagues such as the National Basketball Association (NBA) and Major League Baseball (MLB) have been mining the talent base of international players, through which they have also been building a global fan base. There has been increased research interest examining the topic of the migration of athletic talent since the early 1990s (e.g., Lanfranchi & Taylor, 2001; Maguire, Jarvie, Mansfield, & Bradley, 2002; Maguire & Pearton, 2000a, 2000b; McGovern, 2000, 2002). In research on sports athlete migration, significant attention has been paid to the culture rather than to the economic significance of athlete mobility (Takahashi & Horne, 2006). Thus, to date, much remains to be explored regarding the subject of athlete migration. Moreover, among those articles examining the economic impact of migrant athletes, very little research has been conducted on the topic of the impact of international players on their teammates. In other words, research has mainly focused on the assimilation of the arriving athletes, neglecting the acculturation processes, and particularly the effects foreign and domestic athletes have on one another.

The major goal of this study is to investigate the market value of distinguished Chinese NBA players’ American teammates to Chinese consumers. This study has three objectives, which are listed as follows: 1) To identify Chinese consumers’ feelings of attachment to American NBA players who have a distinguished Chinese teammate; 2) To examine the relationship between Chinese consumers’ attachment level to the American NBA players and the players’ credibility as product endorsers; and 3) To examine whether Chinese consumers’ evaluation of athlete endorsement would differ for sports products and non-sports products.

Review of Relevant Literature

The term “brand” is now commonly applied to firms, products, and services, and is also used to describe terms of perceived quality, and image (Thomson, 2006). In the recent past, the definition of “brand” in the brand management literature has been broadened to include anything that deals with emotional relationships with consumers (Bayley, 2005). Keller (2003) stated that brand theory could be extended to people. Similarly, Thomson (2006) claimed that celebrity can be regarded as brand because celebrities can be professionally managed and also have additional features of a brand.

Self-Determination Theory (LaGuardia, Ryan, Couchman & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) has been applied to examine the relationship between human brands and consumers. Self-determination theory, according to Ryan and Deci (2000), states that innate human needs related to motivation include autonomy, relatedness and competence (A-R-C). LaGuardia et al. (2000), and Ryan and Deci (2000) concluded that if the social contexts in which different individuals are embedded are able to fulfill those individuals’ basic psychological needs, they could develop people’s active, assimilative and integrated nature. Although the concept of A-R-C (autonomy, relatedness, and competence) in Ryan and Deci’s (2000) research is examined in the context of interpersonal relationships, Thomson (2006) examined the A-R-C needs in another context, seeking the possibility that human brands qualify as responsive relationship partners. The results confirmed that the satisfaction of autonomy and relatedness could predict strong attachments. Specifically, with regard to human brands, if people are made to feel capable of self-expression, self-governance and a feeling of closeness and intimacy, they will have strong attachments to human brands.

Past literature has examined benefits of using celebrity endorsement (Atkin & Block, 1983; Bush, Martin, & Bush, 2004; Friedman and Friedman, 1979; Spielman, 1981). Benefits included the following: enhancing the chance of ad recall, product desirability and product glamour; capturing and holding attention, even to low-involved products; and
increasing purchase intention, developing brand loyalty and impacting word-of-mouth in a good way. Although China is considered to be one of the world’s fastest growing sportswear markets (Tong & Hawley, 2009) with annual sporting goods sales revenues of 30-40 billion Chinese yuan (approximately 4.4-5.9 billion U.S. dollars) and a sporting goods market growth rate of 10% in recent years (Business Wire, 2007), little knowledge exists related to Chinese consumers’ perceptions of athlete celebrity endorsement. An exhaustive literature research uncovered only two recent studies about Chinese consumers’ attitudes toward athlete celebrity endorser. Through an experimental design, Liu, Huang, and Minghua (2007) investigated the relationships among attractiveness of endorsers, match-up, and purchase intention in sports marketing in China. They found that high endorser-product match-up could lead to higher purchase intention than the low match-up regardless of the attractiveness of the endorser. Another study by Schaefer, Parker, and Kent (2010) compared American and Chinese consumers’ general attitudes toward athlete celebrity endorsers. The findings suggest that Chinese consumers tend to more willingly rely on suggestions from athlete celebrity endorsers when compared to consumers from America. They also suggest future research on this topic to narrow down product types, for example the difference between sports products and non-sports products in order to gain specific insight about Chinese consumers.

**Data and Method**

To capture Chinese consumers’ attitudes toward American teammates of distinguished Chinese NBA players and distinguished American NBA players, a quantitative survey was used to collect information. A 2×1 between subjects factorial design was employed to manipulate the nationalities of the distinguished NBA players. Two experimental scenarios were generated: an American NBA player with a distinguished Chinese teammate and an American NBA player with a distinguished American teammate. The American NBA player in both scenarios was designed to endorse a sports product and a non-sports product in order to examine the third objective. For the first scenario containing a distinguished Chinese NBA player, 157 completed questionnaires were analyzable. For the second scenario which included a distinguished American NBA player, 164 questionnaires were completed and analyzable. During the data analysis, independent-samples t-test was used to compare the differences in people’s attachment to distinguished basketball players (Chinese and American) and their American teammates under the two scenarios. Second, canonical analysis was used to examine the relationship between the level of attachment and how valuable people perceive the person as a product endorser. Third, differences in the endorsers’ credibility and people’s purchase intention when the athlete was endorsing a sport product and a non-sport product were evaluated via paired-samples t test.

**Result and Discussion**

The independent-samples t-test indicated that Chinese people’s feelings of attachment for the distinguished Chinese NBA player and the distinguished American NBA player were significantly different. Moreover, participants tended to feel more attached to the typical American NBA player with a distinguished Chinese teammate than the one with a distinguished American teammate.

Having established that Chinese people more attached to a teammate of a distinguished Chinese NBA player rather than to a teammate of a distinguished American NBA player, a Canonical correlation analysis further explains whether such feelings of attachment are correlated to the athlete’s credibility level as a product endorser, and whether the types of products endorsed would affect the athlete’s credibility level as well as people’s purchasing intentions. The results revealed that there exists a correlation between feelings of attachment and the typical American NBA player’s level of credibility no matter what kind of product he endorses. However the correlation was stronger when the player endorsed a sports product. Furthermore, the findings showed that Chinese consumers were more willing to buy sports products rather than non-sports products endorsed by the same typical American NBA player.

The findings of this study not only add information to the existing academic literature, but also contribute value to the field of sport management, particularly for companies evaluating athlete potential as product endorsers. In order to tap an international market composed of foreign sports fans, it is common for companies to pursue international athletes as endorsers. However, the athletes migrating to another country in search of higher levels of sports competition are often elite players in their native countries, thus the endorsement fee is likely to be relatively high. The findings imply that American teammates of the superstar native athlete may provide a low-cost alternative to the same companies. With more and more companies who are eager to acquire assets in foreign markets, potentially
reducing the endorsement fees by employing the athlete who has a distinguished international teammate may provide a suitable alternative to the relative scarcity of the international star.