

**GENDER AND THE ATHLETE:
COMPARING THE BRAND IMAGES OF MALE AND FEMALE ATHLETES**

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ABSTRACT

There is a disparity in payment to female athletes compared to male athletes for activities related to their brand. Research has been done to understand how to identify an athlete's brand image and the barriers female athletes currently face as they attempt to build their brands. This study aimed to investigate the difference in how consumers perceived the brand image of male and female athletes. A survey was utilized to encourage participants to evaluate fictional athletes according to several adjectives and then compare them to prominent company brands. The results indicated that female college athletes were considered to be more unique and more similar to Apple than the male college athletes. However, the adjusted alpha level meant those results were no longer statistically significant. As a result, there was no evidence to suggest a difference in the brand image of the male athletes compared to the female athletes.

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	3
MOTIVATIONS	3
SIGNIFICANCE	5
2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH	6
CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENT	6
THE ATHLETE’S BRAND	7
BARRIERS FOR FEMALE ATHLETES.....	9
3. METHODS.....	10
DATA COLLECTION	10
<i>Figure 1: Data Collection Process.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Phase One.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Phase Two</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Figure 2: Fictional Athlete Profiles</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Figure 3: Results of Mann Whitney U Test</i>	<i>16</i>
RESULTS	17
<i>Figure 4: Apple – Sentiment Summary Chart</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Discussion.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Limitations and Future Research</i>	<i>20</i>
4. CONCLUSION.....	21
REFERENCES	23

1. INTRODUCTION

Motivations

With the exception of tennis players Naomi Osaka and Serena Williams, the top 100 highest paid athletes around the world in 2021 were all men according to Sportico (Badenhausen and Akabas 2012). Of the estimated \$4.2 billion in total income amassed by the top 100 athletes, about \$1.3 billion (31%) were profits generated from their brand images such as endorsements, licensing, and appearances. Considering the limited representation, it is reasonable to wonder if there are any identifiable reasons why there are only two female athletes in the list. More specifically, is there a difference in the brand images of female athletes causing them to miss the opportunity to capitalize on a substantial portion of their potential earnings? If there is no identifiable difference in the brand images of the male and female athletes, why are they paid differently? Of course, it is important to note that there is variance in audience sizes across several men's and women's sports. On the other hand, if there is no difference in the way audiences perceive the brands of male and female athletes, as fanbase sizes increase, it can be inferred that earnings will increase accordingly over time.

The topic of the pay gap in women's sports has garnered greater attention with the United States Women's National Soccer Team's lawsuit for equal pay¹ and its resolution being one of the conversations at the forefront. However, the discussions in the media are usually limited to the salary players receive from the teams they play on and the tournaments they play in, but there is more to the conversation. From a team sports perspective, women's sports are only a portion of the estimated \$49.9 billion global sports sponsorship market. With the rise in TV viewership

¹ The US Soccer Federation defended their practices of paying the men's team more than the women based on revenue generation. However, a financial audit found that the women's games made \$50.8 million from 2016-2018 while the men's games made \$49.9 million (Bachman 2019).

and ticket sales over recent years more companies are considering sponsoring women's sports. In addition, there has been an increase in media right deals, and some are paying teams and leagues for the first time in exchange for their product (Lee, Westcott, Wray, and Raviprakash 2020).

While these media rights deals are still undervaluing certain women's sports, which needs to be addressed, there has also been insufficient attention given, at the individual sponsorship level, to the marketing aspect of being an athlete and building an individual brand.

The developing relationship between brand images and athletes is not only limited to professional sports. On July 1, 2021, the world of college sports changed forever. This was the day that Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) policies went into effect allowing student athletes to make a profit from their NIL (Umeri 2021). For years, this was strictly prohibited by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), but over the past couple of years, athletes and government officials began to push against the NCAA resulting in the change. Now, college students are allowed to join the market of endorsements, licensing, appearances, and more. Following July 1, 2021, some student athletes began signing multi-million-dollar deals, and since then, even some high schoolers have signed substantial marketing deals. A study by Opendorse (2022) found that the top college sports for NIL compensation since then have been football (51.3%), women's basketball (16.8%), men's basketball (15%), women's volleyball (2.5%), and softball (2.1%), as of April 30, 2022. Likely because the market is relatively new, there is not clear information available about exactly how much is being earned in total across all sports. However, this is an area where researchers can get ahead and leverage the applicable knowledge from other sectors as the market continues to grow beyond its first year.

Significance

This study investigated whether there is a difference in the way consumers perceive the brand images of male and female athletes. For the purpose of this study, brand image was defined as an assortment of ideas, beliefs, and associations that someone holds about a brand (Thimothy 2016). This is important for athletes in general to understand, but it is especially important for female college athletes beginning their journey in the world of NIL marketing. Considering professional, accomplished female athletes face barriers when leveraging their brands, such as improper brand management, it is reasonable to infer that female college athletes who are new to the space will be met with obstacles as well (Lobpries, Bennett, and Brison 2017). They need to fully grasp their own strengths and the unfortunate difficulties that they may face in trying to expand their brand within the landscape of sports marketing before becoming deeply rooted in the industry.

It is also important for companies to understand this difference as they decide which athletes to partner with for various marketing initiatives. Nielsen's 2021 Trust in Advertising Study found that 66% of global audiences trust brand sponsorships in the sporting events that they watch ("Playing" 2022). At times, sports fans will connect their purchasing behavior to a certain league, team, or player and buy from a sponsor because of their partnership with them. This concept also extends to the idea of brand image in the form of the "halo effect". From the fan's perspective, when a league, team, or player is viewed positively, their goodwill is assigned to the sponsor of the sports entity as well. Consequently, the "horn effect" explains that negative opinions, if present, can also be transferred to the brand image of a sponsor of a league, team, or player (Dodds, Morris, Mahoney 2021). Because of this, "when selecting a sport athlete, a sponsor generally considers two things: whether the celebrity has a positive social image

perceived by the target market; and whether they are trustworthy thereby lending credibility to the brand” (Faruq 2021). Companies will invest in research to understand the depth of the athlete’s brand image and ensure they will fit the brand image and identify of the company’s brand. If done correctly, this can result in substantial returns as demonstrated in the way the Under Armour brand’s financial value was doubled after signing their deal with National Basketball Association star, Stephen Curry (Faruq 2021).

Consumers are also taking a closer look at how and whether companies put their stated values into action such as whether they support underrepresented communities like female athletes. 61% of American fans say that gender equality is at the top of the list for causes they are passionate about (Deloitte 2022). This positions partnerships with female athletes as a potentially lucrative avenue to connect with fans. Not only is the value of women’s sports increasing over time, to consumers it is also “a signal of commitment to positive change in society” (Lee, Westcott, Wray, and Raviprakash 2020). As a result, companies may consider increasing their inclusivity of female athletes in their marketing in an authentic fashion that also matches their own brand image.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Celebrity Endorsement

Some athletes are not only recognized for their success within their sport but as celebrities more generally, especially when they are seen in spaces with celebrities of other spheres such as musicians or actors. At their foundation in marketing, athletes are treated as celebrities in that celebrities are defined as “famous or celebrated persons” (Merriam-Webster.com). With this in mind, there is a positive correlation between using a celebrity in

advertisements and the way consumers perceive the brand that is being promoted. In fact, there is a greater impact on the consumer when a celebrity is used than a non-celebrity (Saeed 2014).

With the right audience, this celebrity concept could be leveraged when using the reputation and associations of a particular athlete to sell a product or service.

The Athlete's Brand

There have been various studies conducted to investigate the marketability of female athletes and athletes in general. In order to do this, there must be a general definition of a brand as it pertains to athletes at the center of the research. Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014) “define an athlete’s brand as a public persona of an individual athlete who has established their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face or other brand elements in the market”. Their work focused on creating an updated model for understanding the components of an athlete’s brand image which serves as an “important antecedent of fan loyalty” (Arai et al. 2014). They proposed a model of athlete brand image (MABI) with three dimensions: Athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. Similarly, Yu (2005), after concluding a case study on David Beckham, stated that athletes should focus on maintaining “a successful career and positive image of personal life” when building their brands. Hasaan, Kerem, Biscaia, and Agyemang (2018) supported this by stating on- and off- field attributes help fans create a certain image of an athlete. The off-field attributes include but are not limited to “physical attraction, lifestyle, personal appeal, ethnicity and entertainment” (Hasaan, Kerem, Biscaia, and Agyemang 2018). Athletes and agents can use the MABI to identify their strengths and weaknesses which will inform their marketing strategies (Arai et al. 2014).

Klaus and Bailey (2008) also investigated whether there was a difference in the way consumers responded to a celebrity endorser based on the gender of the endorser or that of the

consumer. In their study, the celebrities were former American soccer players, Mia Hamm and Landon Donovan. Their analysis revealed that the female celebrity ad with Hamm was viewed as more favorable than the male celebrity ad with Donovan by the participants. Rather than the gender of the athlete, Düsenberg, Bragança, Cunha de Almeida, and Barbosa de Amorim (2016) identified an impact of the gender of the respondent on the level of trustworthiness the consumer had in the sport celebrity when looking at purchase intention. This indicates interactions between gender and sports marketing that should be investigated further.

Antil, Burton, and Robertson (2012) found that when asked to recall prominent endorsers “male sport celebrities were more likely to be mentioned [than female athletes] by both male and female respondents.” In this study, the participants were also asked to state whether they saw a product as being male or female, and they were later told to assign athletes to those products that they had also previously designated as primarily male or female. Even products that were considered to have a female personality by the participants were more likely to be assigned to a male figure. They found this was partly because the female athletes were less prominent/visible and were considered to be less credible (Antil et al. 2012). On the other hand, they did not investigate who was viewing the athletes differently or whether there were any similarities in the few people who did assign “female” products to male athletes. Their study suggests that participants were more inclined towards male athletes in terms of familiarity, and it does not support the results of Klaus and Bailey that female athletes are more favorable.

Barriers for Female Athletes

There are a few different perceived barriers that have kept female athletes from reaching the same status as their male counterparts. One of them is proper brand management (Lobpries, Bennett, and Brison 2018). This includes the lack of agents accessible to represent female athletes and help them build their personal brands and the limited understanding in how to best support a female athlete. There are some researchers such as Kristiansen and Williams (2015) who have investigated the few success stories. However, their research is limited to case studies of a small group which makes it difficult to generalize to a larger population. The need for sports agents is also important for college athletes to discuss as they are already managing an academic workload along with their sport. If they want to be intentional about curating their brand image, they should consider the costs and benefits of proper representation.

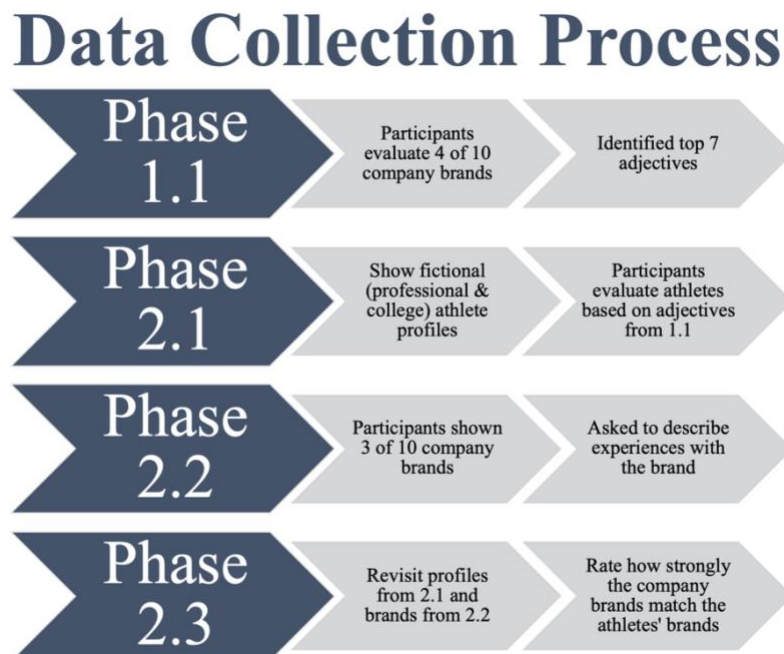
It is also vital that further investigation in this area touches on practical ways the barriers faced by female athletes and differences between them and male athletes can be overcome (Lobpries, Bennett, and Brison 2018). The issues cannot be allowed to perpetuate without the proposal of actionable solutions. It may also be useful to conceptualize the psychological toll “being a brand” has taken on athletes both male and female (Kristiansen and Williams 2015). However, for females specifically, there can be a focus on whether there have been improvements over time as representation increases. There are also a few models that have been proposed to measure brand identity for athletes specifically. Studies can be conducted on whether there was bias towards the male athlete in the way these models were constructed. This bias check can also be done for the way that companies find the perfect “fit” for their various marketing and advertising campaigns.

3. METHODS

Data Collection

In order to investigate consumers' perceptions of brand image of male and female athletes, considering there were no previously available relevant datasets, survey instruments were utilized to collect data. There were two phases based on the methods used by Antil et al. (2012) of using company and product brand images to help describe the brand of a person. Phase one was a shorter survey with the purpose of creating a bank of descriptive vocabulary that participants might use to describe a company's brand image. The vocabulary from this phase was then used as the basis for building the next survey. Phase two was the main source of data in that its survey aimed to identify how participants viewed male and female athletes in reference to the vocabulary from phase one and well-known company brands. Both surveys were distributed through Amazon's Mechanical Turk.

Figure 1: Data Collection Process



Phase One

This section requested 98 participants (34 females, 62 males) to complete a 10-minute survey. The sample population of the participants were adults, between the ages of 24 to 76, recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk.

Participants were first asked to sign a consent form. Then, they were randomly shown four of ten companies' brands and asked to list five words that describe each brand resulting in a total of twenty adjectives per participant. These brands are Apple, Google, McDonalds, Starbucks, Nike, Adidas, Visa, FedEx, Lego, and Marvel. They were chosen from the list of top recognizable brand logos included in Promotique by Vista Print's 2020 study ("Top" 2020). These specific brands were chosen to ensure a variety and that no more than about two brands of the same industry were selected. In addition, the automobile brands, such as Toyota and Ford, were avoided because of common knowledge that cars are generally associated with males.

Next, they were also asked an open-ended question: 'How would you describe your experiences with this brand to a friend?' The purpose of this question was to identify any strong emotions or biases people may have had towards a brand that could skew the results. Their personal experiences may have impacted the way in which they answer the question. If there were any unusual patterns in the words listed, this served as a way to investigate further if needed.

The order in which the participants review each company was also be randomized. This mitigated the risk of participants' effort-levels being influenced by feelings of mundaneness or boredom. For example, the first few companies that participants see may have more detailed responses to the open-ended question because their motivation could have been higher when

beginning the survey. With randomization, the timing of when they answer a question should not have had an impact on the overall quality of the data collected for each company.

The first phase was created based on the assumption that the language used to describe a company's brand can also be used to describe an athlete's brand. In previous research such as Antil, Burton, and Robertson (2012), pairing companies and athletes in analysis was a common practice. This is also applicable in practice as companies need to first understand their own brand image before choosing an endorser. Then, they must understand the brand of the athlete to determine they are a good fit for the company. In order to make a comparison, the same metrics need to be utilized.

Before building the survey for phase two, the words respondents gave in phase one were compiled along with their counts. The adjectives were first consolidated based on similarity. For example, "innovative" and "innovator" both became "innovative." The same was done for antonyms such that "trustworthy" and "untrustworthy" were both counted as "trustworthy." In addition, some words were removed that were related to price (e.g. expensive, overpriced), a location (e.g. foreign, Californian), and anything that was specific to only one company brand (e.g. credit, Disney). Other words that would usually only describe a company brand and not a person were also removed like "tasty", "easy", "useful", and "fast." This left seven words, with the highest counts of appearances within responses across all brands, that would be able to address a range of brand personality traits when applied to the athletes. The adjectives that were then used for the phase 2 survey were: authentic, entertaining, fun, innovative, leader, trustworthy, and unique.

Phase Two

The second phase consisted of a longer survey, approximately twenty minutes, completed by 194 adult participants² between the ages of 20 to 71. About 47% of the participants were between the ages of 20 and 35, and this is followed by 39% being between 36 to 50 years old. Among the participants, 2 identified as non-binary, 72 were females, and 120 were males. After signing a consent form, participants were led through three main steps.

Figure 2: Fictional Athlete Profiles



² Six of the participants were removed because they failed the attention check.

In step one, each participant was given a description of a fictional professional and college athlete (See Figure 2). The gender,³ (male or female) and sport (basketball or soccer) were both randomly selected for each athlete the participant was shown. They were then asked to provide one word to describe the athlete in order to encourage participants to formulate an opinion about the athlete. It was after this was completed that they were shown the 7 adjectives from phase one. Participants then measured on a 7-point Likert scale how strongly they agreed or disagreed that each word described that athlete's brand image.

The profiles of the athletes were fictional in order to reduce the risk of the results being influenced by participant's prior opinions and interactions with real athletes. Without this precaution, they may have taken into consideration factors such as whether that athlete played for a rival team or did not agree with their political stances in their evaluation. If it was a participant's favorite athlete that they knew well, they may have drawn conclusions based on outside information, and the results would not have been controlled such that the participants only answered based on what was included in the profile.

The information concerning each athlete⁴ was focused on both athletic performance and marketable lifestyle, two of the MABI framework dimensions (Arai et al. 2014). However, attractiveness was not a dimension included in the profile. It is a subjective factor that could have become a confounding variable since people view attractiveness differently especially depending on which gender they are attracted to. In addition, it would have required a picture thereby indicating race. While unconscious bias based on race is an important area of research, it was not the goal of this study. Lastly, since the traits utilized for both the professional and college athletes are vastly different, hesitancy should be exercised before drawing conclusions about a

³ Only male and female gender identities were used for simplicity.

⁴ The traits used were a combination of characteristics derived from real sport celebrities.

possible difference between professional and college athletes more generally. They are referred to as such for simplicity and not because they are representative of those populations on a whole.

The second step of phase two utilized the bank of ten company brands from phase one. However, participants were only randomly shown three of the 10 in order to decrease the risk of mental fatigue. The purpose was to ensure participants were paying careful attention to the questions, and the study did not become mundane. For each company brand, the participants were asked “How would you describe your experiences with this brand to a friend?” This is the exact question utilized in phase one for the similar reasoning of collecting additional information in the case that unusual patterns appeared in the results. It also encouraged participants to recall their own memories and associations with the brand before asking them to compare it with the athletes.

Within the final step, participants were once again presented with the professional and college profiles that were randomly selected for them in step one of the second phase. However, in this step they indicated how strongly the brand image of the athlete matched the three company brands that they were shown in step two on a 7-point Likert scale. At the end of the survey, the final questions gathered information about the participants and general demographics such as age, gender, and race.

Figure 3: Results of Mann Whitney U Test⁵

Professional	P-value	Effect	*F-Mean	+M-Mean	~Difference
Authentic	0.118	0.112	1.777	1.510	0.267
Entertaining	0.877	0.011	1.649	1.690	-0.041
Fun	0.857	0.013	1.575	1.540	0.035
Innovative	0.449	0.054	1.138	0.920	0.218
Leader	0.299	0.075	1.862	1.700	0.162
Trustworthy	0.393	0.061	1.596	1.460	0.136
Unique	0.885	0.010	1.106	1.060	0.046

College	P-value	Effect	*F-Mean	+M-Mean	~Difference
Authentic	0.263	0.080	1.367	1.154	0.213
Entertaining	0.053	0.139	1.911	1.635	0.276
Fun	0.085	0.124	1.911	1.750	0.161
Innovative	0.106	0.116	0.922	0.606	0.316
Leader	0.262	0.081	1.089	0.914	0.175
Trustworthy	0.210	0.090	1.189	0.942	0.247
Unique	0.044	0.144	1.233	0.827	0.406

Professional	P-value	Effect	*F-Mean	+M-Mean	~Difference
Apple	0.968	0.008	0.563	0.480	0.083
Google	0.481	0.094	0.615	0.300	0.315
McDonalds	0.844	0.026	-0.760	-0.794	0.034
Starbucks	0.231	0.156	0.581	-0.036	0.616
Nike	0.365	0.118	1.586	1.733	-0.147
Adidas	0.288	0.143	1.682	2.000	-0.318
Visa	0.112	0.182	0.000	0.629	-0.629
FedEx	0.673	0.049	0.085	-0.111	0.196
Lego	0.759	0.041	0.286	0.143	0.143
Marvel	0.133	0.203	-0.560	0.167	-0.727

College	P-value	Effect	*F-Mean	+M-Mean	~Difference
Apple	0.043	0.270	1.348	0.515	0.833
Google	0.486	0.092	0.889	0.548	0.341
McDonalds	0.199	0.167	0.185	-0.469	0.654
Starbucks	0.191	0.173	0.583	0.000	0.583
Nike	0.967	0.005	2.241	2.333	-0.092
Adidas	0.848	0.025	1.333	1.571	-0.238
Visa	0.683	0.054	0.394	0.680	-0.286
FedEx	0.806	0.032	0.000	-0.135	0.135
Lego	0.196	0.167	0.036	-0.531	0.567
Marvel	0.836	0.027	0.482	0.548	-0.067

*=Mean rating for the female athletes +=Mean rating for the male athletes
 ~=Difference of means (female – male)

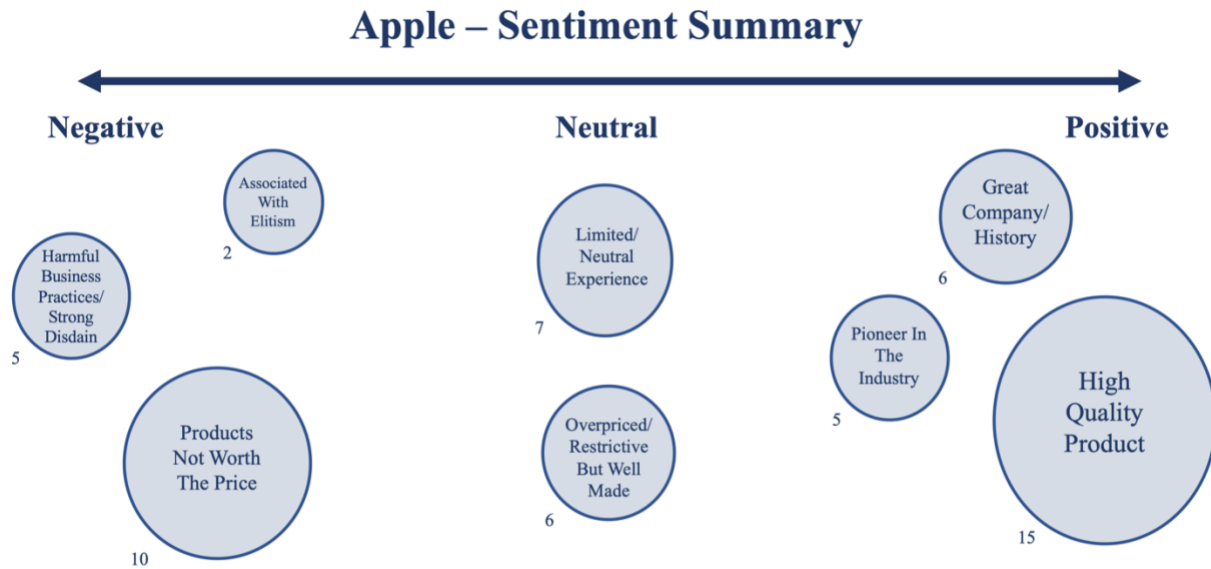
Results

The goal of the statistical analysis of the data was to provide evidence of whether there was a difference in the way participants viewed the athletes based on their gender. The independent variable was the gender of the athlete, and the dependent variables were the results of the Likert scale questions for each adjective and the company brands. The Mann Whitney U Test was utilized to analyze the data in IBM's SPSS which is a common tool for Likert-scale data. The null hypothesis was that there was no difference between the results for the male athletes and the female athletes in phase two steps one and three. Consequently, the alternative hypothesis was that there was a difference between the results for the male athletes and the female athletes in phase two steps one and three⁶.

The results were split into two separate data sets for the professional athlete responses and the college athlete responses. Because each participant evaluated one professional and one college athlete, splitting the data and analyzing them separately allowed for each individual response to be treated as independent of the other. As seen in Figure 3, there were two instances that had statistically significant p-values based on the alpha level of .05 thereby rejecting the null hypothesis and suggesting a possible difference in brand image perception. The first was that the college female athletes were considered to be more unique than the male college athletes (p-val = .044, mean difference = .406). The data demonstrated that there was a difference in whether the participants saw the college athletes as unique such that female athletes were considered to be more unique than the male athletes.

⁵ The responses were re-coded on a scale of -3 to 3 such that -3 was strongly disagree/very weak, 0 was neutral, and 3 was strongly agree/very strong

⁶ The structure of the survey phase two resulted in 34 null hypothesis and alternative hypothesis pairs for the 7 words and 10 brands within each data subset (professional and college).

Figure 4: Apple – Sentiment Summary Chart

Note: Numbers at bottom left of each shape refers to the actual count

The second was the female college athletes were measured as being more similar to the Apple brand than the male college athletes ($p\text{-val} = .043$, mean difference = .833). This proposes that participants found the female college athlete to be more similar to the Apple brand than the male college athlete. Since there was statistical significance for the comparison of the college athlete to the Apple brand, further qualitative analysis into how participants perceived the Apple brand was warranted (Figure 4). The responses to the question about their experiences with the brand were summarized into short statements that conveyed the consistent themes. The data was then visualized to represent the difference in counts for each statement. While the positioning is not fully representative of the exact degree to which each statement is positive or negative, it provides three broad categories that provide a picture of the participants' sentiments.

As seen in Figure 4, 26 of the 56 participants (46%) in this sample had a positive sentiment towards Apple. They viewed Apple as a pioneer and believed the company made high-quality products. In some regards, this is also aligned with the underlying ideas among the

negative sentiments that the Apple brand is positioned to convey a high caliber image as seen through its high prices and reputation of elitism. Since there was not sufficient evidence to suggest that the characteristics, authentic, entertaining, fun, innovative, leader, and trustworthy, were statistically different between genders for the college athletes, and the theme of uniqueness did not appear in the sentiment summary, it is unclear which trait of the Apple brand led to the difference in perception for male and female athletes. However, this reminder of the difficulties faced when comparing company brands and people, in that most statements were product related, also serves as possible inspiration for future analysis.

Discussion

A lack of statistical significance for the other questions does not translate to there being no effect present between the two samples based on gender. Instead, it means there is not sufficient evidence to suggest that there is a difference. It is possible that there is an effect that is small or being confounded by another variable not yet identified. As a result, caution should be utilized when drawing strict conclusions regarding whether there is or is not an effect.

Looking at previous research, Klaus and Bailey (2008) had trustworthy as an indicator when looking at the difference between the brands of male and female athletes, and they found that the female athlete endorser was viewed as more favorable than the male athlete. However, this conclusion was not supported by the data in that there was no statistical significance for “trustworthy” between the male and female athletes when looking at professional and college athletes, and their mean differences were .136 and .247 respectively.

Since there is no evidence to indicate consumers characterize the brand image of male athletes as being more favorable than female athletes, based on the adjectives except for unique,

this suggests there is little statistical support in this respect for companies to leverage male athletes in their campaigns more than female athletes. If consumers do not see a difference in the brands of male and female athletes, companies should be willing to expand their search for the “perfect” athlete to women’s sports. This will also increase their chances of finding the person with the right fit which is essential because the status and relevancy of the celebrity being highlighted could transfer over to the endorsed brand if activated efficiently (Malik, Sudhakar, and Dutta 2018).

Limitations and Future Research

Because of the number of hypothesis tests that were run, this study’s results have the problem of multiple significance tests. As a result, the Bonferroni correction should be applied thereby changing the alpha level to .0015.⁷ With this adjusted alpha level, there is no longer a statistically significant result, and not enough evidence is present to reject the null hypothesis. This further supports the conclusion that there is no difference between the brand images of male and female athletes indicating they should be treated and paid equally.

In addition, the use of a seven-point Likert scale and positive adjectives may have led to a higher concentration of responses on the agree end of the scale. It was not possible to complete a Chi-Square test for independence as an analysis tool because several of the expected cell counts were below five and some were in fact zero. A five-point scale may have been as effective in measuring the perception while also providing a smaller spread of results that would have been simpler in analysis for a sample of this size.

⁷ .05/34 = .0015

The structure of the survey also led to smaller samples of about 60 when analyzing the company brand comparisons to the athletes which means there are limitations to how the results can be generalized to professional and colleges on a whole. The survey was also only built using basketball and soccer athletes limiting the results generalization, but it also serves as possible avenue for further analysis. It may be useful to investigate whether there is a difference in other sports such as hockey or if it depends on whether it is a team or individual sport (Lobpries, Bennett, and Brison 2017). This is intriguing since the two female athletes who made the top 100 paid athletes list play tennis which is an individual sport.

Another possible limitation was that the profile may have served as an overload of information. It could have directed participants to pay more attention to the facts listed rather than considering the athletes' gender. The profiles also included information with things such as social media presence that is generally considered to be associated with younger generations. Therefore, it may be useful to determine if there is a difference in the way people perceive the brand image of male vs. female athletes across generations. This is especially important as sports leagues and their partners are attempting to capture the attention of younger generations like Generation Z while competing with platforms like TikTok and streamers like Netflix.

4. CONCLUSION

The increase in attention given towards women's sports over the years has sparked conversations comparing the successes of male and female athletes in their respective sports and wondering if women's games will ever rise to the level of the men. In the business of sport, the relationship between the athletes and their brand images is a core topic. This study found limited evidence that the gender of an athlete affects the way in which people characterize the brand

image of the athletes. There is no clear justification, within this research, for a disparity in the payments made towards female athletes for activities related to their brand image in reference to male athletes. The hope is that one day we will see more signs of change such as greater representation of female athletes on the top 100 paid athletes list. Until then, researchers should continue to explore this area, so they can be prepared to support and empower the arguments of female athletes as they fight for equality.

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