Female Athletes' Brand Personalities and Determinants of Endorser Appeal

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There has been a significant amount of research examining the marketability of female athletes including a growing body of literature that indicates the practice of using sex appeal is ineffective and can actually damage the credibility of the female athlete (e.g., Angelini, 2008; Daniels, 2012; Daniels & Wartena, 2011; Kane & Maxwell, 2011). Anecdotal evidence suggests that agents and marketers may be taking notice. For instance, Gatorade and Panasonic feature Abby Wambach in commercials dripping with sweat using descriptors such as dominating, tough, and fearless (Sports Studio, 2012) while Nike recently agreed to an endorsement deal with Britney Griner who will model male clothing for their company (Watkins, 2013). Likewise, Maria Sharapova's longtime agent, Max Eisenbud, went to great lengths to brand her as a tennis champion rather than promoting only her appearance (Elberse & Golod, 2010). His vision appears to have paid off as Sharapova has been the top earning female athlete nine years in a row – in 2013, she earned $23M in endorsements and has earned the label “Brand Sharapova” (Badenhausen, 2013; Morely, 2013).

Indeed, savvy athletes and their agents work diligently to craft their public images into a “human brand” in order to attract endorsement opportunities and capitalize on the lucrative sums companies pay athlete endorsers (Badenhausen, 2013; Thomas, 2006). While past research examining the effectiveness of female endorsers has been limited to only a few characteristics (e.g., attractiveness, competence), Carlson and Donavan (2013) noted that athletes can possess many distinct brand personality attributes that lead to consumer interest. Therefore, this research takes a broader, more holistic view of female athlete endorsers and examines the many dimensions that create their unique brand personalities and how those relate to consumer appeal.

McCracken (1989) contended the power of athlete endorsement is found in the cultural meanings the endorser brings to the advertising process. He posited that “the number and variety of meanings contained in celebrities are very large…and represent not a single set, but an interconnected set of meanings” (p. 312-313). A portion of these meanings are captured by an athlete’s brand personality—the adjectives commonly used to describe the athlete’s attributes (Aaker, 1997; Carlson & Donavan, 2013). As Carlson & Donavan note, “Although many companies find it appealing to be associated with a professional athlete, it is the culturally derived meanings (i.e., brand personality attributes) associated with the athlete that make such associations profitable” (p. 195). It is important to note that these are created (rather than authentic) brand personalities, which have been constructed and reconstructed via public relations strategies, media representations, endorsement associations, and/or sport associations amongst other external circumstances (Aaker, 1997; Carlson, Donavan, & Cumisky 2009).

According to the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989), the brand personality of an endorser can be transferred to a product and then, through the product, potentially transferred onto the consumer. However, McCracken noted the transfer from product to consumer is not automatic and the consumer must be a participant in this process. In this regard, Carlson and Donavan (2013) found that consumers are most likely to identify with brand personalities they find distinctive and prestigious, which, in turn, leads to greater consumer appeal. Thus, determining the dimensions of an athlete’s brand personality that significantly influence consumers’ perceptions of distinctiveness and prestige is an important process for athletes and marketers alike.

Additionally, McCracken’s model suggests that consumers’ perceptions are impacted by societal factors, and this may be especially true for female athletes. Research has shown that consumers still perceive sport to be gendered and that perceptions of female athletes are shaped by the type of sport in which the athlete participates (e.g., Kiovula, 2001; Jones & Greer, 2011). That is, females participating in sports considered more feminine – typically individual sports emphasizing grace and feminine attire such as golf, tennis, figure skating – are more highly regarded. However, recently Fink, Parker, Cunningham, & Cuneen (2012) found no differences in consumers’ perceptions of female
athlete endorsers in the sports of tennis and boxing. Given these ambiguous results, it is important to consider whether the sport context impacts perceptions of the athlete’s distinctiveness and prestige beyond her brand personality.

Thus, drawing on Aaker’s (1997) brand personality dimensions and McCracken’s (1989) meaning transfer model, this research examines the following questions: 1) What are consumers’ perceptions of the brand personalities of select female athletes? 2) Which personality traits in female athletes lead to distinctiveness and prestige? 3) Do the traits which lead to distinctiveness and prestige vary based on the sport context, and 4) How do these variables impact perceptions of endorser appeal?

A sample of 1200 sport fans (with diversity in terms of gender, age, and race) over the age of 18 will be obtained via Amazon.com’s mTurk service. Participants will be asked to assess one of six female athletes, randomly assigned to participants (200 participants/athlete), regarding perceptions of the athlete’s brand personality, distinctiveness, prestige, and endorser appeal. The athletes chosen for the study compete in tennis (Maria Sharapova; Serena Williams), soccer (Hope Solo; Abby Wambach), and basketball (Brittany Griner; Maya Moore) as these represent feminine, neutral, and masculine rated sports (Kiovula, 2001). We attempted to choose two athletes within each sport who possess different brand personality traits to produce variability. Four of the athletes are in Bloomberg’s 2013 Power 100 ranking and the other two (Griner; Moore) have received significant media attention in the past year, thus all should be recognizable by even moderate sport fans.

Brand personality will be measured using Aaker’s (1997) scale. While this scale has been criticized for use in assessing sport team personalities (e.g., Heere, 2010), recent research suggests that the measure can be reliable and predictive when utilizing the traits (rather than merely the dimensions) (Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Eisend & Stockburger-Sauer, 2013). Distinctiveness will be measured using 3-items adapted from Donavan (2005), prestige will be measured using Mael and Ashforth’s (1992) 3-item scale, and finally, endorser appeal will be measured by a 3-item semantic differential scale (Tripp, Jensen, & Carlson, 1994), all of which have been deemed reliable in previous research. A short demographic section will also be included. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) will be conducted on the measurement model. Variables of interest will be assessed to determine if participants differ based on demographics. A MANOVA will then be conducted to determine if/how the athletes differ on the personality dimensions. The structural model (dimensions of athlete personality lead to distinctiveness and prestige which impact endorser appeal) will be tested using moderated (by athlete) SEM.

We anticipate the results will have both theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical standpoint, our results will add to the literature regarding athletes as human brands and provide a better, more holistic, understanding of the “cultural meanings” female athlete endorsers bring to the advertising process. Additionally, it should offer insight into the role gendered perceptions play in that process. From a practical standpoint, a greater understanding of the relationship between an athlete’s brand personality traits and endorser appeal can lead to more efficient and effective marketing campaigns – traits leading to the athlete’s prestige and distinctiveness can be highlighted and also facilitate in discovering endorsement opportunities which are a natural fit for the athlete. These and other implications will be fully discussed.