Athletes' Brand Identity And Brand Image. Research Advancements And The Development Of An Athlete Brand Identity Scale

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Research aim

The aim of this research was to investigate athlete brand management and in particular, the two key constructs of athlete brand identity and image. The objective was to scope existing research advancements and to develop a scale on athlete brand identity. The following research questions guided this project: (1) "What are the underlying concepts of athlete brand management?", (2) "How do athlete brand identity and image relate?", and (3) "How can athlete brand identity be measured?"

Theoretical background

Arai, Ko and Ross (2014) argued that athletes have become more proactive in developing personal branding strategies to leverage their brand. These strategies have to be particularly strong as athletes are considered unstable products. Unlike conventional brands, athlete brands have to be powerful enough to overcome negative circumstances such as injuries or poor performance (Richelieu & Pons, 2006). One decisive success factor of the athlete brand is the perceived image in the minds of consumers (Arai et al., 2014). Therefore, it is not surprising that the majority of research in this field is concerned with understanding consumer behaviour. However, the perceived image of athletes developed by consumers reflects brand associations sent by the athlete (Keller, 1993). Hence, it is the brand owner (i.e., the athlete) that first establishes and communicates their 'brand identity', before consumers can perceive a particular 'brand image' (De Chernatony, 1999). In short, *identity* is the sender's reality and *image* represents the receiver's perception (Kapferer, 1997). Therefore, the two underlying concepts of *athlete brand management* are *brand identity* and *brand image*. De Chernatony (1999) advocated that it is essential for the development of strong brands to match the desired with the perceived image. This match is represented in the form of brand congruence; optimising brand congruence helps to establish powerful brands (De Chernatony, 1999).

Arai et al. (2014) investigated the athlete brand from the consumer perspective and developed the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI). They identified three primary dimensions of athlete brand image: athletic performance, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle. However, as athlete brand identity is essential in informing brand image, it is also important to analyse the athlete brand from the brand owner perspective. Only if the dimensions of the athlete brand identity construct are clearly defined, it is possible to compare those dimensions with athlete brand image and indicate the level of congruence of the athlete brand.

Methodology and preliminary results

To map the field of athlete branding and to identify relevant research advancements, a systematic quantitative literature review was conducted. A search across six databases using predefined search terms and following rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria revealed 47 articles that were included in the study. Results facilitated an understanding of the different perspectives, use of subjects and theories, as well as the varying application of scales within athlete brand research. The findings indicated that research on athlete brand identity needs further advancing and the development of an athlete brand identity measurement tool is necessary to further advance research in this space and allow for future comparisons between identity and image. The identified articles were searched with a particular focus on scales applied or developed to investigate the athlete brand. All items used in existing scales were collated and resulted in a pool of 229 items that were sent out to 10 experts in the field of athlete brand management. In this pre-study survey, experts were asked to rate these items by importance to athlete brand identity. Additionally, they were provided with the opportunity to suggest items they deem relevant but were missing from the list. The data from this survey will provide preliminary results with regards to identifying relevant items for athlete brand identity. These items will subsequently allow the research team to develop a scale on athlete brand identity.

Conclusions

This research project provides a first step towards developing an athlete brand identity scale and investigating the associated dimensions of the athlete brand from the athlete's perspective. The emerging trend of increased visibility and outreach of athletes has led to the necessity to develop and manage personal brands. Next to analysing consumer perceptions (brand image) of those personal brands it is essential to investigate to what extent the information sent by the athlete (brand identity) matches those consumer

perceptions (brand congruence). Hence, brand congruence is the synergy between athlete brand identity and image. Once the athlete brand identity scale is developed and tested, it is recommended that future research measure brand congruence between the identity and image constructs.

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