Gender and Emotional Branding in Sport

Katie M. Brown, Texas Tech University
Andrew C. Pickett, University of South Dakota

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Emotional branding is a relational, story-driven approach to marketing that creates profound and enduring bonds between consumers and brands (Roberts, 2004). In forging these bonds, brands seek to become part of consumers’ life stories and memories while also becoming strong links in their social networks (Atkin, 2004). Gobe’ (2001) emphasized the significance of feelings and utilizing emotional branding as a methodology to unite product and purchaser in an emotionally significant relationship. Subsequently, there has been an increased research interest in emotional branding (e.g., Gobe, 2010; Efrat, Asseraf, 2019; Kim & Sullivan, 2019) and its measurement (Singla & Gupta, 2019).

Emotion-driven marketing efforts can leverage these strong psychological associations to drive consumption behaviors (Joshi & Nema, 2019). Thus, emotional branding increases brand loyalty and encourages active participation by consumers (Sajjad, 2009). This is particularly important, as consumers choose specific brands, within a larger product category, primarily for emotional reasons (Cope, 2017). For example, many organizations sell high-quality athletic apparel, but consumers choose a particular brand (e.g., Nike) due to their emotional connection to the brand.

Prior work suggests gender plays an important role in brand perception. For example, consumers ascribe a higher value to brands that can be easily classified as masculine or feminine (Lieven, Grohmann, Herrmann, Landwehr, & Van Tilburg, 2015). This is particularly true when there is congruity between consumer gender and gendered brand characteristics (i.e., women’s reaction to feminine brands). However, to date, little research has explored gendered effects of emotional branding.

In sport marketing, hero narratives are a common and effective advertisement theme. In 2019, Nike aired an emotional branding advertisement during the women’s final at the US Open Tennis Championship. The ad, featuring voiceover from Serena Williams, played on perceptions about women’s emotions (i.e., ‘craziness’). Images in the ad highlighted women’s achievements in sport and the final message encouraged viewers to “show them what crazy can do.” This hero narrative, focused on women, runs contrary to traditional gender norms often found in sport.

The purpose of this study is to examine gendered reactions to a gendered, emotional branding advertisement. To guide this work, we developed the following research questions:

RQ1) Does viewing the gendered emotional advertisement increase overall brand image?

RQ2) Does participant gender influence the relationship between advertisement and brand image?

RQ3) Is the relationship between gender and brand image further influenced by participants’ level of traditionalism in views related to gender norms?

Data will be collected via a questionnaire administered using Amazon MTurk. Emotional branding will be measured using the scale developed by Singla and Gupta (2019). We will also measure attitudes towards the brand using items from Spears and Singh (2004), and sex based traditionalism using gender ideology items (Davis & Greenstein, 2009).

This study seeks to advance sport marketing literature with respect to the use of emotional branding, particularly regarding efficacy of gendered messaging. We expect that emotional, gendered marketing messages are polarizing, particularly for individuals with traditional views on gender roles. Practical implications include insights for sport managers regarding emotional branding advertisements.