Stand, Sit, or Play: Examining the Relationship between Athlete Activism and Athlete Brand Image Using CRT

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Political demonstrations and protests by athletes have been around since at least the African American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Black athletes of that era (e.g., Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, John Carlos) faced negative backlash from the white establishment, and had their images tarnished because they spoke out and stood up against racial and other forms of injustice in the United States (U.S.). In the current era, athlete activism has been a pervasive topic in the media in 2016. For example, to show support for the Black Lives Matter movement, WNBA players from the Minnesota Lynx, New York Liberty, Indiana Fever, and Phoenix Mercury dawned black shirts that listed several black men killed by police. Most recently, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick has been scrutinized for his personal sentiments and subsequent actions—kneeling during the National Anthem as a protest against the racial injustice in the U.S.

Unfortunately, these demonstrations are not without repercussions and criticism from leaders and managers in sport organizations, other athletes, fans, and other stakeholders in the sport industry. Although subsequently rescinded, the WNBA players were warned and fined for their demonstration (Moore, 2016). Opponents of Kaepernick’s position are responding with movements to boycott the NFL in hopes for his reprimand (McCarthy, 2016). Denver Broncos linebacker Brandon Marshall decided to support Kaepernick by also kneeling during the national anthem, and consequently, lost endorsement deals with the Air Academy Federal Credit Union and CenturyLink (Tuttle, 2016). Each of these instances provides examples of what could occur when an athlete seeks to use sport as a platform to voice their opinions about social and/or political issues. Sometimes, these activist behaviors are detrimental to the athlete’s brand image as well as their status within their league or team.

Previous research on athlete activism has focused on athletes who have used sport to advocate for political and social justice, college athletes’ perceptions on race and athlete activism, the effects of activism type on the endorser’s trustworthiness and endorser-product fit (Agyemang, Singer, & DeLorme, 2010; Cunningham & Regan, 2011; Kaufman & Wolff, 2010). Although research has acknowledged that “athletes have a responsibility to speak on social issues and causes today,” the body of literature does not provide extensive analysis into an athlete’s activism and the impact on their athlete brand image (Agyemang et al., 2010, p. 1). In fact, some have argued that today’s athletes refrain from political or social engagement during their playing career, as such engagements could negatively impact their brand image and endorsement potential (Cunningham & Regan, 2011).

Athlete brand image is closely tied to the concept of a human brand. A human brand is “any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communication efforts” (Thomson, 2006, p. 104). Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014) further explained that the athlete brand is the athlete’s “public persona” which has its own symbolic meanings and values in the marketplace (p. 98). The athlete brand image consists of the athlete’s athletic performance, his/her attractive appearance, and his/her marketable lifestyle which elicit distinct associations in the mind of consumers (Arai, Ko & Kaplanidou, 2013).

Given the negative impact activism has had on the playing careers of athletes in the past and how it can certainly affect the playing careers and brand image of athletes today, it is important for sport management scholars to further explore and critically analyze athlete activism in today’s societal and sport industry landscape. In this regard, the purpose of this presentation is to examine the potential issues involving current events related to athlete social/political activism. Specifically, it will address several brand image and marketing implications that may arise when athletes engage in social/political activities. Researchers will also propose recommendations for athletes who
seek to engage in political and social activities. Because athlete activism is rooted in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s and black athletes have been at the forefront of this activism in the past and present, it is appropriate to draw from Critical Race Theory (CRT) in our examination of this timely issue.

In the special issue on “promoting critical and innovative approaches to the study of sport management” in the Journal of Sport Management (JSM), Singer (2005) challenged sport management scholars to consider and embrace race-based epistemologies such as CRT to address some of the pertinent research problems faced in the sport industry. CRT is rooted in the social missions and struggles of the civil rights era, and the disenchantment legal scholars of color had with the limitations of critical legal studies to produce real meaningful racial reform (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). As its name implies, CRT views “race” as an important social construct to consider when analyzing some of the social, political, legal, and educational issues and challenges people in society face, particularly people of color in the U.S. Although an understanding of race and racism is at the heart of CRT, CRT works to address racism as part of the larger goal of opposing other forms of oppression and subordination based on human differences (e.g., gender, social class, religion, etc.) in society and organizations. Our focus in sport management on people in organizations and managerial activities (Frisby, 2005) positions us to utilize CRT to question and interrogate how structures and practices related to marketing and brand management impacts athletes who engage in activism.

The effectiveness of CRT in assessing athlete brand image is applicable to the marketable lifestyle dimension, which includes the athlete’s position as a role model and relationship effort (Arai et al., 2013). According to Arai and colleagues, marketable lifestyle made the greatest contribution to an athlete’s brand image. There are several core tenets or principles of CRT we could use to examine this issue of athlete brand image and the impact activism has on it (see Singer, 2005 and Tate, 1997 for more insight). However, for the purpose of this presentation only a few will be discussed. First, we will draw from the race, particularly whiteness, as a property interest (Harris, 1993) tenet. The race as a property interest tenet not only recognizes that certain racial groups in U.S. society were considered property (e.g., enslavement of people of African descent), but also how whiteness (i.e., being considered “white”) was deemed to be superior and a desired identity moniker that afforded people certain privileges in the society. Second, Derrick Bell’s interest convergence principle (Bell, 1980, 2004)—which posits that whites (particularly elite white males) will often tolerate or even support the interests and progress of racial minorities, but particularly when doing so substantially and disproportionately favors white self-interests (e.g., financial gain, positive publicity)—can be a powerful tool to examine the relationship between athlete activists and the sport organizations and sponsors with which they are affiliated. Finally, the importance of “voice” and the experiential knowledge, particularly of people of color and other subordinated groups, can help shed light on this issue. The “naming of one’s own reality” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) principle of CRT allows athlete activists to offer counter-narratives to the dominant discourse (e.g., athletes should keep quiet and stay away from political/social activism) that often permeates society and sport organizations.

In this presentation, we will elaborate on CRT and these relevant tenets to provide greater insight and a unique perspective in understanding the relationship between consumer behavior, athlete brand image, and athlete activism. Theoretical and practical implications will also be discussed.