Who Has a Logo? A Content Analysis on the Prevalence of Professional Athletes Personal Logo

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Athlete branding literature has gradually grown since the initial conceptualizations of athlete branding (e.g., Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014; Williams, Walsh, & Rhenwrick, 2015). Scholars are beginning to explore the many ways athletes build and manage their brands, such as through brand extensions, endorsements, and sponsorships (Walsh & Williams, 2017). However, a dearth of literature exists as it pertains to the presence and utilization of athlete brand marks (e.g., logos). Athletes have begun using their own logos to introduce branded products and services into the marketplace. However, the athlete logo is frequently created and distributed in conjunction with a corporate partner and adorned on licensed products, such as signature shoes and apparel. Recently, athletes such as Kawhi Leonard and Roger Federer have sued Nike for control of their logos (Bassam, 2019; Bontemps, 2019). Overall, the presence and use of logos add a stimulating line of inquiry in the athlete brand domain.

Professional athletes, regardless of fame, notoriety, or sport, seem to be taking advantage of the potential added benefits of communicating their brand via a personal logo. While literature (e.g., Ahn, Suh, Lee, & Pedersen, 2012; Foroudi, Melewar, Gupta, 2014, Williams, Walsh, & Rhenwrick, 2015) pertaining to corporate logos, team logos, and athlete branding all point to the benefits of using such marks, no research related to athlete logos currently exists. Considering this void in the literature, the purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the presence of athlete logos currently used in the sport marketplace, while categorizing the logos based on theory from logo typology research (Henderson & Cote, 1998).

A content analysis was employed to examine the presence, use, and type of athlete logos existing in the marketplace. A list of athletes (N= 218) was curated from ESPN’s Fame 100 and Forbes Richest Athletes lists. Three researchers coded items related to the logo itself (e.g., design, typology, typeface, repetition), athlete demographics (e.g., gender, race, nationality), sport type (e.g., team vs. individual), and presence of ancillary items (e.g., equipment). An independent blind coding approach was used (Neuendorf, 2016) and intercoder reliability was found to be at an acceptable level of at least .83 for all variables. The study found that 104 of the 218 athletes used a personal logo, led by Caucasian (38%) and Black/African American (37%) athletes. The coding also revealed that the highest percentages of athletes were from the United States (56%) and played basketball (27%). In terms of the athlete logo itself, 12% included a nickname, 16% used their initial, and 5% used a silhouette. Additional findings (e.g., 25% of the logos had repetition and 18% parallelism) and the implications (e.g., how athletes use their logos, athlete criteria for having a logo) of the research will be discussed.