Athlete Brand: A Conceptual Framework to Understand Its Antecedents and Consequences

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Relevance of the Topic to Sport Management

The topic of team loyalty has been of major interest for researchers due to its importance on club’s long-term benefits (e.g., Biscaia, Correia, Ross, Rosado, & Marôco, 2013). Consistent with this view, there is a stream of research focusing on the role of celebrity players to understand how to increase team loyalty both among fans within the area where the team is located and foreign fans living abroad (Kerr & Gladden, 2008; Künzler & Poli, 2012). Also, some researchers have highlighted that player interest is an important aspect to understand team loyalty (e.g., Neale & Funk, 2006). Moreover, because media coverage of sport (i.e., TV broadcast), it is possible that a club’s abroad fans will outnumber local fans (Datson, 2004). This situation has caused the emergence of player brand as well. Recent studies have focused on the conceptualization of athlete’s brand and its consequences on fans’ loyalty towards these players (e.g., Agyemang, 2011; Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2013; Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014; Chadwick & Burton, 2008). These studies have contributed to the understanding of player brand models and tried to fulfill a research gap in the field of branding in sports. Still, there is a lack of knowledge about the antecedents and consequences of player loyalty and how athlete brand contributes to generate loyalty among foreign fans. Thus, the purpose the current study is to provide a conceptual framework to understand the motives that trigger the creation of an athlete’s brand among both local and foreign fans, and its consequences on player and team loyalty among those fans. In doing so, this study intends to provide a contribution for understanding the role of high spree of spending by some clubs to bring famous athletes into the team.

Review of Relevant Literature

Celebrities are human brands, and Thomson (2006) refers to a human brand as any well renowned personality who is the subject of marketing communication efforts. Consistently, Boorstin (1992, p. 75) refers that a ‘celebrity is usually nothing greater than a more publicized version of us’ (i.e. an everyday person). The demand for human brands is growing day by day (Kerrigan et al., 2011). Thus, more showbiz stars and athletes are emerging as celebrities. Yu (2005) mentioned that athletes with successful careers (i.e., star players) and good personal lifestyle tend to become famous brands. In line with this view, Kerr & Gladden (2008) highlighted that, in this media oriented world, star players tend to generate equity for their own personal brand and the brand of the club for which they play. Brand equity refers to "the incremental utility or value added to a product by its brand name" (Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000, p. 195), and starts occurring when the consumer becomes aware of the brand and develops positive mental associations toward that brand (Aaker, 1991). That is, the power of brand lies in what resides in customer’s mind, and thus, brand knowledge is vital to the creation of brand equity (Keller, 1993). Complementarily, strong brands are often built on a foundation of trust and this allows for increases in trust with purchase decisions and brand loyalty (Aaker, 1991). In the sport context, fan loyalty towards a brand refers to the strength of the relationship between fans and team or players resulting in consistent positive behaviors and attitudes towards that team or player (Biscaia et al., 2013; Funk & James, 2001). That is, a fan is a person who is dedicated to some entity (team or person) and the entity that he/she attaches with is considered as the brand (Castillo, 2007; Arai et al. 2013).

The rise of communications technology (e.g., broadcasting of foreign games/leagues, social media) has paved the way for the creation of foreign loyalty; these fans are often called ‘satellite fans’ (Kerr & Gladden, 2008) or ‘armchair TV fans’ (Castillo (2007). These virtual fans have access to their favorite players and teams regardless of geographic location, and previous studies highlight the significance of foreign fans from the prospect of star player (e.g. Künzler & Poli, 2012).
Due to the increasing importance of athletes as brands, this model focuses on the conceptualization of athletes’ brand. In doing so, this study also proposes a set of antecedents of athlete’s brand and its consequences on fan loyalty towards both the player and team.

**Conceptual Framework**

The model is composed of three parts: antecedents, components and consequences of athlete brand on fans’ loyalty. Four major antecedents of the athlete's brand are proposed to act as triggers of the creation of an athlete’s brand in fans’ minds. These antecedents are media (e.g., social media, mass media, computer gaming, and big events; Vann, 2014; Sierra, Taute, & Heiser, 2010), oral communications (word-of-mouth, rumors, and stories; Dimeo, 2002; Künzler & Poli, 2012), social agents (e.g., parents, family members, friends, and community; Armstrong & Stratta, 2004; Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996), and teams or sports (i.e., sport interest, team interest, and team location; Heere & James, 2007). These factors will contribute to fans becoming aware of the athletes. Once these antecedents have played their roles in creating awareness of a certain athlete, then two components help fans to create a certain mental image of that specific player. These components are on-field attributes (i.e., playing behavior, achievements, style of play, and skills; Chadwick & Burton, 2008; Daley & Wolfson, 2010) and off-field attributes (i.e., physical attraction, lifestyle, ethnicity, entertainment factor; García, 2011; Mullin & Dunn, 2002). This image will then permit a fan to strengthen the link with the player, engendering a following and loyalty to that specific player, thereby becoming a fan. Once loyalty to the player is established, a fan tends to like everything associated with the player (Wu, Tsai, & Hung, 2012). For example, fans start to follow the team in which the player is playing (e.g., team matches and news). Also, they tend to increase the intentions to visit the team stadium, watch matches on TV, read news about the favorite player, follow the player and team via social media, and buy merchandise (Kerr & Gladden, 2008). In this sense, buying a big name player may represent a good investment for the team both inside and outside the field.

**Implications**

The proposed model represents an initial step to understand how fans develop a mental image about their favorite athletes and its consequences for both the athlete and their team. It aims to contribute to the continued understanding of the importance of high spree of spending by some clubs to bring big names among their ranks, while also displaying a picture of how fans are attracted to certain players and teams. For example, the recent signing of James Rodriguez by Real Madrid may increase viewership of the Spanish League (i.e., La Liga), as well as the support to Real among Colombians. Also, it may generate more endorsement opportunities for the athlete with subsequent repercussions on fans’ responses towards those sponsoring brands in both national and foreign markets. While previously presented models have been limited to certain communities (i.e. local fans), the current framework intends to provide inputs to not only to stadium visitors and local supporters, but also to fans of a specific players living abroad and in different cultures (i.e., foreign fans). The implications of this model are wider than previous models and it is not only a pre-loyalty model, but it also describes the effects of post-loyalty to a star player among fans.