

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING BRAND EQUITY IN WOMENS SPORT

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ABSTRACT

In today's sport landscape women's sports are garnering more attention from various markets. According to Sky Sports, 21% of adults have spent more time following women's sport in the past 18 months, with 68% of those attributing that to increased coverage and the quality of the coverage. The biggest rise was among men, with 24% of those surveyed saying they were following more women's sport. The 2019 women's US Open finals garnered 3.1 million viewers per game. The 2020 WNBA finals viewership increased 15% during a pandemic. Most recently, ESPN reported 4 million viewers for the 2021 NCAA women's basketball championship. Women's sport brands (teams, leagues, athletes) have transcended sport and become national and global brands (Lough & Greenhalgh, 2019). Nevertheless, research as it relates to branding in women's sport is scarce (Mills, 2019). Although minimal, previous research has focused on team branding, personal branding, and media coverage as an opportunity to build brands in women's sports. As the focus on the aforementioned areas further develops, it has become apparent that women's sports entities (i.e., teams, leagues, and athletes) have become viable brands that have tremendous potential to benefit a multitude of stakeholders.

Keywords: Branding, Brand equity, Women's sports, Conceptual model

INTRODUCTION

Previous brand equity research in sport has focused on the creation of conceptual models to measure brand equity in professional and collegiate team brands, athletes, as well as sport spectators and satellite fans (e.g., Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998; Gladden & Milne, 1999; Kerr & Gladden, 2008; Ross, 2006; Williams, Walsh, & Rhenwick, 2015). To date, no research has focused on developing a conceptual framework for understanding women's sport brand equity. The author proposes that applying a conceptual framework to building brand equity among women's sport will aid leagues, teams, and individual athletes in developing a brand image that is unique and viable in the marketplace.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer-based brand equity occurs when a consumer is aware of a brand and holds some favorable, strong, and unique brand associations in their mind (Keller, 1993). Brand equity has been conceptualized and assessed in the sport and participatory sport segments (Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998; Mills & Williams, 2016; Robinson & Gladden, 2003; Ross, 2006; Williams & Pedersen, 2012). Although the previous conceptualizations of brand equity have applied Keller (1993) and Aaker's (1991) frameworks, the current study will employ Berry's (2000) service brand equity framework. According to Berry (2000), internal and external brand communication as well as customer experience led to enhanced service brand equity for organizations. Overall, consumer perception is a principal aspect of developing brand equity.

A myriad of research has been conducted on brand equity in a traditional marketplace; however, few approach brand equity from a women's sport context (Mills, 2019). Most of the branding research done in a women's sport context has focused primarily on personal branding (Cortsen, 2013; Lobpries, Bennett, & Brison, 2018; O'Reilly & Braedley, 2008; Parris, Troilo, Bouchet, & Peachy, 2014; Toffoleti & Thorpe, 2018), team branding (Cortsen, 2017; Heere, 2010; Martensson, 2010), and the effects of media coverage on branding (Cooper, 2008; 2009). The brand equity models in spectator and participatory sport (e.g., Gladden & Milne, 1999; Gladden et al., 1998; Mills & Williams, 2016; Robinson & Gladden, 2003; Ross, 2006) have modified and applied (Aaker's,1991) (Berry's,2000) and (Keller's,1993) models of brand equity. As such, this study will employ the same procedures in developing a conceptual framework for building consumer-based brand equity in women's sport.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed framework stems from the previous brand equity models (Berry, 2000; Ross, 2006) in that it recognizes the distinctive characteristics of women's sport brands through organization-related, market-related, and athlete-related antecedents that contribute to the formation of women's sport-based brand equity. The organization-related antecedents are team identification, advocacy, and sponsors. The market-related antecedents are eWOM and publicity, and the athlete-related antecedents are social media and the actual consumer experience. Similar to the previous sport-related brand equity models, women's sport brand equity is comprised of brand awareness and brand associations. The combined implications of high or low women's sport-brand equity are designated as consequences, which may include purchase intention, brand extensions, and media exposure. The proposed conceptual framework differs greatly from sport-brand equity models proposed by Gladden & Milne (1999), Ross (2006) and Williams et al. (2015) through the modification of antecedents and consequences of brand equity to fit the unique aspect of women's sports. The following sections include an elaboration of the proposed model's concepts.

ORGANIZATION-RELATED ANTECEDENTS

Team identification is the cognitive awareness of membership to a team that instills an entrusted commitment to the team's prominence (Birging) or lack thereof (Corfing). Several scholars have studied team identification and its impact on brand equity (Kim & Manoli, 2020; Kwon, Lee, & Kim, 2015; Lee & Um, 2021). Regarding women's sport, team identification research has explored the influence of team identification on thoughts and behaviors (Clarke, Guerin, & Burch, 2022; Fink et al., 2002; Heere & Newland, 2013; Lee et al., 2017; Madrigal, 1995; Schramm & Knoll, 2017).

A myriad of scholars have studied the impact of sport sponsorship on brand equity (Cornwell et al., 2001; Henseler et al., 2011; Tsordia et al., 2018). Women's sport as a standalone product has received minimal attention, despite growing commercialization and professionalization of many leagues (Morgan, 2019). A major challenge for some women's sport leagues like the WNBA has been distinguishing themselves from the NBA brand. For instance, being able to obtain exclusive partnerships that don't come primarily from NBA brand agreements is a key hurdle. Previous research suggests that sponsorship of women's sport yields positive corporate social responsibility as well as commercial benefits (Morgan, 2019). Sponsorship produces a halo effect through consumer awareness. Although most research in this context has been conducted internationally, the data provides promising results for future agendas. There are some notable movements emerging particularly in the women's sports sponsorship industry. For instance, sales efforts are becoming more targeted; highlighting the unique value tied to the women's sport product.

Research related to corporate social advocacy in the context of women's sports is robust and emerging. Women's sports leagues, teams, and athletes have taken a stand on social issues such as gender equity, racial justice, and LGBTQ+ rights through statements, marketing initiatives, community partnerships, and merchandizing. In 2020, during the time of nation-wide protests, athletes, teams, and leagues posted a wide range of statements and varying language around inclusion, diversity, and social justice. Scholars suggest that these initiatives and campaigns have implications for consumer attitudes and purchase intention (Atunovic et al., 2021); consistent with the proposed framework.

MARKET-RELATED ANTECEDENTS

Electronic word of mouth is a market-related antecedent that integrates technology, allowing consumers to express their opinions and preference on sport teams, athletes, and other industries. WNBA Twitter has a massive following with 700,000+ and growing. Consumers are talking about the league consistently on various platforms. ESPN Digital's number of female unique visitors across its digital properties last year increased by 4% year-over-year, and total unique visitors to the 2021 NCAA Women's Tournament are up 43% compared to the 2019 tournament, across ESPN's digital platforms (Guaglione, 2021).

These gradual improvements in the coverage of women's sport indicate that social media platforms may be able to accelerate its growth. Although the growing use of eWOM communication can be considered a double-edge sword as it may convey positive and negative messaging (Ross); sport marketers must begin to recognize the views consumers hold about women's sport brands because the messaging within various online platforms can effect purchase decisions.

Previous brand equity models have indicated that publicity is essential to the development of sport brand equity (Ross, 2006; Williams et al., 2015). Conversely, other scholars have suggested that publicity is a consequence of sport brand equity (Gladden et al., 1998). Given its magnitude and pervasiveness in sport, practitioners should be observant of this market-related antecedent. Having a strong media presence, whether it is traditional or new media, may greatly contribute to women's sport brand equity.

ATHLETE-RELATED ANTECEDENTS

Athlete-related antecedents are the messages produced, managed, and delivered by the athlete to the consumer directly or indirectly via a social media platform. The proposed model postulates that having these direct and indirect experiences with women athletes may lead to strong brand awareness and unique brand associations.

Although in its infancy, there is much to learn and apply regarding athlete advocacy and its impact on brand equity in women's sport. Scholars have identified a new wave of athlete political activism and/or advocacy, often led by the example of women. A lot these efforts are made on social media and allow consumers to engage in a memorable way. A defining facet of social media is the ability for users to engage with and create content (Pegararo et al., 2021). Female athletes are empowered and easily able to bypass traditional media and communicate directly with their fans and other stakeholders (Li et al., 2020). Burch & Zimmerman (2019) noted that social media provides a significant platform for female athletes in their personal branding development process. The popularity of social media has implications for women's sport and may be utilized by organizations to address some of the issues women's sports face from a lack of traditional broadcast coverage (Vann, 2014).

BRAND AWARENESS

Brand awareness defines the presence of a brand in the mind of consumers (Ross, 2006). It is the initiator of women's sport brand equity from a consumer's standpoint. The proposed model suggests that the effective presentation of women's sport brands in controlled and uncontrolled communications is important to the creation of brand awareness. Additionally, these communications will enhance a consumer's ability to recall and recognize a women's sport brand (Berry, 2000). In turn, top of mind awareness increases and

foster's unique brand associations resulting in positive consequences for women's sport brands and their stakeholders.

BRAND ASSOCIATIONS

Brand association is the second component of women's sport brand equity. It is defined as the links and nodes that come to mind when the women's sport brand is recalled (Keller, 1993). These thoughts are often used as an evaluation measure when consumers make purchase decisions (Aaker, 1996). Consumers may also possess brand associations unique to women's sport (Doyle et al., 2021). This is especially likely as many women's sport teams are in early stages of the product lifecycle (e.g., semi-professional). Moreover, researchers have suggested the contextual factors surrounding women's sport impact how consumers engage with, and develop connections toward such teams (Fink et al., 2002; Funk et al., 2002; Mumcu & Lough, 2017).

CONSEQUENCES

Purchase intention is a form of behavioral loyalty that represents a tendency in consumers to purchase the same brand repeatedly. Previous studies have suggested that purchase intention is impacted by CSR associations and loyalty (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2018), which is consistent with the proposed model. In women's sport, purchasing season or partial season tickets and/or watching all of a team's games on television because of the brands represented is indicative of loyalty linked to strong brand equity. It is imperative that women's sport brands develop positive brand equity to create loyal fans. This support may lead to increased opportunities for brand extensions and media exposure.

If an athlete, team, or league in women's sport can develop strong brand equity it increases their capability to introduce brand extensions. A brand extension is when a brand uses their parent name to introduce a new product/service (Aaker, 1996). For instance, many NFL teams have developed women's only fan clubs. Previous research has indicated that if a consumer has positive attitudes toward the brand which introduces the extension, they will have positive attitudes toward the brand extension (Williams et al., 2015). Thus, women's sport brands that have strong, favorable and positive associations may be able to introduce extensions that will be received positively by consumers

In addition to increasing purchase intention and introducing brand extensions, women's sport brands that create strong brand equity will be presented with more media exposure and in turn more revenue. As previously stated, a contributing factor to the increase in women sport following has been the increase and quality of coverage. Previous sport brand equity research has suggested that media exposure is a consequence of brand equity (Gladden et al, 1998). The proposed conceptual framework for assessing brand equity in women's sport is shown in **Figure 1**.

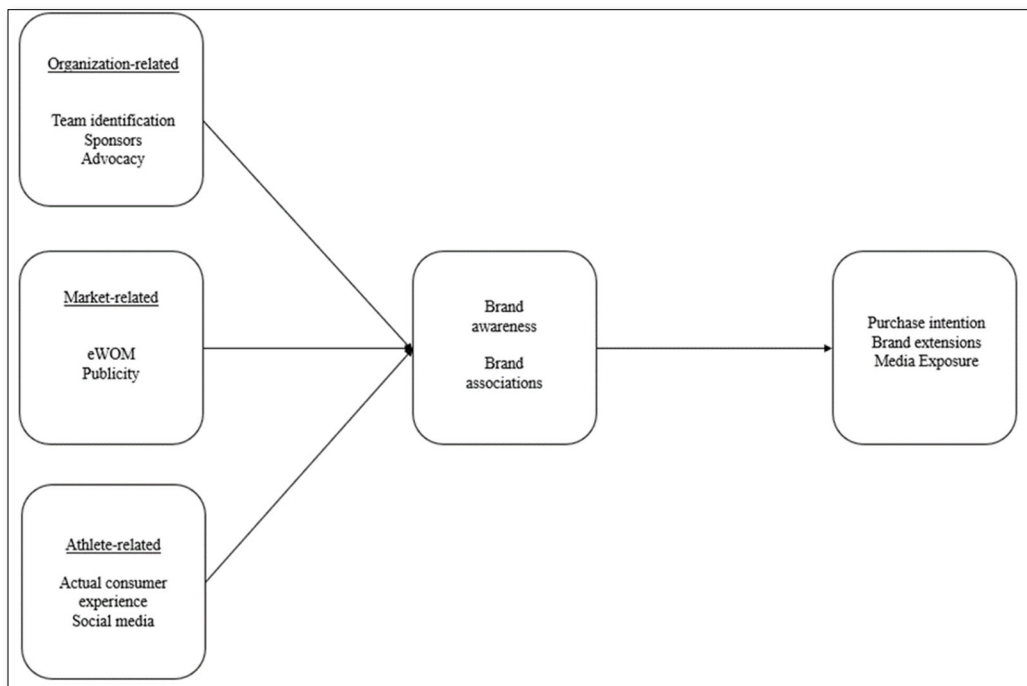


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between antecedents, brand equity and consequences in women’s sport.

DISCUSSION

From a practical point of view, it is important that women’s sport entities and their stakeholders understand these antecedents and potential consequences. Knowing what may impact a women’s sport brand will allow their marketing representatives to develop brand awareness and create a positive image by fostering and nurturing brand associations. Developing positive brand equity will lead to several positive consequences as noted in the model. This will allow women’s sport brands to increase revenue they receive by engaging in corporate sponsorships, extensions, and licensing opportunities.

CONCLUSION

While there are several theoretical and practical implications, this the first known attempt to develop a brand equity model specific for women’s sport. As such, future research should empirically test some of the model’s assumptions that were developed through previous literature. Specifically, research should examine the antecedents and their impact on brand equity. Social media has emerged as a primary marketing tool in various industries and is producing a wealth of receptiveness from sport consumers. Examining this antecedent may be of interest to various constituents in women’s sports. Moreover, advocacy and community engagement are two unique aspects of women’s sports that also need more exploration. Recent literature references their connection to building brand equity, but more empirical evidence is needed in this specific context.

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