Ethnicity Mismatch and the Role of Diversity Promotion: The Effect of Perceived Image on LPGA Consumption Intentions

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The first 70 years of LPGA Tour have witnessed the dominance of American golfers since the first American Women’s Amateur Championship in 1895. It was not until 1968 when the tour ticket was given to an international golfer to compete in the LPGA; since then, the number of non-US golfers has increased steadily. While many professional leagues limit the number of foreign players in the roster to protect domestic players, the LPGA does not have quotas for international golfers. In the 1990s, the LPGA’s marketing strategy took a major shift to embrace globalization and adopted a more proactive approach to accepting golfers from different countries and regions (Lim, 2009). Regardless of nationality, golfers in top 20 who are identified through the qualifying school are granted tour tickets. With the implementation of this new strategy, an increasing number of Asian golfers have made appearances in the leaderboard and won a series of tournaments since late 1990s.

Despite the increased competitiveness and improved performance level of the LPGA Tour on a global scale, the ethnic mismatch between the leading performers and the domestic spectators is perceived as a looming threat to the continued success of the LPGA. Sponsors and fans lost interests in the LPGA due to the lack of communication skills of some international golfers and their superior performance over domestic professionals (Choi, 2010; Lim, 2009). In fact, high level of demographic congruence between players and fan population is typical for most of professional sports globally, which makes the situation of the LPGA unique. Given the incongruence of ethnicity between tour-leading golfers and the fan population in the LPGA, this study was designed to develop a conceptual framework for studying the moderating role of diversity promotion in media programming on the relationship between consumers’ perceived image of the LPGA and their consumption intentions.

Social identity theory proposes that people tend to classify themselves into a specific group, and see others differ from them; people behave positively toward “in-group” members while may think of “out-group” members by the group traits and react less favorably (Tajfel, 1981). Ethnicity is one of the strong criteria for the formation of social identity. Kaiser and Pratt-Hyatt (2009) demonstrated that Whites react less favorably to minority with strong perceived racial identity. In the sport setting, more favorable responses were observed among Asian-American university students when Asian golfers were employed for golf advertisement over Anglo actors (Kim & Cheong, 2011). It is very likely that differences in ethnicity between spectators and the major golfer group would negatively impact the formation of perceived image of the LPGA as consumers might perceive the LPGA as “out-group”.

On the other hand, the perceived image of an individual, event, or sport can be heavily impacted by various media outlets as media play a vital role in constructing the image for athletes, coaches, teams, leagues, and sports (Fortunato, 2000; Zhang et al., 2011). For example, positive media coverage of women’s tennis and golf in the 1890s facilitated the societal approval of women’s participation in sports despite the fact that sports were not considered a proper activity for women at that time (Zhang et al., 2011). Similarly, mass media exposure and coverage of a sport organization may have a strong influence in portraying its public image (Nichols et al., 2002; Pedersen et al., 2007). Mass media have been customarily positioned as the communication platforms between a sport organization and the audience. A positive mass media coverage of a professional sport organization is more likely to elicit greater awareness, higher interest, and more favorable perception of image, especially when the message is to promote diversity and inclusion of players of different colors (Brandon et al., 2016). In fact, the LPGA has made concerted efforts to elevate the organization’s image through a more inclusive and diversity-oriented mass media approach to promote consumer awareness, interest, and consumption of its game products. Therefore, it is assumed that positive media coverage on the ethnic diversity of the LPGA would help moderate major spectator group’s less favorable
perceived image of the LPGA.

The theory of reasoned action proposed that attitude and subjective norms significantly influences on behavior intention, which is an antecedent to actual behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Among many factors that influence the formation of an attitude of an individual, many scholars have asserted that positive image contributes to the generation of positive attitude toward a sport product and further enhances consumers’ purchase intention (Filo et al., 2010; Speed & Thompson, 2000). Subjective norms refer to social pressures or expectations derived from significant others that would influence one’s intention to take certain action (Cunningham & Kwon, 2003). It can be reasonably argued that positive image would also affect subjective norms as people would consider that entities with positive connections or outcomes are more likely to be accepted and supported by their friends and families. In the current context, if the LPGA possesses a favorable image, consumers are more likely to consume LPGA products as they perceive their behavior would be understood and supported by their close ones.

Based on a comprehensive review of literature as the primary method of inquiry, a conceptual framework was developed in this study, which proposes that less favored image of the LPGA, which was previously perceived as a detrimental factor of its continued success in the United States due to ethnic mismatch, would be attenuated by positive media coverage on diversity and inclusion. Portrayal of a positive image of the LPGA is expected to have positive impact on consumers’ attitude and subjective norms, thereby increasing the consumption intentions. Given the impact of extensive mass media coverage on consumer behavior, the developed conceptual model is expected to provide both theoretical and empirical evidences for conducting future studies and also forming LPGA marketing strategy that emphasizes on promoting diversity education, cultural familiarity, and social interaction in its media programming.