Value Creation Through Athlete Social Responsibility

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Social responsibility (SR) among professional sport teams and organizations has attracted both academic and practitioner attention (Walzel et al., 2018). Surprisingly, little work has been devoted to individual athlete social responsibility (ASR) and the role ASR might assume in athlete brand value creation in professional sports (see exceptions, Tainsky & Babiak, 2011; Kim & Walker, 2013). Given the unique resource bundles created by and through SR regarding firm-level competitive advantages (Barney, 1991; Walker & Mercado, 2013), it stands to reason the same could be true for SR at the athlete level-of-analysis. If properly activated, ASR should serve as a resource to enable value creation for the athlete.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship between ASR and athlete value creation in professional sports. Panel data from professional sports in North America will be used to test the theory of whether an observable competitive advantage is derived for athletes who have engaged in ASR activities.

Through a resource-based view (RBV) lens in the strategy literature (Barney, 1991), SR has been the focus for strategic sport resource research (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Walker & Mercado, 2013). The influence of sport in modern society as both entertainment and a social pulpit underscores its unique value (Dunning, 1999; Jackson, 2017). With the increased attention to social issues and stakeholder responsibilities to community stakeholders (Madsen & Rodgers, 2015), athlete (i.e., actor) efforts towards SR should provide the actor with discriminatory status from other athletes without SR. Similar to the effects seen in organizational SR research (Husted & Allen, 2007; Walker, Salaga, & Mercado, 2016; Visser & Kymal, 2015), social leverage should contribute to value creation for the ASR actor. From the RBV perspective, ASR should serve as a valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resource, which in theory should generate a competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). Therefore, we hypothesize that ASR enables discriminatory power, which serves as a conduit to athlete value.

Athlete data in four major sport leagues of North America were identified. The images and reputations of affiliated athletes, teams, and the leagues in terms of SR involvement and social issue support (Cunningham, et al., 2019; Inoue, Kent, & Lee, 2011) as well as representative status makes these leagues appropriate research contexts. We examine the impact of off-field performance as a value creating resource; SR status and contributions will be used as measures of intangible resources. The model will include several control variables including athlete-, team-, and league-relevant factors in order to restrict major confounding effects. We will employ latent growth modelling in Mplus to capture the influence of SR status on athlete market value change across the athlete’s career.

This study is expected to address unique contributions to academic and practical fields regarding ASR, its immediate value creation, and residual value evaluation. In academia, the results should offer insights into how and why ASR reflects on the athlete’s value creation. The results will also contribute to sport practitioner’s understanding of how athlete intangible values should be evaluated and leveraged.