Feminist Themes within the Marketing of The National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL)

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Beginning to play in 2013, the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) has battled to avoid the fate suffered by its two predecessors, the Women’s United Soccer Association (WUSA) and Women’s Professional Soccer (WPS), both professional women’s soccer club leagues having ceased operations after three seasons. In particular, marketing the new league to a skeptical public has proven difficult, despite the continued success of the United States Women’s National Team (USWNT). Despite the success of the USWNT, the continued growth of youth soccer within the U.S., and the sustained ambition in trying to make a professional league work, actual systematic research into the marketing of professional women’s soccer has been scant. Existing studies (e.g., Christopherson, Janning, & McConnell, 2002; Jowdy & McDonald, 2003) have focused more on the narrative construction of the event itself or have become dated with the rapidly changing landscape of women’s soccer in the U.S. and worldwide.

Feminism and sport have been connected for decades as activists have battled to bring feminism’s goals of equality to the sport industry, historically rife with inequality between the genders. Feminist viewpoints have often argued that the sport industry ascribes to strict binary gender classification, promoting an intractable sense of male superiority (Shaw, 2006). The feminist goal of equity between the genders has, for decades, been hostily opposed by a male hegemony resistant to change from the status quo. Messner (2002) notes that male dominance is upheld by a “gender regime of sport,” where these power brokers “maintain and promote male hegemony in sport” (p. 65). At the same time though, feminist theory’s primary goal of equality has still been felt through policy that has leveled the playing field for sport in general and, specifically, women’s soccer. Worldwide, women’s soccer players have benefitted from legislation that has offered up more opportunity, including Title IX in the United States (Caudwell, 2011). Beyond legislation, it has largely been up to sport industry practitioners to implement initiatives to further feminists’ goals of equality within the sport industry.

Many of these initiatives have taken root within the marketing of sport, with feminist themes being used in marketing as a way to reach new audiences that may have been previously marginalized in sport or to help close gaps in resources and attention between men’s and women’s sports. This marginalization and inequity have been a prominent part of the history of women’s soccer in the United States. As such, the purpose of this study is to examine the prevalence of feminist themes within the main marketing strategies of the NWSL and how the league and its clubs have used those themes within their marketing to fight for sustained viability and an eventual path towards equality.

Method

An effective way to examine feminist themes is through qualitative interviews with stakeholders (Alasuutari, Bickman, & Brannen, 2008). In this investigation, a case study involving interviews of marketing officials of the NWSL was conducted to analyze their perspective and experiences in dealing with feminist issues. Additionally, this study utilized the collection of archival material, including league and team press releases and print and electronic media marketing artifacts. The researcher conducted content analysis using the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti 7.0. As data from interviews and from archival material was collected, it was both inductively and deductively analyzed through the guidelines established by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2013). A cross-case analysis (Yin, 2013) was used to compare and contrast emergent themes between the different cases (i.e., teams) to analyze how different clubs utilized similar or different strategies and practices in their marketing through the feminist themes outlined previously.
Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study revealed three primary feminist themes prevalent within the marketing strategies of the NWSL and its clubs: (a) the inequity of rules, resources, and coverage between women’s soccer and male sport, (b) the hegemony’s embracing motherhood, family values, and role models while shunning the ‘other’, and (c) the development and perpetuation of an ideal heteronormative femininity and a consumption community.

An inequity of resources and media coverage has continued to fester, mirroring many of the same problems that women’s sport in general and, specifically, women’s soccer has struggled with (Messner, 1992). Previous leagues have suffered through minimized staffs and continually shrinking budgets. Additionally, women’s soccer has suffered through a shrinking media profile, mirroring the same marginalization almost all women’s sport has dealt with. Constrained budgets have forced clubs to pay some players in between $6,000-7,000 a season, while the league enters its third season without a full season national television deal.

This study also found that while the NWSL and its clubs continue to promote the ‘family values’ and ‘role model’ portrayal of its athletes that has defined much of the marketing of women’s sport and women’s soccer, it has also begun to embrace and normalize the ‘other’, largely defined as the LGBT community. Women’s soccer has tried to ignore this market throughout its history despite the sexuality of many of its players and the fandom for the sport from the LGBT community (Longman, 2001). The NWSL has, for the most part, begun outreaches to the LGBT community with support of marriage equality, partnership with LGBT advocacy groups, as well as holding LGBT Pride Nights. At the same time, clubs have continued to point to their players as role models to the youth and family markets they have strived to capture.

Finally, this study found instances of the construction of a consumption community based on ideals of heteronormative femininity. Throughout recent history, corporations have used many branches of society and pop culture, including women’s recreation and sport, as vehicles to sell an image of heteronormative femininity to the public at-large, touting products they claim will help women conform to these ideals (Goldman, 1992). This has been reproduced in women’s soccer, including within the NWSL and its clubs. Nike, often touted as being at the forefront in the development of consumption communities to capture a market eager to ascribe to heteronormative feminine norms, is one of the NWSL’s key partners, producing apparel for the league and its clubs. Some of the interviewees touted a demand for more ‘feminized’ merchandise, such as jewelry and ‘fashionable’ women’s athletic apparel as a catalyst in trying to develop these products for consumption.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable expansions to the sport marketing literature within American professional women’s soccer, an arena that had gone mostly unexamined since the 1999 FIFA Women’s World Cup. While an inequity of resources and media coverage has still lingered between men’s and women’s sport, interviewees noted creative methods such as new and social media initiatives to try and close the gap. Interviewees have also taken steps to welcome the LGBT community, previously marginalized and largely ignored within the world of sport. Finally, interviewees spoke of the necessity of building a consumption community to exploit secondary income streams, often by targeting merchandise towards a youth and female market, sometimes with products allowing consumers to boost their ability to ‘do’ heteronormative femininity. The findings from this study revealed that while feminist marketing themes have helped the march towards equality within sport, the path is still a long and complicated one.

References


