The Gendering of Sport Fan Clothing on Team Online Stores

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Team clothing is important for sport fans, particularly as a way to demonstrate one’s identification with and loyalty to a team or player (Andon, 2011; Derbaix & Decrop, 2011; Kwak & Kang, 2009; Kwon & Armstrong, 2006; Pope 2011). In addition, individuals wear sport team clothing to establish membership in a community, be fashionable, or reinforce one’s authenticity as a fan (Crawford, 2004). Sport organizations realize this and offer a range of fan clothing. Yet, recent research has suggested that some female sport fans are dissatisfied with the clothing offered to them because of the limited selection (e.g., no official jerseys for women) or it is viewed as overtly feminine with its “pink it, bling it, shrink it” style (Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013, p. 334; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2015).

While some have studied the motivations to purchase sport team merchandise (e.g., Andrew, Kim, O’Neal, Greenwell, & James, 2009; Kwak & Kang, 2009; Kwon & Armstrong, 2006; Wu & Chalip, 2013), few have critically examined the discourses associated with the packaging and promotion of sport fan clothing for men and women. Specifically, we are interested in and how discourses of gender are embedded in the texts of sport team clothing. This approach helps us to understand what sport fan clothing “communicate[s] about the culture in which we live” and how they are “advertised so as to convey socially desirable meanings” (Kaiser, 1998, p. 25).

Framework

Our study is framed using the clothing semiotics framework (Owyong, 2009), which consists of three ways in which clothing portrays meaning: representational, modal, and compositional. The representational function refers to the features of the clothing that convey information about reality, such as associations with specific functions, social roles, events and ceremonies, or context. The modal function refers to the features of clothing, such as colour, pattern, or designs, that attracts attention. The compositional function relates to the overall picture of the clothing.

Purpose & Objectives

For this exploratory study we examined one item of fan clothing – t-shirts, since they are a common item of clothing for men and women (unlike dresses which are marketed for women) and are one of the more popular items of sport fan clothing. The purpose of our study is to compare the t-shirts offered to men and women sport fans via team online stores. The three objectives of this study are:

- To critically examine the representation of sport fan t-shirts offered to men and women
- To critically examine the modality of sport fan t-shirts offered to men and women
- To critically examine the composition of sport fan t-shirts offered to men and women

Method & Data Analysis

Our study is informed by social constructivism and critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1993). We used a case study design involving four elite level sport leagues: National Football League, National Basketball Association, Champions League, and National Collegiate Athletic Association. These leagues represent a sample of professional and amateur sports, in-season and off-season sports, and North American and European leagues. The top five teams in each league for merchandise sales were identified. For each team, we identified and analyzed the first 20 t-shirts offered for men and women on their official website store. Of note, three Champions League teams offered fewer than 20 t-shirts for men and women.
Data collection was conducted from July and August 2015. The written description of the t-shirt provided insight into its representational function. To assess the modality of t-shirts, we noted the primary colour, style (sleeve length, neck), patterns, embellishments, fit, position of the logo, and price. To determine the compositional function, we noted if a model was used and the features of the model. Other descriptive data were also recorded including the total number of t-shirts available to men and women per team and other categories of clothing. Using critical discourse analysis, we analyzed the embedded discourses of gender associated with the written and visual texts of the t-shirts.

Discussion

Although not a main objective of our work, preliminary analysis indicates distinctions in sport fan t-shirts between the four leagues. Of note, Champions League teams have the fewest options for women, with Paris Saint - Germain offering no t-shirts for women. Analysis of the data is ongoing, but preliminary findings show that with respect to modality, there is a wider range of styles of t-shirts for women based on sleeve lengths, neck styles, colours, patterns, and embellishments. In three of the four leagues (NCAA, NBA, and NFL), women’s t-shirts are, on average, more expensive than men’s. In terms of composition, models are used to advertise some women’s t-shirts, while models are rarely used to advertise men’s t-shirts. Initial discourse analysis of the written descriptions shows that the t-shirts serve a similar purpose of ‘showing one’s pride’. However, some phrases and terms are used to reinforce gender stereotypes and distinctions, such as “flaunt” only be used for women, while “you don’t need elaborate graphics and glitter to get your point across” for men.

Contribution to the Sport Management Field

The findings may be useful for sport marketers and merchandisers, specifically those who decide on the styling of clothes or who are responsible for crafting the description of the clothes. The visual and written texts, in terms of modality and representational functions, often reinforce gender distinctions. As noted by Owyong (2009) “clothing serves as the vehicle through which ideologies of power relations and gender roles become constructed and realised in society” (p. 205). We need to pay attention to, and change, how sport fan clothing for men and women is packaged and promoted so as not to reinforce gender distinctions.

Future research could examine sport fan clothing in other leagues or at different times of the year. We expected to see many pink t-shirts being offered for women. If the study was conducted in October, in which professional leagues such as the NFL, partner with breast cancer associations, it is likely that we would have identified more pink clothing available for women (and perhaps men as well).