The Impact of Gender Expression on Endorser Effectiveness

Heidi Parker, University of Southern Maine
Janet Fink, University of Connecticut
Michael Mudrick, University of Connecticut

Socio-cultural Thursday, May 24, 2012 11:15 AM
Abstract 2012-032
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (North)

Since the implementation of Title IX, the number of girls and women participating in athletics has increased substantially. For example, in 2010, there were 9087 women's intercollegiate varsity teams across the United States, an increase of 2741 teams in the past twelve years (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010). However, this growth in participation has not resulted in a concomitant increase in media coverage (Duncan & Messner, 2005) of women's sport nor endorsement opportunities for female athletes (Badenhausen, 2008). However, recent research has indicated that female athletes can be effective endorsers (Charbonneau & Garland, 2006; Fink, Parker, Cunningham, & Cuneen, in press) and it is the “fit” between the athlete and the product being endorsed that is most vital to the success of an endorsement campaign (Boyd & Shank, 2005; Fink, et al., in press; Til & Busler, 2000). However, the most important components of “fit” relative to female athletes and endorsement success have yet to be fully determined. Thus, this study draws from the match-up hypothesis, gender norms, and social role theory to further elucidate our insight regarding this topic.

Many have argued that hegemonic masculinity is perpetuated through sport, and thus, sport is “contested terrain” for female athletes. Men are seen to be “naturally” superior athletes. These beliefs are in line with the social role theory (Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000) which posits there are distinct behavior and appearance expectations for men and women (Eagly, 1987; Eagly et al., 2000). In general, people believe men and women possess very different characteristics, and these differences are innate, rather than socially constructed (Eagly, Wood, & Johanssen-Schmidt, 2004). Further, those who display behaviors, characteristics, or traits inconsistent with one’s assigned gender role are typically met with adverse judgments (Heilman, 2001). In sport, a traditionally male domain, female athletes are often seen as violating their traditional gender roles and as a result, are negatively evaluated (Heilman, 2001; Messner, 2002).

Further, there is a large body of literature which has explored the complexities faced by athletic women in our society, particularly women who appear muscular and/or participate in sports viewed as traditionally masculine (i.e., Kane, 1988; Krane et al., 2004; Wachs, 2005). Many of the complexities are centered around athletic women who feel the need to appear aptly feminine (i.e., thin, narrow shoulders, ample breast, defined waste, long hair, make-up, fitted clothing, etc.) or act in traditional feminine ways (i.e., graceful, aesthetically pleasing, and not strong or powerful) in order to meet societal expectations. Some female athletes have described feeling like they are living in two different worlds (Krane et al., 2004). In one, the athletic world, they are admired for their musculature, strength, and physical prowess. In the other, the world outside of sport, those same traits are disparaged as women are judged on traditional displays of femininity (Krane et al. 2004). Relatedly, past research has indicated gender typing of sports affects attitudes about the sport participants. Women who participate in more traditionally feminine sports (e.g., golf, tennis) garnered higher social status amongst their peers (Kane, 1988), were significantly more likely to be preferred by males as a date, and by females as a friend (Holland & Andre, 1994), and were rated as more attractive (Kane, 1987) than those participating in more traditionally masculine sports.

However, a recent study by Fink et al. (in press) indicated these gender norms may be shifting. Their study examined the impact of participating in a traditionally masculine sport on the effectiveness of a female athlete endorser. The results showed that while a female athlete participating in a gender “inappropriate” sport (boxing) is still perceived to be less attractive than one in a more gender “appropriate” sport (tennis), the sport in which the female athlete participated had no bearing on perceptions of her expertise and trustworthiness. Additionally, the type of sport played by the female athlete endorser had no impact on perceptions of athlete-product fit. In other words, female athletes who participate in sports traditionally viewed as masculine are perceived to be as effective as endorsers as female athletes who participate in traditionally feminine sports. However, it is important to note the same athlete was portrayed in both treatment conditions in the Fink et al. experiment and that athlete was visibly feminine.
So, what about female athletes who do not subscribe to the “normative” definition of femininity and choose to express their gender in ways counter to traditional gender norms? Have gender norms shifted enough that these female athletes will be viewed as equally effective as more feminine female endorsers?

A recent meta-analysis indicated the endorser traits of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (in order) had the most positive influence on endorser effectiveness (Amos et al., 2008). Though Fink et al. (in press) found no effect of the sport played (feminine/masculine) on two of these traits, given the research outlined above, we anticipate the gender expression of the female athlete will have an impact on the perceptions of these traits. We propose the following hypothesis:

H1: A female athlete endorser exhibiting more “masculine” characteristics will be deemed less trustworthy, expert, and attractive than a female athlete endorser who exhibits more feminine characteristics.

According to the match-up hypothesis, the fit between the product and the endorser is crucial to endorser effectiveness—the better the fit the more effective the endorsement. The idea is to create an intuitive link between the two entities so that when one is seen the other is automatically recalled (Boyd & Shank, 2005). Given these tenants and the research noted previously, we anticipate that gender expression of the female athlete may impact perceptions of fit. However, we believe this will be dependent upon the sport product being endorsed. If the sport product serves to enhance more “masculine” traits (e.g., Muscle Building Milk Shake Dietary Supplement) then perhaps the female athlete endorser with the more masculine gender expression will be deemed the best fit. This leads to the study’s second hypothesis:

H2: There will be an interaction effect of gender expression and product endorsed on perceptions of endorser-product fit; female athlete endorsers with more masculine characteristics will have the highest fit ratings when endorsing a product that serves to enhance more masculine traits. Similarly, female athlete endorsers with more feminine characteristics will have the highest fit ratings when endorsing a product that serves to enhance more feminine traits.

This study will employ a 2 gender expression (feminine, masculine) x 2 sport product (feminine, masculine) experimental design. Participants (approximately 250) will be students at two universities in the Northeast. Participants will be randomly assigned to one of four treatment conditions in which they will be asked to study an advertisement for a sport product for 1-minute and then respond to a series of questions regarding that advertisement.

The advertisements will include a picture of a female athlete (feminine/masculine) participating in the sport of boxing endorsing different products (Six Star Elite Series Muscle Building Milk Shake or HER Energy Drink). The script for the ad will remain the same in all advertisements. The athlete used will be an unknown athlete whose picture is manipulated to appear more masculine or more feminine by changing hair length, tightness of clothing, musculature, and amount of make-up using Photoshop. Other than the make-up, the face of the athlete will remain unchanged. Pre-tests will be conducted to be certain the two pictures and two products are substantially different in terms of ratings on masculinity and femininity. Perceived trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise of the athlete will be measured using Ohanian’s (1990) endorser credibility scale. Athletic product fit and purchase intentions will be measured using scales from Fink et al. (in press). Variables including gender of participant, sport involvement and product involvement will serve as controls. Finally, the instrument will ask for participants written comments relative to their thoughts on the advertisement.

The first hypothesis will be tested using MANOVA with gender expression as the IV, and ratings of athlete attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness as the DV’s with the controls listed above. To test the second hypothesis, an ANOVA will be conducted with gender expression (masculine v feminine), the product endorsed (Muscle Building Milk Shake v HER Energy Drink) and the interaction of the two as the independent variables and perceptions of fit as the dependent variable.

Results will be discussed relative to appropriate theoretical underpinnings such as social role theory, match-up hypothesis, hegemonic masculinity, and gender roles. Practical implications relative to marketing, endorsements, and related areas as well as suggestions for future research will also be discussed.