Beyond the Court: Analyzing the Benefits of Belonging to the Athlete Brand Community

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Consumers relate to human brands (e.g., athletes and celebrities) and identify with their personality and life story (Thompson, 2006). Athlete brands’ distinct ability to transcend a sport presents sport marketers with a unique opportunity to maximize their clients’ earning potential and raise their profile in our society (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014; Gilchrist, 2005). As cogently stated by Darlow (2018), “athletes are so much more than points per game or yards after the catch or slugging percentage. These are people that our society sometimes worships” (p. 17). Sports fans perceive celebrity athletes and their athletic achievements as cultural icons and attempt to emulate their traits. These meaningful attachments are characterized by the associations about an athlete’s persona as reflected by their followers’ perceptions. Past literature refers to this construct as athlete brand image (Arai et al., 2014).

Athletes’ relatable personalities and appealing brand image facilitate a direct connection with the target audience. This connection allows sport consumers to emulate the values and social status of celebrity athletes to validate their own self-worth (Hewitt, 1997). Furthermore, consumers of athlete brands derive a number of emotional benefits from the relationship with their admired athletes and create networks of like-minded fans (Arai et al., 2014; Keller, 2008). The existing scholarly work recognizes this phenomenon as brand communities, where consumers share certain traits (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Consumers’ unique identification with fellow brand community members evokes feelings of kinship and could in turn enhance consumption of the focal brand (Keller, 2008). While past scholars have developed theoretical frameworks for the commonalities, practices, and derived value within brand communities (e.g., Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009), the psychological benefits related to the affiliation with fellow athlete brand community members have been largely unexplored and require further scholarly attention. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to explore how like-minded members of an athlete brand community derive multifaceted emotional benefits through shared athlete brand community experiences.

Method and Contribution

Thirty six semi-structured interviews were conducted with a LeBron James fan club located in a large city in the Midwestern United States. Given the dearth of empirical data concerning the studied topic, the present data collection procedures were deemed appropriate. Specifically, the authors intended to determine the emotional benefits gained through participation in the fan club activities and interactions with fellow athlete brand consumers. The analysis of the interviews revealed a unique bond among athlete brand community members. This intricate self-fulfillment derived from athlete brand community identification provides further insight into the communal interaction and personal satisfaction sought by athlete brand consumers. The current findings lend themselves to further recommendations for the athlete brand management literature and related industries. For example, athlete brand managers and talent agencies should consider applying the present data to enhance their clients’ brand perception and overall consumer experience. The findings at hand should guide sport marketers and their clients to a better understanding of value maximization in a crowded market space.