Examining Consumer-Based League Brand Associations for Women's Sport Leagues

Brittani Sahm, University of Florida
Michael Sagas (Advisor), University of Florida
Yong Jae Ko (Advisor), University of Florida
Ted Spiker (Advisor), University of Florida

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Brand associations have been widely explored from the perspective of professional sports teams (Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt, 2005; Carlson, Donovan, & Cumisky, 2009; Funk & James, 2006; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006). Kunkel, Funk, and King (2014) first introduced the idea of league brand associations with their study on men’s professional sports leagues, but previous research has yet to explore this topic for women’s sports. As women’s professional sports leagues in the United States continue to struggle to provide female athletes with financially stable associations in which to participate, discovering and utilizing specified brand associations may boost a league’s brand equity through improved advertising and marketing efforts (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Brown & Dacin, 1997; Fazio, 2007; Gladden & Funk, 2004; Keller, 1993, Plummer, 1985; Sonnier & Ainslie, 2011).

This study sought to be the first to establish consumer-based brand associations for women’s professional sports leagues in the U.S., as history indicates that women’s sports and female athletes are viewed differently from male athletes (Cooky, Messner, & Hextman, 2013; Jones & Greer, 2011; Methany, 1965). Specifically, we aimed to answer two specific questions that extended the existing brand association literature of men’s teams to the women’s sport context: (1) What are the consumer-based league brand associations for each of the three professional women’s sport leagues?, and (2) Are there any meaningful differences between the perceived brand associations of the WNBA, LPGA, and NWSL?

To accomplish the aims of this study, self-identified fans of three mainstream women’s professional leagues in the U.S. – the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA), Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), and National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) – participated in semi-structured interviews to explore the current perceptions of these leagues from the consumer’s perspective. For the purposes of this study, self-identified fans were those individuals who chose to spend free time keeping up-to-date on one of the studied sports. This could include, but was not limited to, attending and/or watching games, reading game summaries online, tracking statistics and/or performances of certain players, and following a specific team in the league. Participants were asked questions relating to individual perceived associations of their preferred league. Most questions were adapted from the work by Kunkel, Funk, and King (2014) on men’s professional league brand associations. Each interview was audio-recorded, and interviews lasted between 15 and 50 minutes. The entire study yielded responses from 16 total participants: 5 responding to questions on the WNBA, 6 responding on the NWSL, and 5 speaking on the LPGA.

Transcribed interviews went through a qualitative open coding stage where the text was separated based on the study’s research questions (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). Next, a codebook was developed to further organize the text into broad themes of consumer-based league brand associations determined through reference to previous research on men’s professional league brand associations, team associations, and motivations (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Kunkel et al., 2014). The final results included: (1) a compiled list of consumer-based league brand associations of women’s professional sport leagues as a whole, and (2) lists of consumer-based league brand associations discovered for each individual league. The 16 one-on-one interviews helped establish 19 unique consumer-based league brand associations between the WNBA, LPGA, and NWSL: management, access to the league, community ties, performance, player personality, opportunity, socialization, instability, excitement, fan experience, star players, role models, education, stereotypes, atmosphere, specific team, national identity, competition, and venue.

The findings featured seven similarities among the three leagues, including the associations of access to league, performance, player personality, opportunity, excitement, fan experience, and star players. Some of the associations were so prevalent during interviews that further categorization was needed to break them down into themes for better organization and understanding of the results. For example, when talking about the LPGA, fans appreciated the players’ personalities for a few different reasons, allowing the association to include a players’ ability to relate to
fans, their perceived approachability on the course, and the overall attractiveness while in competition. Each league also featured a few unique associations only mentioned by their specific consumer base. WNBA fans emphasized stereotypes and role models featured by the league. Fans of the LPGA discussed competition and venue as important associations, and NWSL consumers noted specific team and national identity as distinguishing aspects. Many of the other established associations were shared among two of the leagues.

The brand associations discovered for the women’s professional sports differed significantly from those found through brand association studies done on men’s professional sport leagues and teams (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Kunkel et al., 2014). This study, then, contributed in the lack of branding literature on professional women’s sports leagues in the U.S. The brand association lists for the WNBA, LPGA, and NWSL can be utilized by managers of the leagues to generate marketing and advertising promotions targeting those appealing aspects acknowledged by self-identified fans. In order to stimulate growth for these three leagues, it is critical to determine why current fans continue to support and follow them despite the unstable history for all three sports. Future research toward determining these motivations and their associated brand linkages is merited.