We are not talking about the game: Exploring the Athlete Brand Community Practices

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Consumers of branded products (e.g., cars and computers) organize into brand communities and share specific qualities that ultimately contribute to a brand’s identity (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Various traditions adopted in brand communities engender kinship with fellow brand consumers (Keller, 2008; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). In the sport setting, social exchanges among fellow fans can promote greater sociability and enrich the overall experience (Melnick, 1993). Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) further posited that traditions observed within brand communities revolve around communal consumption and preserve the culture of the brand community. Similar to rituals and traditions, brand community practices create incremental value for brand consumption (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009). These practices (e.g., social networking, community engagement, brand use) are employed to protect the brand identity and enhance consumption of the focal brand (Schau et al., 2009). Interestingly, Melnick (1993) argues that direct interactions with admired athletes (i.e., focal brands) are equally important in favorable fan experience. In fact, superstar athletes are capable of shaping our communities’ wider culture, which in turn presents a unique opportunity for personal brand promotion and sponsor interest (Gilchrist, 2005). Sport consumers’ ubiquitous emotional affinity for superstar athletes organizes legions of fans into brand communities where they reap the rewards of meaningful connections with fellow brand consumers (Keller, 2008; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). As evidenced by the existing scholarly work, brand community activities and practices have received adequate attention; however, the particularities and implications of such practices in the realm of athlete brands are yet to be determined. Therefore, the central aim of the current study was to explore what specific practices are shared in athlete brand communities and how these established activities operate in the given domain.

Method and Contribution

The authors interviewed thirty six members of a LeBron James fan club located in a large Midwestern city. We inquired into the specific perceptions regarding the athlete brand community practices and how these initiatives reinforce a sense of collective in the fan club. The analysis of the interviews yielded evidence of several practices implemented within the studied fan club. For example, the authors observed practices involving face-to-face gatherings of members, community outreach and volunteer initiatives, mentoring programs, and activities related to praise of the focal athlete brand. The current study advances our understanding of athlete brand community practices and the benefits that derive from communal consumption of the athlete brand. Despite limitations concerning the studied setting, we believe our findings provide further recommendations for strategic athlete brand management. We indicate that athlete brand community practices can perpetuate the identity of the athlete brand community and generate greater value in terms of consumer targeting. We further demonstrate that athlete brand managers should implement and carefully monitor brand community practices that could lead to enhanced communal experience and positive perception of the focal athlete brand. It is clear that the affiliation with athlete brand community creates incremental value in consumers’ view, resulting in increased sponsor engagement and revenue for the athlete.