

Are female wrestlers the new superstars of world wrestling entertainment?

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Aim

Gender inequality continues to be a significant issue in sport, where discrimination has been described as taking place in various forms, ranging from the media coverage (Trolan, 2013) to the lack of female representation at boardroom level. Increasingly, however, women's role in sport is being seen in a more positive light. Changes in societal perceptions, global and national campaigns as well as the growing success of individual female competitors and teams, have all contributed to this shift. Traditionally, professional wrestling has been seen as a male-dominated performance spectacle; however, over the last year in particular, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) has been trying to change this perception through showcasing women's wrestling matches on a regular basis. Accordingly, it is important to assess whether these women are leaving a mark on fans in the same way as the men. Therefore, this research aims to establish how successfully WWE is promoting its female wrestlers, by looking specifically at what their overall brand image is.

Theoretical background

Traditional studies on sports branding have focused on the leverage that successful team branding can bring to an organisation (Naik and Gupta, 2013), as opposed to focusing on the branding of athletes themselves. However, these individual sports stars are now in a position to become brands in their own right. Despite the endorsement challenges that female athletes still encounter (Antil, Burton and Robinson, 2012), stars such as Maria Sharapova have demonstrated that women in sport can become successful brands. Brand image plays a key role in this but becomes difficult to define due to the number of associated attributes and the context in which a brand is discussed. Nevertheless, where the recent studies have been conducted on the brand equity of individual athletes, these stars tend to be from sports such as soccer, golf and tennis (Parmentier and Fischer, 2012 and Arai et al, 2013). Professional wrestlers have not been addressed in this context in the academic literature. The theoretical framework for this research is therefore based on the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) proposed by Arai et al (2013). The MABI framework consists of three dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle – determined through research of existing branding literature, such as Keller's 1993 classification study.

Methodology

The three dimensions of the MABI framework consist of various criteria against which athletes are ranked on a Likert scale to effectively determine the strength of their brand. A modified version of this model was therefore used to gauge how female wrestlers' brand image compares to that of the male wrestlers. Components of the MABI framework were adapted to focus solely on WWE wrestlers. Whilst the existing three dimensions

remain, the criteria for each component contain elements that are context-specific. The subsequent revised MoWBI (Model of Wrestler Brand Image) was then tested on a small group of wrestling fans before the main study was carried out. The research design involves purposive sampling, whereby surveys were disseminated specifically to current WWE fans, where they were asked to choose the female wrestler they were most familiar with and then rank their chosen wrestler only, according to the MoWBI framework. These steps were then repeated but this time using the male wrestler the respondent was most familiar with. No restrictions were placed on the wrestler that respondents could choose, except that they should currently be competing in WWE (injured or active). The extended respondent pool of the main study was recruited primarily via wrestling forums.

Results, discussion and implications

Data collection is still ongoing, however, results and analysis will be presented at the conference itself. Implications of the study are that the research will add to the growing contemporary literature on gender inequality in sport whilst, the MABI framework can be further tested to enrich the studies on athlete branding. Similarly, the specific use of MoWBI can serve as a niche framework for the branding of professional wrestlers on which there is little data. Moreover, this initial research will act as the basis for a longitudinal study, to be conducted annually over a minimum 5-year period. This will allow for a stronger correlation to be made between the successful branding of the female wrestlers and their overall brand image, as well as providing an opportunity to identify aspects that may have contributed to any changes in their brand image.

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