A Qualitative Examination of the Role of a Personal Logo in Athlete Branding

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With the drastically increasing popularity of sports, a large number of athletes now have widened their influences beyond the sport industry. These individuals act not only as endorsers for an organization’s promotional activities, but also as personal brands with their own values. Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014) defined 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). Because athletes are now considered as brands, the importance of branding has been highlighted with various concepts, such as athlete brand equity (Williams, Walsh, & Rhenwrick, 2015), athlete brand architecture (Williams, Kim, Agyemang, & Martin, 2015), and athlete brand image (Arai et al., 2014).

According to Henderson and Cote (1998), a logo is the most salient visual brand element that acts as a key component of brand equity. Thus, developing a logo has been essential for creating brand equity and positive brand effects for organizations (Kohli, Suri, & Thakor, 2002). Accordingly, athletes also have their own personal logos as brands. For instance, prominent athletes such as LeBron James, Bryce Harper, Tom Brady, Lionel Messi, and Jordan Spieth all have their own logos. Interestingly, not every athlete has a personal logo, and Buteau (2017) has argued that not every athlete is worthy of having their own logo or brand.

In traditional branding, it has been widely agreed that a logo, as a core visual brand element, influences brand attitude, brand associations, brand image, brand loyalty, and brand awareness (Henderson & Cote, 1998; Henderson, Giese, & Cote, 2004, Hynes, 2009, Kohli et al., 2002). Despite the burgeoning interest in athlete branding and the current phenomenon where fans are exposed to numerous athlete logos while consuming sports, the influence of an athlete logo on the athlete brand has yet to be explored. Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore the role and fans’ perceptions of a personal logo in athlete branding. The following research questions will guide this study:
RQ1: To what extent are the participants able to recall and recognize logos associated with prominent athletes?
RQ2: Does familiarity with an athlete’s logo alter or reinforce perceptions of the athlete?
RQ3: Do participants feel that athlete logos reflect the brand image of the athlete?
RQ4: Does the presence of a logo impact participants’ intentions to purchase branded products associated with the athlete?

Considering the exploratory nature of this study, we employed a qualitative approach. Grounded theory will serve as a primary theoretical framework, as the study seeks to inductively identify new themes (Charmaz, 2006). A purposeful sampling technique will be used to recruit participants for a series of three focus group discussions to identify common themes regarding athlete logos and brands. Three researchers will independently code the obtained data and discuss how to categorize the overarching themes and sub-themes. The findings of this study will be discussed in the presentation as to theoretically advance athlete branding research and application.