Impact of Athlete Social Activism in Endorsement

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Brand activism is a value-driven strategy intended to draw attention to social and environmental issues based on justice and fairness (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). Recently, athletes have used their visible pulpit to promote various forms of social activism. Examples such as kneeling during the USA national anthem to protest racism and social activism centered around health, sexuality, education, and disaster relief have become increasingly commonplace in sport (Agyemang, 2012; Cunningham & Regan Jr, 2012). Although research has indicated the impact of negatively perceived behavior on athlete transgressions (Lohneiss & Hill, 2014), little work has been devoted to the both positive and negative marketing impacts of different forms of athlete activism in sport.

The purpose of this study is to classify athlete social activism and examine the impact of an athlete social activism on sport consumer attitudes towards the athlete, the athlete’s social act, and the endorsement company in professional sport.

Prejudice-distribution theory outlines the viewpoints of athlete activism specific to race (Kaiser & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009). Kaiser and Pratt-Hyatt (2009) posited that interactions with racial minorities are likely to vary as a function of racial identification. For the current research, the theory will be used to explain discriminate consumer attitudes towards athlete activism. In order to capture the impact of athlete activism, match-up hypothesis will be used to explain the relationship between an endorser and a brand (Kamins, 1990; Ohanian, 1991). Ohanian (1991) examined the benefits of developing associative links and appropriate celebrity match-up when they found that the likelihood of purchasing more complex/expensive products increases when they are endorsed by someone trustworthy, attractive, and experienced.

Data for the project will be collected via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. The survey module will consist of a manipulated article with information concerning athlete activism and the athlete’s endorsement deal. The researchers will purposely manipulate different forms of athlete activism based on actual acts (e.g., poverty, youth health, racism, and sexism). In order to minimize potential endogenous issues due to the quasi-experimental design, several variables, including identity, knowledge, and brand identity, relevant to fan’s attitude will be controlled. The questionnaire will also include several predictors (i.e., perceived social activism, appropriateness of social activism, trustworthiness of athlete), a moderator (i.e., perceived pervasiveness of relevant issue), and one outcome variable (i.e., brand attitude). The authors will employ Multiple Regression Modelling in SPSS and mediated moderation analysis in PROCESS (Hayes, 2017).

The current research is expected to address salient contributions to academic and practical fields regarding social activism and endorsement market. In academia, the findings should offer insights regarding how athlete activism impacts the attitude toward the athlete and its endorsee. The research will also contribute to sport practitioners with helping them understand how fans respond to different types of athlete social activism in order to better control the messages and their source.