Examining the Influence of Athletic Participation in Evaluation of Entry-Level Positions in Financial Services

Laura Burton, University of Connecticut
Heidi Grappendorf, North Carolina State University
Angela Henderson, University of Northern Colorado

As in many areas of management, women within the financial services industry are overrepresented in the labor force (57%) but significantly underrepresented in executive offices (18%), boards of directors (17%), and CEO positions (1%) (Catalyst, 2010). Despite the gains women have made in the world of business, very little has changed in the overall perceptions about what makes a good manager. Social role theory (Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000) and role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) have examined expectations about the roles that men and women occupy, in an attempt to explain why women continue to be underrepresented in major leadership positions. Role congruity theory predicts women will be less likely than men to emerge as leaders because expectations for the leadership roles are incongruent with stereotypes regarding females (Ritter & Yoder, 2004). Additionally, if women do engage in stereotypically masculine or male-dominated behaviors such as those perceived as necessary in management and leadership positions, they are evaluated less favorably than men because they are violating their stereotypical gender roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). However, these traditional gender expectations can be violated – favorably – in certain situations when women are in leadership positions (Powell, Butterfield, & Bartol, 2008; Rosette & Tost, 2010). For women, participation in athletics can be considered a violation of female gender role stereotypes as female athletes have been linked to more masculine or androgynous gender role orientations, and also to more agentic characteristics (Harrison & Lynch, 2005). In addition, female athletes have been rated as having more power (i.e., ability to influence others) and greater competence (i.e., ability to solve problems and accomplish goals) when compared to other groups of women (DeWall, Alternatt, & Thompson, 2005).

Role congruity theory has been applied to evaluation of male and female athletes for entry-level positions in sport management and results have indicated men, specifically male athletes, have an advantage over women in competency evaluations and salary recommendations for entry-level management positions (Burton et al., 2008; Grappendorf, Burton, & Henderson, 2007; Henderson, Grappendorf, & Burton, 2009). Therefore, to expand this line of research, it is important to consider how perceptions of athletic participation influence men and women in hiring, promoting, and evaluating procedures in other industries in addition to the sport industry. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to examine whether athletic participation influenced hiring recommendations for male and female job applicants to entry-level positions specific to the financial services industry.

A 2 (male, female) × 2 (athlete, non-athlete) experiment was conducted using an online survey method with hiring managers within the financial services industry (N = 200). Each participant evaluated one candidate résumé for an entry-level position in financial services from the four treatment conditions (female athlete, male athlete, female non-athlete, male non-athlete), and completed a survey regarding hiring preferences, competence, and likeability for that candidate. The participants also completed a demographics questionnaire. A final sample of résumés for female athletes (n = 46), female non-athletes (n = 36), male athletes (n = 42), and male non-athletes (n = 38) was analyzed using multivariate analysis of variance. Dependent variables included in the analysis were hiring recommendation, competence for the position, and likeability of the applicant. Independent measures included type of résumé and managerial level of evaluator. The MANOVA evaluating differences based on type of résumé was significant, Wilkes λ = 89, F (6, 296) = 1.89, p < .05, η² = .04. Post hoc analysis indicated that female athletes rated significantly higher than female non-athletes on hiring recommendation and competence for the position. In addition, there were significant differences based on managerial level of the evaluator, Wilkes λ = .91, F (6, 296) = 2.48, p < .05, η² = .05. Post hoc analysis indicated that senior level managers provided significantly lower rankings for hiring recommendations and competence when compared to mid and entry-level managers, but not for likeability of the candidate. There was no support for an interaction of ratings of all résumés by managerial level of the evaluator, Wilkes λ = .86, F (6, 296) = 1.28, p = .19, η² = .05.

Findings from this study contradict previous research that has reported an advantage to male athletes for entry-level positions in sport management, and support that athletic participation may provide women with an advantage when being evaluated for management and leadership positions in the financial services industry. The female athletes in our study received the highest ratings for hiring recommendation, competence, and likeability. Most notably, these ratings were significantly higher than those
provided to female non-athletes. These findings indicate that athletic participation may moderate the impact of role congruity for women entering into the financial services industry.