Female Athletes’ “Sex Sells” Marketing Strategy: Consumers’ Gender Gap toward Female Athletes’ Body Images

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Numerous studies have explored issues surrounding the treatment of gender and the nature in which the sports media display the body images of female athletes (Duncan, 1990; Hillard, 1984; Kane, 1988; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991). Photographs depicting female athletes are often displayed provocatively or with overt sexual undertones in an attempt to capture viewers’ attention or even arouse heterosexual males (Duncan, 1990; Duncan & Sayavong, 1990; Hillard, 1984). However, evidence suggests that the perception that “sex sells” is not particularly accurate relative to sports (Cunningham, Fink, & Kenix, 2008; Fink, Cunningham, & Kensing, 2004; Kane & Maxwell, 2008). Moreover, only marginal empirical research has examined how different portrayals of athletes’ body images affect viewers’ attitudes toward those athletes. Although researchers have speculated the nature in which people’s beliefs might be influenced by biased coverage (Fasting, 1999), a dearth of research exists regarding actual consequences of these differential portrayals as well as the extent to which the media can truly influence people’s perceptions of athletes (Knight & Giuliano, 2001). The current study sought to extend the literature by using the match-up hypothesis and associative learning theory to examine how different portrayals of well-known female athletes influence perceptions of consumers.

The current study extends the endorser-product research by using a real female athlete, specifically noting the work of Cunningham et al. (2008) and their suggestions for future directions and limitations. The context of Cunningham et al.’s study may have contributed to the emphasis placed on expertise and attractiveness of fictitious endorsers. However, using actual endorsers may lead to different results. In the current study, the match-up hypothesis and associative learning theory were utilized to develop the hypotheses. Based on principles within these theories, this study proposed that athlete attractiveness and expertise would influence consumers’ perceptions regarding the appropriateness of the endorser for the product and sporting event. Furthermore, this study proposed that perceptions of appropriateness lead to positive attitudes regarding athletes and sports and, ultimately, intentions to purchase tickets of a sport event. These findings were also tested for differences according to consumers’ gender.

A 2(consumer’s gender: male, female) × 2 (product type: tennis dress, swimsuit) experimental design was conducted. Pictures for a tennis event were created using Maria Sharapova as the endorser as the study participants—113 undergraduate students—were tested at a large southeastern university in the United States. The hypotheses were tested using an ANOVA with product type and the consumer’s gender as the independent variables, athlete attractiveness and expertise as the control variables, and athlete-product fit, attitude toward athlete/sport, and purchase intentions as the dependent variables. All dependent variable measures used had been deemed reliable in previous research (Cunningham et al., 2008; Ohanian, 1990; Parker & Fink, 2008; Till & Busler, 2000). Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement to 10 prompts using a 9-point semantic-differential scale; the prompts included 9 statements focused on the athletes’ pictures and 1 open-ended question.

In the hypotheses testing, Hypothesis 1 predicted that participants’ gender would affect the dependent variables—namely, (a) endorser-product fit, (b) attitude toward athlete, (c) attitude toward sport, and (d) purchase intention. The ANOVA results indicated a significant main effect of participants’ gender for fit (F 1,112 = 12.745) and attitude toward athlete (F 1,112 = 8.639). However, attitude toward sport (F 1,112 = 1.733) and purchase intention (F 1,112 = 0.865) were not significantly different. Hypothesis 2 predicted that product type would affect the dependent variables. The findings revealed significant differences for fit (F 1,112 = 10.218), attitude toward sport (F 1,112 = 24.922), and purchase intention (F 1,112 = 8.279). Hypothesis 3 predicted an interaction between participants’ gender and product type in the dependent variables. All the dependent variables demonstrated significant interaction effects: fit (F 1,112 = 10.693), attitude toward athlete (F 1,112 = 4.900), attitude toward sport (F 1,112 = 9.524), and purchase intention (F 1,112 = 3.683). In the descriptive statistics, most participants gave the highest score to the athletic image. However, only one difference was measured in attitude toward athlete by participants’ gender: Male participants indicated a more favorable attitude toward sexy (M = 7.58, SD = 1.29) than athletic (M = 7.34, SD = 1.60) athletes. However, female participants indicated a more favorable attitude toward athletic (M = 7.09, SD = 1.71) than sexy (M = 6.08, SD = 1.66) athletes. These results support Hypothesis 3, while Hypotheses 1 and 2 were partially supported.

To fill the gaps in respondents’ opinions from the survey questionnaire, one open-ended question asked them to describe their general feelings about the athlete’s image in the given image; the open-ended questions were presented after the close-ended questionnaire and before the demographic questions. Respondents’ descriptions were typed, arranged in random order, and
subjected to content analysis. A preliminary evaluation of all the transcripts indicated that six dimensions captured most of the themes in the accounts: sexuality, outfit, attractiveness, athleticism, expertise, and marketing tool. These themes were related with female athletes’ “sex sells” marketing strategies, which produced significant gender differences in the questionnaire data. Respondents frequently wrote about a concept of sexuality and the femininity of the female athlete as marketing tools employed to ease social discourse, selling sex appeal to male consumers. Based on the results of this study, sport managers should realize that the “sex sells” marketing tool with female athletes may result in different purchase results based on consumers’ gender as female consumers perceive athletes’ sexualized images in a negative light while male consumers perceive female athletes’ sexualized body images in a more positive light.

We combined the structured quantitative method with a less structured, more open-ended method. The subsequent content analysis provided a richer, more phenomenologically satisfying account of consumers’ perceptions. In the traditional experimental survey questionnaire, dependent variables were rated using only simple numbers. These numbers frequently have been muted or overlooked in empirical research. Sport managers need to focus attention to the neglect and misrepresentation of female consumers’ perceptions about female athletes’ body image in media outlets. We have sought to extend this critique by analyzing sources of gender bias in this empirical research. These accounts suggest methodological implications and research directions that may provide a basis for new models of female athletes’ marketing strategies for both genders of consumers.