Investigating the Perceptions of Retired Athlete Brand Image

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While jerseys of active players constitute the majority of jersey sales in the four major North American professional sport leagues, jersey sales of retired athletes have been increasing steadily. Mitchell and Ness Nostalgia Company (M&N) has catalogued the top-selling throwback jerseys by state to map consumer affinity for jerseys of retired players (M&N, n.d.; Petchesky, 2016). For example, Walter Payton tops the list of throwback jersey sales in the state of Illinois; Deion Sanders leads sales in Georgia; and Larry Bird’s iconic number 33 jersey heads sales in Massachusetts (M&N, n.d.). In addition to the robust throwback jersey market, there is a highly exclusive market for game-worn memorabilia from retired superstar athletes. Michael Jordan’s final regular season game jersey sold for a stunning $173,240 at auction (Golden, 2015). The above examples illustrate the degree to which retired athletes still resonate with sport consumers forming a formidable advertising vehicle. Further, there is a general consensus among sport marketing scholars that professional athletes should be perceived as brands due to their ability to optimize a variety of social activities and the business sphere (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014).

Arai et al. (2014) define an athlete brand as, “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. 98). Termed human brands, Thomson (2006) insists these individuals are most easily identified which presents a unique opportunity for marketers in terms of promotional efforts. When an athlete's brand image transcends his sport, his influence rises to that of a cultural object (Arai et al., 2014; Gilchrist, 2005). Despite playing a team sport, Michael Jordan was marketed as an individual and redefined the “player as product” concept, immortalizing his first name mononym, last name, and number with a veritable brand empire extending well beyond his prolific, active playing years (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2000). However, the mechanisms of nostalgia that create an affinity for a specific athlete's brand and drive sales of their throwback jerseys require further investigation.

Nostalgia marketing initiatives are capable of evoking the desire to “go back in time” by arousing sentimental feelings that consumers associate with past eras (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003; Ju, Kim, Chang, & Bluck, 2016). Retro branding is a powerful asset leveraged by sport organizations to stir up vivid recollections of past times (Balmer, 2013; Cattaneo & Guerini, 2012). Admittedly, it is the sense of comfort which nostalgic sentiments are capable of providing that make retro marketing extremely relevant considering the complex values of today’s uncertain society (Brown et al., 2003). In sport marketing, the power of retro brands to evoke a sentimental longing for the past and stimulate the feeling of nostalgia for the “Good Old Days” allow sport organizations to utilize their desirable heritage (Hallegatte, 2014). Brown and colleagues (2003) suggest that brand heritage should be perceived as a combination of marketing-mix variables that, “invoke the history of a particular brand, including all its personal and cultural associations” (p. 20).

Retro branding has grown in strategic relevance among sport marketers making these promotional initiatives omnipresent; however, research concerning sport consumers’ desired emotional reactions to retro branded products is non-existent in the sport marketing realm. Furthermore, a lack of empirical evidence about the consumer perception of retired athletes’ brands and their persona prevents brand management practitioners from utilizing the full potential of marketing opportunities associated with athlete brands. As a result, a plethora of questions concerning the symbolic value of retired athletes and positive and lasting impressions generated by athlete brands remain essentially unanswered. Despite the existing literature’s validation of the dimensions of athlete brand image, which apply to active athletes (e.g., athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle), empirical analysis of sentimental associations evoked by retired athletes requires further investigation. Therefore, the primary aim of the present study is to decipher sport consumer perceptions of retired superstar athletes and understand how these sentimental feelings ultimately contribute to value of athlete brands.
The authors implemented a qualitative research design to gain a deeper understanding of how the sport consumers perceived retired superstar athletes and the role that nostalgia played in the internalization of retired athlete brand image. Fourteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with sport industry professionals, who indicated a thorough knowledge of retro marketing practices in the context of retired superstar athletes. The current sample was deemed appropriate due to the participants’ extensive expertise in marketing, sport brand promotion, fan engagement, and sport event management. Due to the lack of prior empirical investigation as well as consumer knowledge needed to discuss the topic in detail, participants were carefully recruited, screened, and chosen based on their background in sport marketing and knowledge of retro branding and retired athletes, both from the practical and consumer standpoint.

Based on a preliminary interpretation of the interviews, the anticipated contributions of the current study lie in revealing that retired athletes were capable of evoking nostalgic feelings related to on-field performance and unique life story. Retired athletes evoked a yearning for specific time periods in history and sentimental associations about their childhood. The memories of these superstar athletes conjured up desired moments and made participants reflect on their initial introduction to a sport. Additionally, childhood memories associated with retired athletes brought back a deep sense of pride among study participants. These sentiments stimulated intentions to rekindle and honor retired athletes. Evidently, the feeling of achievement that retired athletes are still capable of embodying is well ingrained in sport consumers’ memory. The findings of the present investigation could allow sport marketers to engage with consumers of athlete brands in a more meaningful and impactful manner to maximize market response and consumer satisfaction.