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The Objectification of Professional Female Athletes in Print Advertisements and the Consumers' Response

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And the Consumers' Response

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Abstract

As female athletes gain more recognition in the sports world, researchers continuously debate on whether the reason behind this is due to their athletic performance or their hyper sexualized appearance in media outlets such as print advertisements (Fink, Cunningham, & Kensicki, 2004). This raises the question on how consumers interpret advertisements that contain female athletes promoting both sport and non-sport products. Since this research is the first examine how consumers view and react to the use of professional female athletes in advertisements, this research further develops the literature of women's role in both the advertising and sport world. Both members of the advertising world and sport world can use this research to develop more effective ways to use female athletes in advertisements that will benefit both the product and brand and the athletes reputation. This research included a qualitative study of three focus groups lasting 30-60 minutes. After the focus groups were conducted, coding was used to analyze the data that emerged from the study. The findings confirmed the previous research in that consumers formed opinions on the product based on the portrayal of the female athlete in the advertisement, the athlete's fit with the product, the athletes reputation and the objectification of the athlete in the ad. These findings are important as they provided additional evidence for the previous literature.

The Objectification of Professional Female in Advertisements
And the Consumers' Response

In today's society, female athletes are gaining more publicity and recognition in the sports world. However, a number of researchers debate on whether this sudden increase of exposure is due to their sheer athleticism or simply their hyper sexualized appearance in media outlets such as billboard or print advertisements (Fink, Cunningham, & Kensicki, 2004). This raises the issue on how consumers interpret advertisements containing female athletes when promoting various sport and non-sport products. Although there are many previous studies in which relate to women in advertising, athletes in advertising, and consumer behavior in relation to advertising, there seems to be no in-depth analysis on how the presentation of female athletes in advertising relates to the purchasing habits of consumers. Women are portrayed a certain way based on the genre of the media outlet being used and the overall theme and format of it. Lynn (2004) examined the different ways women are portrayed in different types of magazines to find that the settings and physical appearances are altered in order to connect with the specific target market. This phenomenon is alarming towards females all around the world as the trend of enhancing the physical attributes and the hyper sexualizing of female professional athletes in advertisements is becoming more and more popular. This belittles the athlete's hard work and commitment to their sport, and in some cases, can hinder the consumers' thoughts on the product or brand itself (Fink et al., 2004).

This research is beneficial to the academic community as it further develops the literature of women's role in both advertisements and the sports world. Up to this point, the relationship between how female athletes have been used in advertising and consumers views and reactions to it has not been examined. This research also has practical application as it provides insight to

organization managers on how to effectively market their product. The research gathered indicates that not only does the setting of the advertising content matter, but also which specific athlete is used (Koernig, 2009). By understanding which marketing components trigger which emotions and actions of the consumers, managers can successfully create advertisements that given them the results they want in the most effective and efficient way.

The objective of this research was to study the consumer's thoughts on how female professional athletes are exemplified in print advertisements. A plethora of previous studies have drawn conclusions on consumer behaviors and purchasing habits based on the image the model in the advertisement is sending. Gender of the consumer plays a significant role in their reaction to sexually objectified advertisements versus those in a more natural setting (Boyd, 2004). Even though research has been done on consumer behavior in relation to advertising content, no studies have been conducted on the use of female athletes and the ways they are often positioned and set up when featured in print advertising. This research, when given to non-experts, will attempt to clarify why females are often made to look more feminine and sexual while promoting a product, rather than athletic and natural, in respect to their accomplishments in the sports world. The research question of this study was: How do consumers view and interpret advertisements containing female professional athletes? This research will present a clearer understanding of the different messages female athletes send to the consumers when embodying a specific image pertaining to the company or product it is advertising for.

Literature Review

Consumer Attitudes and Behavior Towards Brands in Relation to Advertisements

Previous research had been conducted revolving around mechanisms used in altering the attitudes and feelings of their consumers. Chuang (2009) conducted a study that investigated the relationship between advertisement vocabulary and consumer product knowledge in the attitudes toward advertisements and brands. This study took 120 undergraduate students and conducted an experiment that looked at terminologies used versus terminologies not being used and compared it to high consumer knowledge versus low consumer knowledge. After this information was recorded, qualitative data was then collected.

The results of Chaung's (2009) study showed that participants with low consumer product knowledge had significantly more favorable attitudes towards the advertisements that didn't use specific brand terminology, as the participants were unaware of the meanings. In other words, the effectiveness of terminology used in the advertisements depended greatly on level of the consumer's product knowledge.

The purpose of Chaung's (2009) study was to make marketing managers aware of the effectiveness of different techniques in producing advertisements. Also, this study helped clarify the influence of consumer product knowledge in the success of various advertisements as well as provided evidence for the relationship between advertisement terminology and consumer product knowledge when looking into consumer's attitudes on the advertisements.

In order for marketing teams to increase sales and influence consumer behavior, evidence from the past showed how vital it is to consider the effects advertising has on sales. Bruce (2012) further explored this topic as he set up an experiment that evaluated how advertising built brands. More specifically, he focused on the role of intermediate effects in building brands. Bruce (2012)

proposed a quantitative analysis in order to identify which factors of advertising contribute to building an organization's brand.

The results of Bruce's (2012) analysis showed evidence that the purchase reinforcement outcomes exist not only for experience but also for other intermediate effects and that advertising simultaneously contributes to both sales growth and brand building. This can be used for both researchers and managers, as it encouraged a stronger consumer- brand relationship as well as increase their overall sales.

When developing a marketing strategy, management teams often pick an advertising factor that will resonate with the target audience in hopes of influencing their likelihood to purchase. Kemp (2013) explored this concept as she developed a study in which evaluated the use of influential appeals that contain emotional content to encourage individuals to moderate their support by buying or getting involved with their product. Furthermore, Kemp developed three experiments in which examined the effectiveness of the emotions of pride and sympathy used in charitable appeals (2013). Sympathy promoted attention to the needs of others and caretaking, while pride entailed success related appraisals. A few moderators that were noted in these three experiments were biological gender, gender roles, and classifying current donors based on their motives for engaging in proactive behaviors.

A quantitative experiment was conducted using adults ranging from ages 20 to 59. Participants were presented with either a message that presented pride or sympathy revolving around the SIMS Foundation. Then, qualitative data was collected as the participants were then asked to discuss their feelings on the topics presented.

Kemp's (2013) experiment showed that men expressed higher intentions to donate in the pride condition rather than in the sympathy condition. On the other hand, females expressed

greater intentions to give money in the sympathy conditions, rather than a pride condition. Also, the results show further insight into how individuals might be targeting in charitable appeals by examining various personality traits (Kemp, 2013). Gender identity also played a role in the experiments as the study found individuals scoring high on femininity had a greater likelihood to give than those who scored high in masculinity. This study is important for management and marketing teams as the findings provide insights that may offer direction in how to engage their public in getting involved after viewing the advertisement. This also provided insights on the personality traits, gender, and gender roles and how they can affect how to market and advertise to the public.

In today's society, the general public is exposed to thousands of advertisements with or without even realizing it. Linyun (2014) dug deeper into this topic by creating a series of studies in which examined how being exposed to multiple brands at once affects consumers' reactions to these brands. The tests consisted of students at Duke University being asked to compare the characteristics of six candy brands and six soft drinks to pick a focal brand for the following study. The next part of the experiment took the brand previously picked by the majority of the contestants and asked participants to view different pictures of Dove chocolate, the focal brand, and assessed whether it would be chosen more with Mountain Dew (dissimilar) than Canada Dry would be picked (similar)(Linyun, 2004).

The results of Linyun's (2014) experiments showed that exposure to multiple brands can influence brand preferences in ways different from exposure to individual brands in isolation. More specifically, the first study shows how when a focal brand is paired with a dissimilar brand, the focal brand is preferred more than when it is paired with a similar brand. Altogether these findings suggest that consumers do not form perceptions of a brand's traits and characteristics in

isolations, but instead use the context (in this case consists of multiple brands) to form their impressions and judgments (Linyun, 2004).

This research can be used to better understand brand attitudes in a setting that is more prevalent to consumers' experiences in that they are constantly seeing multiple brands in a small range of time. Linyun's (2004) study was important for brand managers and organizations as a whole because it gave them further insight on how the consumers generally resonate with their brand/product. This study also implied how brand specialists can maximize their efforts to reach consumers in a brand-cluttered world.

After finding sources in which analyze brand exposure, persuasive advertising and the consumers response, how to effectively build brands, and the relationship between consumer knowledge and advertisements terminology, it made sense to dig deeper into the concept of brand love. Brand love is described as a consumers' love for a brand in which is associated with positive word of mouth, brand loyalty, decreased price sensitivity, and forgivingness of brand failures (Batra, 2012).

Batra (2012) investigated the nature and consequences of brand love, and argued that research on this phenomenon needed to be built on an understanding of how consumers experienced brand love. The author conducted two qualitative studies in which consisted of brief telephone interviews and follow-up interviews lasting two to four hours each. Participants were between the ages of 23 and 45 and highly educated. The objective of the study was to uncover the different elements of brand love, and then they use the data to explore how these elements can be modeled as first-order and higher-order structural models (Batra, 2012).

Higher-order model contained seven core elements: self brand integration, passion driven behaviors, positive emotional connection, long-term relationship, positive overall

attitudes, attitude confidence, and anticipated separation distress. Along with these, the prototype includes quality beliefs as a precursor of brand love and loyalty, word of mouth, and resistance to negative information as an outcome. Both first-order and higher-order brand love models predict loyalty, word of mouth, and resistance better and provided a greater understanding than an overall summary measure of brand love (Batra,2012).

The results of this study conducted by Batra (2012) showed that the higher-order prototype model add more value than the individual study. For instance, it led to a much more comprehensive and integrated understanding of how consumers actually experienced brand love than the prior research on its individual component. The model also showed estimates that show how highly loved brands had higher means than less-loved brands on all the elements of the brand prototype factors, suggesting that the elements represent potential pathways to build brand love, subject to category/brand specific opportunities and constraints (Batra, 2012).

This information was useful for organization managers, especially those on tight budgets, as this provided insight on which ways and mechanisms worked to maximize the return on investment of brand-love-increasing efforts. Also this gave managers further understandings on which factors to promote and focus on when representing their brands to be sure to utilize the ones that most resonate with their audience (Batra, 2012).

Women in Advertising

Responses to objectified advertisements. The following study focused on how the objectification of females in advertising is often overlooked as the image is so embedded in our culture. Zimmerman (2008) elaborated on this idea as she conducted a study in which captured and measured the attitudes of young women in response to sexually objectified advertisements. The study was conducted through forming a survey by combining the elements of two previous

studies (Ford, LaTour, & Lundstrom, 1991; Mittal & Lassar, 2000) to 94 female undergraduate students. The respondents agreed that females were represented in hyper sexualized manners in the advertisements but were less offended by these images than female respondents from 1991. The results also showed that the females attitudes towards the images had little effect on their purchasing intentions, which is also a substantial change from the study previously conducted in 1991. Zimmerman's (2008) study showed how the idea of females being hyper sexualized in advertisements is so common in today's society that young, female consumers are not offended or surprised when seeing these images. These findings provided insight on how advertising strategies have changed throughout the years as well as where they are headed in the future (Zimmerman, 2008).

There's been a common notion that having attractive models in print advertising grabbed the attention and encouraged the viewers to take a closer look and possibly increased the intent to purchase. However, many people often wonder if having an attractive model or athlete is more important than expertise and knowledge on the product or event being endorsed. Fink (2004) took a closer look at this notion as she conducted a study on the effects of athlete attractiveness and athlete expertise on endorser-event fit, attitudes towards an event, and intentions to purchase tickets to an event. This study used a sample of students from three different universities who were asked to complete a survey in order to compile qualitative data on the topic. Results from this test indicated that athlete attractiveness and expertise were both positively related to the endorser-event fit aspect. Furthermore, attitudes toward the specific event partially determined the relationship between endorser-event fit and intentions to purchase tickets to the event. In other words, Fink's (2004) study indicated how, although attractiveness is important while gaining publicity using an endorser, the attitude towards the specific event is what increased

people's likelihood to purchase tickets. Although it is not completely definite, this research showed that perceptions with athletes and events are portrayed differently than regular model/actor endorsers with non-sport related events. The expertise of an athlete and their relative sport is a significant factor that drives people to an event (Fink, 2004).

How women are portrayed in advertisements. Not only do some researchers believe that female athletes are hyper sexualized in advertisements, but also portrayed differently in other types of media outlets as well. For instance, there was significantly less media coverage on female athletes than there are on males, specifically when it came to sport blogs. With the little coverage they did get, female athletes were often portrayed in a more sexual manner than male athletes. Clavio (2011) dug deeper into this topic as he examined the portrayal of women in sports blogs. By using a content analysis of the ten most popular sports blogs, the researcher looked to identify whether or not the blogs contained more images of males than females, if the blogs portrayed the females in a sexually suggestive manner, and if there was relationship between the type of blog and the sexual suggestiveness of the gendered image.

The content analysis that examined the portrayal of women in sports blogs discovered that males receive significantly more photographic coverage in the blogs than females, and like hypothesized, the females were portrayed in a far more sexually suggestive nature, and approximately 5% of the sexualized images were corporate-owned sports blogs and 10.9% of independent sports blogs were deemed sexually suggestive (Clavio, 2011). Although given these percentages, the tests did not indicate any meaningful correlation between the type of blog owner and sexual suggestiveness of the images. Clavio's analysis and implications highlighted the current state, as of 2011, of the sports blog content as it related to gender-based portrayal of athletes. This enlightened the idea that, although seen fewer times than male, female images in

sports media were significantly more likely to be sexual in nature (Clavio, 2011). In other words, one may take away the idea that sports blogs use female images to entice readers to continue reading the different stories in the blog rather than promoting the athleticism or competition of female sports.

Women and men in sports are portrayed differently as female athletes were often sexualized whereas male athletes encourage athleticism and competition through their image. Lynn (2004) worked from this notion and examined the different ways women are portrayed in different types of magazines and newspapers. The author's study examined the presentation of women in advertising photographs printed in a variety of different sport and fitness magazines in order to uncover the presence of sexual difference as well as the different advertising messages portrayed in each of the magazines. In this article, Lynn stated that sports sections within magazines and newspapers still frame women in terms of sexual difference, which implies that women are naturally inferior to men in their ability to actively participate in sport (Lynn, 2004).

This study examined Real Sports, Sports Illustrated Women, Shape, and Women's Sports & Fitness for differences and similarities in the way gender was presented through advertising. A content analysis was conducted to answer a number of research questions regarding sexual difference displayed in the photographs (Lynn, 2004). The sample for this study included a combination of both non-famous models and celebrities that were featured in a total of 1,593 of the magazine's photographs.

The findings of this study concluded a significant amount of the advertisements showing women in passive positions rather than active ones. This was unexpected given the fact of the target market and genre of these particular magazines. Lynn (2004) expressed the passivity of women to be an indicator of sexual difference. She also found that all magazines incorporated a

different amount of sexual differentiation (Lynn, 2004). For example, *Shape* magazine strongly enforced sexual difference as the majority of their advertisements feminized the female body, making it more sexually desirable to men. On the other end of the spectrum, *Real Sports* incorporated active women in their magazines (Lynn, 2004).

This article provided the notion that each magazine must find its own identity of how they want to portray their female athletes in order to maintain a strong readership with those who correspond with those specific ads. Lynn's (2004) analysis delivered effective background material on the different advertisements used in difference magazines and how the majority shows some kind of stereotype among females in sport.

Marketing mechanisms. Retailers used specific tactics to resonate with each sex in order to influence buyer behavior. Tifferet's (2012) study examined to the differences in how men and women relate and react to advertisements. The purpose of Tifferet's (2012) study is to gather support the idea that women, in comparison to men, report higher levels of brand commitment, hedonic consumption, and impulse buying (Tifferet, 2012). For this study, 257 students completed a series of questionnaires. As hypothesized, women indeed had higher levels of brand commitment, hedonic consumption, and impulse buying in comparison to men. Tifferet used this data to implicate the idea that retailers should promote high quality brands for their female customers, since their female customers have higher levels of brand commitment than men (Tifferet, 2012). Also, since women have higher levels of impulse buying, retailers should accentuate these cues to women in store, such as offering them products to touch, the increase the likelihood of purchasing (Tifferet, 2012).

Athletes in Advertising

Chao-Sen (2013) developed a study that aimed to probe into the relationships among athlete endorsements (attraction and reliability), consumer involvement, and advertising effects (attitude toward advertising, attitude toward products and purchase intention) by looking into Major League Baseball's (MLB) Hong-Chih Kuo's position of being the spokesperson for Subway. Using Hong-Chih Kuo as the subject point of the study, a total of 400 questionnaires were distributed and 347 valid samples were retrieved for an 86.75% return rate (Chao-Sen, 2013).

The results of Chao-Sen's (2013) study indicated that athlete endorsements significantly and positively influences consumers' attitudes toward the advertising, products and purchasing intention, in advertising effect. In other words, in current sports marketing, attraction of athlete endorser positively enhances consumers' attitude toward advertising, products, and intent to purchase (Chao-Sen, 2013). However, when consumer involvement was a mediating variable, athlete endorsement did not significantly influence advertising effect. The influence of athlete endorsement and consumer involvement on advertising effect did not exist in this study. However, consumer involvement revealed a significant and positive correlation with attitudes toward advertising, attitudes toward products and purchase intention in advertising effect (Chao-Sen, 2013).

Koernig conducted additional research to determine the relationship of athlete versus non-athletes used in print advertisements for both sport and non-sport related products. Koernig (2009) examined the roles of product-endorser "fit" with celebrity and non-celebrity endorsers by comparing the effects of a famous athlete and an unknown model on a variety of consumer responses. Koernig (2009) directed a two-part experiment to better understand the consumers'

attitudes and feelings towards this concept. The first experiment included a full-page print advertisement for the non-sport and sports brands including NFL player Tom Brady as the endorser for the brands. Both ads were identical in that they included a close up of Brady and clearly identified the subject as the quarterback for the New England Patriots. The only difference about these two ads was the brand logos at the bottom, one was for Champion and the other was for The Gap (Koernig, 2009). The 185 subjects were then asked to fill out questionnaires on their overall impressions of the endorser, the ad, and the brand. The results for this part of the experiment concluded that the famous athlete is more effective when endorsing a sport brand rather than a non-sport brand, but only for enhancing the image of a celebrity.

The second part of Koernig's (2009) study further explored the match-up effect by using an unknown model as a product endorser. The goal of this section of the experiment was to determine the impact of a fictional "celebrity" which was done by using an anonymous model and presented the endorser as either an accomplished athlete or with no personal information. Results for this test indicated that an anonymous model made out to be an athlete is more effective as an endorser where there is a match between the endorser and the product. This suggested that a spokesperson depicted as an athlete is more effective as a non-athlete when endorsing a sport brand (Koernig, 2009).

Since the experiments showed that the only benefit of matching an athlete with a sport brand was limited to increased liking and trust of the endorser, it raised the issue, from a managerial standpoint, on whether the athlete endorser would gain more from endorsing your product than the actual brand itself. This article raised the notion of the effectiveness of paying athletes large amounts of money to endorse one's brand, and it makes you question whether or not it is worth it (Koernig, 2009).

Additional research has been conducted in which gave insight as to which celebrity endorser is the right fit for a specific product. As previous studies have shown, a celebrity's endorsement of a product or service has the ability to positively influence the purchase intention of a consumer. This concept led Zwilling (2013) to conduct a study that offered an innovative model for selecting celebrities that will most effectively endorse a particular product.

In his research, the Zwilling (2013) provided an overview of existing methods of assessing the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements, outlines the current research on consumer involvement in celebrity endorsed product advertising; reviewed the common complications, risks, and benefits of celebrity endorsements of products; presented the problems associated with the current methods of studying celebrity product matching and; proposed an innovating model for reconsidering celebrity-product matching based on what the authors perceived as the largely overlooked perspective of product design (Zwilling, 2013). Zwilling(2013) compared and assessed a variety of previously established studies that conducted experiments and resulted in crucial data concerning the individual celebrity endorser and the specific product.

The results of Zwilling's (2013) study provided a new, more effective approach for matching celebrity endorsers to products. The study also led the authors to conclude that there are products that help strengthen the feeling of having selected the "right" celebrity from the marketing team's prospective. Overall, the authors argued that the genetic algorithms (GA) is more useful than the other methods as it has the ability to narrow in to find the optimal product in a short time period and is sensitive to the consumers' level of involvement with the product. Lastly, this model makes it possible to be able to predict the efficiency of the match between the product and celebrity even before the advertisement is launched (Zwilling, 2013).

The findings of this research were important to management teams because it helped and continues to help marketers save money from choosing a “mis-matched” celebrity resulting in an unsuccessful campaign (Zwillings, 2013). Also, the discoveries of this research established a guide for marketers to effectively identify celebrity attributes and find the most appropriate celebrity to endorse their product most effectively.

Female athletes in advertisements. Additional research was conducted to observe the portrayal of female professional athletes in magazine advertisements. Grau (2007) built on this concept when she produced a study that examined the frequency and nature of portrayals of female athletes when they appeared as product endorsers in magazine advertisements. This study included a content analysis of a variety of different advertisements (Grau, 2007). Advertisements from six types of consumer magazines were looked into, including those from sports publications, general magazines, general women’s magazines, and general men’s magazines. The study’s specific purpose was to look deeper into the advertisements in areas such as the number of males versus females, sports type, magazine type, product type, and dress type (Grau, 2007).

The results from Grau’s (2007) study indicated that females appear in just 12% of the advertisements featuring celebrity athlete endorsers. Findings also indicated that three-quarters of the female endorsers came from individual sports rather than team sports. Another key result was that female athletes, when shown in the advertisement, were shown provocatively or partially dressed 81% of the time. Grau’s (2007) research served as foundation for further research to be done as it touches on the trends of print advertisement, specifically in magazines. Also, this study opened doors to a various questions regarding consumers’ attitudes and reactions to advertisements as well as to why marketing managers choose certain endorsers over others (Grau, 2007).

As it is prevalent that the number of athletes used to endorse brands and organizations are increasing, there are still some factors about this technique that many know little about. For example, little is known about the fit between product, endorser, and consumer's influence on the consumer's perception of the endorser. Boyd (2004) conducted a study that examined the effects of endorser gender, consumer gender, and the type of product advertised on consumer perceptions of endorser trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. The study consisted of 309 participants viewing advertisements containing athlete endorsers for either mild or cross trainer shoes. The participants then answered a series of questions on their perceptions of the given endorser. After completing the written questionnaires, the subjects then viewed a print advertisement and wrote about their perceptions of the spokesperson including the athlete endorser's attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise.

Boyd's (2004) study indicated that regardless of product type, subjects rated endorsers of the same genders to them as more trustworthy. Also, women rated endorsers as more expert when there was a fit between the endorser and product, while men rated endorsers as more expert when there was not an endorser-product match. Furthermore, this research found that the athlete endorsements were the most effective when the target market is male, the athlete is male, and the product is sport related. Also, this finding suggested that, regardless of audience gender, male endorsers were likely to be more effective than female ones as they scored higher in the attractiveness/ credibility component (Boyd, 2004).

Business and marketing managers found Boyd's (2004) research useful as it provided useful insight on the importance of considering the gender of the target market and the endorser. Additionally, marketing managers likely saw the effectiveness of the ads improve when there was a match between the product and the endorser. Altogether, this study was useful in bringing

together the various topics of athlete endorsements, gender of athlete, gender of audience, fit for product, and attitude of advertisement into one adjoined study.

Conceptual Framework

The topic of how consumers view and interpret advertisements with female professional athletes was divided into three concepts. The first concept focused on consumer behavior and attitudes towards advertisements and brands. The second concept was women in advertising, more specifically, how women are portrayed in print advertising. The third, and final, concept was athletes in advertising from an endorser or promoter standpoint. Specifically, this concept focused on the product/athlete relationship and also how an athlete's image can directly relate to the success of the advertisement.

Consumer behavior is the study of decision making in which individuals or groups use in satisfying their needs (Bruce, 2012). This relates to purchasing habits which is the manner in which consumers purchase products or services in relation to frequency, timing, outlet, etc.(Bruce, 2012). In relation to women in advertising, objectification is a term used to describe the act of portraying a woman as more of an object rather than a person. Furthermore, the woman is sexualized when she is purposely displayed in a sexual manner or as an object of sexual being (Zimmerman, 2008; Lynn, 2004). In terms of athletes in advertisements, athletes can be used as endorsers, or celebrities who use their fame to help promote a product or service.

In looking closer at how consumers view or interpret advertisements with female professional athletes, there are a number of variables that can skew the results. A few potential moderating variables that I can control in this research include what magazine the images are taken from, what type of product are being advertised, what type of image the athlete currently has (pretty vs. athletic), and what genre of product (sport vs. non sport).

Consumer attitudes and behaviors towards advertisements and brands relates to women in advertising because of the way women are often portrayed in print advertisements as sexualized or objectified. The way women are portrayed can influence how the consumer feels about the advertisement and can impact their likelihood to purchase (Zimmerman, 2008). Consumer attitudes and behavior towards advertisements and brands relates to athletes in advertisements because consumers' existing attitudes towards a specific athlete may influence their purchase behavior (Chao-Sen, 2013). Also, if an athlete doesn't relate or match with the product they endorse, it may influence the purchasing behavior of the consumers (Zwilling, 2013). Lastly, women in advertising and athletes in advertising are related because of the trend of female athletes being portrayed in sexualized or degrading ways. In other words, female athletes are not always promoting products with their skills, but rather their looks or sex appeal (Fink, 2004).

Summary

The literature explained above provided a sufficient amount of support for my research topic concerning how consumers view and react to advertisements featuring female professional athletes. The articles above expressed different approaches and mechanisms used in advertisement that resonated with the consumers and influenced the consumers' purchasing habits. Furthermore, research was done that analyzes the different ways men and women are used in advertising. Women are often seen in a more submissive light whereas men are shown as powerful and active. Research continues to elaborate on the importance of properly matching an athlete with specific characteristics to a particular product when using an athlete endorser in advertising. The athlete-product relationship is important in gaining the trust and reliance of the consumers in the target market. Lastly, female athletes were often portrayed in print advertising in a manner that enhanced their beauty and appearance whereas male athletes were represented

in an athletic and authoritative manner. In all, these articles provided adequate background in forming the relationship between consumers' attitudes and behaviors in response to the ways in which female athletes were and continue to be depicted in print advertising.

Methods

In the past, research has been conducted on consumer behavior in relation to a company's advertising content. However, no studies have been done on the use of individual female athletes pictured in the advertisements, and the ways they are positioned and set up when featured in print advertising. This study was conducted to determine how consumers react to print advertisements containing female athletes in either a hyper-sexualized or athletic setting. The research question of this study was: How do consumers view and interpret advertisements containing female professional athletes? The aim of this study was to present a richer understanding of different messages female athletes communicate to the consumers when embodying a specific image pertaining to the company or product they are advertising for.

Design

The research design used in this study was a focus group interview design where participants were asked a series of questions regarding their thoughts on specific print advertisements (see Appendix D.) By using this design, members of the focus group were able to interact with one another, which led to a more in depth discussion and ultimately provided the interviewer with richer information on the questions asked (Gratton & Jones, 2010). The interviewer took on the role of a facilitator, and had the main duty to stimulate discussion amongst the focus group (Gratton & Jones, 2010).

For this experiment, the desired sample of participants was St. John Fisher College student-athletes and sport management majors. By pulling from this specific group of students, it

was known that they were all part of the advertisements' initial target market, as they all consumed sport in one way or another. In other words, the desired sample was composed of individuals who are sports fans, sport apparel consumers, and magazine readers. Furthermore, the desirable sample was of those individuals in whom the specific company initially targeted in the production and administration of their advertisement.

Procedure

For the experiment, there were three focus groups of four people in each of them. Specifically, one group was all women, one group was all men, and one group was both men and women. The groups were split by gender in order to gather a range of responses as well as address that fact that individuals may sway their opinions based on who is in the group with them. Furthermore, it was necessary for each individual member within the focus group to feel comfortable with one another, as well as with the interviewer, so they felt free to discuss their feelings without hesitation.

Sampling. The sample of this experiment was accessed through using email to reach out to St. John Fisher College student- athletes and sport management majors who encompassed the desired demographics and psychographics. St. John Fisher's student database was used to randomly select participants whose emails were specifically pooled together as they were student-athletes and/or sport management majors and were a part of the organization's intended target market, in that they were readers of a specific magazine, consumers of the sport apparel, or simply sport fans. It was worth noting that those who encompassed active lifestyles were significantly different than those who were uninterested in sports or exercise altogether.

Data collection. The data gathered in the experiment was primary and qualitative data. Qualitative data was used in order to gather rich answers with deep explanations for each

question. As soon as the participants for the focus group arrived, they signed a consent letter that gave permission to video record the experiment so it would be easy to refer back if needed.

Before conducting the primary qualitative test, the participants took a pre-test in which obtained specific demographics as well as answered questions that needed to be done individually so the answers wouldn't be altered from the group's discussion. The pre-test portion of the experiment contained fill in the blank questions that ultimately put the participants in different categories, based as each individuals' demographics and psychographics, which were set aside for possible future use.

The data was obtained in thirty to sixty-minute focus group sessions. The specific order in which each type of picture was presented to the focus group is important in order to refrain from encouraging bias responses from the participants. Because a focus group was used, open-ended questions about the given print advertisement presented were asked so that deeper insight on the participants' perceptions and feelings towards the advertisement were gathered more successfully. Due to the fact that a wide range of information from each of the participants within the focus group was gathered, it was most useful to filter through the responses and acquire common themes and dominant, reoccurring responses.

The questions asked to spark up conversation in each focus group were used to measure variables such as product appeal, athlete recognition, general impressions, focal point, positioning and body language, and how the advertisement resonates with the participant. For the pre-test, participants were shown an image and then given a short written handout that contained general questions such as "who is the athlete shown in the advertisement?" These questions gave the interviewees a chance to share their individual thoughts without them being altered by other members of the group. As for the focus group interview segment of the experiment, the

interviewer probed more open-ended and broad questions such as “tell me about the layout of this advertisement” and “explain your thoughts to me on how the athlete is positioned.” These questions allowed for conversations to arise within the focus group and ultimately made each individuals comfortable explaining themselves in detail.

Reflexivity statement. As a female who has spent the majority of my adolescence playing an array of sports, I have gradually become more and more aware of the particular stigma that is frequently associated with female athletes. Growing up, my peers would often identify my teammates and I as dainty and prissy or over athletic and unfeminine.

This idea is something that has stuck with me throughout the years, enabling me to notice these labels on more than just a personal level. As I’ve grown older, I’ve realized these stereotypes being conveyed in the media as well. For example, when female athletes are used in advertisements, I’ve noticed they are either sexualized to attract the general consumers, or they are specifically made to look dramatically athletic and muscular, with no grey area between the two.

As the interviewer in my focus groups, I feel that being a female may impact the answers the participants give me. For instance, participants may hesitate to say their true feelings and opinions in fear that they will offend me. On the other hand, if the participants know me on a personal level, they may say things that are particularly crude and inappropriate just to be funny or to try and get a rise out of me.

Analysis. The analysis used in this qualitative study was the process of coding. The goal of this data collection was to find the commonality in the different sets of responses and unravel the underlying meanings behind the participants’ thoughts and responses. There were a few stages that were crucial to assure the analysis was done properly and provided the most accurate

answers. A reflexivity statement was used to explain the interviewer's involvement, motivation, and potential bias to this research. As for the coding process itself, the categories found, emerged from the data received after the focus groups were conducted. The process also involved open and axial coding. Patterns and explanations were looked into deeper to identify any need to combine any of the given codes. A research diary was also used prior to data collection, during data collection, and during the analysis of the responses. Meanings of the codes were established by clustering common themes and then related back to the research question.

Findings

Sample

For the three focus groups, the sample included 11 students from St. John Fisher College. These individuals were devoted sport consumers as they were student-athletes, sport management majors, or both. The participants used were both males and females who ranged from ages 18 -22. The participants looked like the typical sport-consuming individuals at St. John Fisher College as, not only did they have similar demographics to one another, but they also shared similar responses to the questions asked during the study. The participants were split into three focus groups based on gender, one group was all females, another group was all males, and the last group was a mix between the two.

Coding

After analyzing the transcripts, notes, and demographic profiles, various codes emerged from the data. Initially, when analyzing the first round of data, the ten common themes found were: *body language; product/ athlete relationship; how relatable the advertisement is to the audience; physical appearance of athlete; popular athlete use with less-known brand; objectification of athlete; concept of "sex sells"; performance vs. nonperformance in*

advertisement; reputation of athlete used; interaction with product. Throughout the initial coding, it was clear that some of the codes overlapped one another and could have been defined in better ways, yet, they were kept the way they were first listed to stimulate careful reflection on the codes over time. The initial themes were categorized as the following:

Categories and Subcategories, Round 1

Physical Appearance of Athlete

Suggestive Body Language

Objectification of Athlete

Concept of “Sex Sells”

Reputation of Athlete Used

Popular Athlete Used With Less- Known Brand

Product/ Athlete Relationship

Interaction with Product

How Relatable the Advertisement is to Audience

Performance versus Nonperformance

A second round of data resulted in three categories with five subcategories. First, *Physical Appearance of Athlete* was changed to just *Appearance of Athlete* with the subcategories of *objectification of athlete*. This change was made in order to incorporate a greater spectrum of what participants first saw when they were exposed to the advertisement. The *Concept of “Sex Sells”* subcategory was eliminated, as it was redundant and may have caused the findings to be confusing. Another change made during the second round included changing the wording of *Product/ Athlete Relationship* to *Product/ Athlete Fit*. This change made it clear that the codes referred to how the participants felt the athlete used in the advertisement

related to the product being advertised, as this was found to have occasionally affected their thoughts on the advertisement itself. Also, moving the subcategory of *Performance vs. Nonperformance* to be under the *Product/Athlete Fit Category* made more sense as they related to each other more directly. Lastly, the wording of *How Relatable the Advertisement Is To The Audience* was switched to *How Audience Relates* to make it less wordy and flow better. Additionally, some categories were changed to subcategories when the meaning of the data was reassessed to be a component of another theme. Axial coding resulted in the following data organization:

Categories and Subcategories, Round 2

Appearance of Athlete

Objectification of Athlete

Body Language

Reputation of Athlete Used

Popular Athlete Used With Less-known Brand

Product/ Athlete Fit

Performance versus Nonperformance

How Audience Relates

A third and final round of coding provided three categories and five subcategories. The main changes made at this stage included minor changes to the language used to better encapsulate the meaning of the data. A change made was *Appearance of Athlete* being switched to *Athlete Appearance*, as that seemed to be straight to the point and left no room for misinterpretation. Also, *Reputation of Athlete Used* was changed to *Athlete Reputation*, as it was obvious that we are talking about the athlete used in the advertisement. The final themes were:

*Categories and Subcategories, Round 3**Athlete Appearance*

Objectification of Athlete

Body Language

Athlete Reputation

Popular Athlete used with Less-known Brand

Product/ Athlete Fit

Performance versus Nonperformance

How Audience Relates

The findings below represented the themes and additional areas of interest of the deductive data collected. The three main themes of the data were 1.) Athlete Appearance, 2.) Athlete Reputation, and 3.) Product Athlete Fit

Theme One: Athlete Appearance

When asked the first thing noticed on each advertisement presented, the participants from my focus groups virtually always commented on the physical appearance of the female athlete starring in the ad. Although the reasons and specific traits noticed varied from picture to picture, the participants from each focus group seemed to call out the same things when shown the same picture. This brings about the first subcategory under *Athlete Appearance*, which is *Objectification of Athlete*. At first, many participants were hesitant to recognize how much they were talking about how the female athlete looked, but as time progressed, they began to feel more comfortable in conversing over the actual athlete model versus the product being advertised. When looking at the KSwiss advertisement starring Anna Kournikova For example, college senior Chris said, “Well I’m a guy, so the first thing is that you don’t look at the shoes,

you look at her body and that's just how it is." His perceptions were merely identical to other participants when asked about the same picture as they all focused on the way the athlete is made to be more of a sex icon than an athlete. While looking at the same KSwiss ad, Ashley, a senior college student from a different focus group stated, "all these brands and what they're doing with female athletes or females in general... it's all sex appeal."

In addition to the participants agreeing that the KSwiss advertisement focused mainly on Kournikova's sex appeal, they did not all agree on the body language implications presented in other ads. For example, when they looked at the Nike advertisement of an unknown athlete bent over and exhausted, the all-male group was the only group to not see anything sexual about her positioning. For example, in the mixed focus group, Brittney stated, "I mean, I don't know if it's just because we are in college and are inappropriate, but anyone who looks at this will say, 'wow a girl bent over with her mouth open'... that's just the first thing that comes to mind." On the other hand, the all-male group focused more on the awkward positioning of the unknown athlete as something they couldn't do themselves. John stated, "Her position is kind of awkward. When I first looked at it, it didn't do much for me."

Theme Two: Athlete Reputation

A second theme that emerged from the data collected was the reputation of the athlete starring in the advertisement. A major component of this theme was a certain athlete's reputation and how the advertisement used that in their advertisement. For example, Chris stated, "I think Danica Patrick has a reputation because of Go Daddy anyways and she is a woman among men in her sport and she's automatically viewed as sexual because of her Go Daddy commercials." Ashley, a member from a different focus group, agreed with this as well as she questioned this concept by stating, "Why does it have to make it look like she's naked, you know? She's already

showing her dominant power in NASCAR.” This showed how the participants, who were consumers of the products being advertised, viewed the advertisement based on prior knowledge of the athlete’s reputation in the sport world.

Another reoccurring thought that was expressed continuously throughout the focus groups was the idea that big time athletes starred in advertisements of brands that were not the most popular in the market. This concept brought the subcategory of *Popular Athlete Used in Less-known Brand*. This was seen through the participants’ responses to the KSwiss and Nike ads, where KSwiss was considered a not well-known brand and would need a well-known athlete and Nike was viewed as a well-known ad, so did not necessarily need a well-known athlete. A senior collegiate football player stated, “KSwiss isn’t really on top, so I feel like they’re trying to get a big time female icon to kind of show that they can be just as good as anyone else.” Matt shared this same thought by saying, “I think a well-known athlete is needed because they are not a well-known brand,” when asked on his thoughts on changing the KSwiss ad to use an unknown athlete or keep it as it is. This same concept was seen when asked about whether or not the Nike ad should have been changed to a well-known athlete or kept the same. Rob answered, “I feel like Nike has the brand awareness where they can just put whoever on there.” This clearly showed the participants feelings on the relationship between the use of a popular athlete and a not so popular brand.

Theme Three: Athlete Fit

A third theme that emerged from the data was the thought on whether an athlete served as the right fit for the product being advertised. Many participants questioned why a certain athlete was used to promote a certain product if they did not relate to one another at all. For example, when shown the advertisement starring Hope Solo and the Seiko watch company, many

questioned their relation to one another. For example, a senior women's soccer player stated, "It seems like the ad is for women, but it is a manly watch... so I am confused by that, not going to lie." Another instance where a participant commented on the relationship between an athlete and product is when Alley said, "she's actually doing work. This actually connects, not the watch and a soccer player. She's running and it's Under Armour so I guess it's more of a fit."

Another component of this category was *How Audience Relates*. Many participants shared similar responses to the Under Armour advertisement, as it was motivational because it seemed the most relatable to the consumers. A senior track athlete stated, "Because I am a female that runs track, I find it inspirational. I like to see actual people on here who looked focused and into it instead of someone posing trying to look really cool." It is worth noting that although this was a common focal point with the Under Armour ad, not all participants felt the same connection and relation to it. For instance, the all-male group agreed that the unknown athlete in the ad was a typical person actually using the product being advertised, however they didn't find the ad appealing as it "didn't really stand out," as a junior sport management major stated.

Discussion

After conducting three focus groups and analyzing the responses given, there were many common responses and reactions given by the participants that ultimately formed an answer to the initial research question of, "How do consumers view and interpret advertisements containing female professional athletes?" The findings concluded that all the participants noticed and commented on the physical attributes and body language of the athlete in the advertisement first, before they identified the featured product. Participants within the three focus groups also shared common thoughts on the athlete-fit within each advertisement and whether they felt it was

obvious a certain athlete was solely used for their hyper sexualized appearance, or if the athlete motivated them to get active by using their product. Although there were some variations in the answers amongst the gender classification of each group, the way a particular athlete is positioned and in an advertisement generally attracted the attention of a consumer and persuades them to either relate to the advertisement on a personal level or simply be infatuated by it due to the hyper sexualized athlete being used.

This study also showed how consumers related and understood advertisements of well-known brands that used unknown athlete models and advertisements of not well-known brands and popular athletes. Many felt a connection when they saw an unknown individual starring in a well-known brand, like Nike, as it made them feel as if the advertisement targeted them directly to perform like the average athlete in the advertisement. Participants felt that big time brands already had the credibility, so there was no need to put in a top-notch athlete, but rather use someone who they related to. On the other hand, they felt it made more sense for less popular brands to use well-known athletes to get the brand name out there, which reassured the consumers that the brand is reliable. This showed how consumers interpreted the use of a specific athlete in an advertisements and how it helped or hurt the brand.

From this study, conclusions were drawn that both corresponded with previous literature as well as grew the body of knowledge pertaining to how consumers view female professional athletes in advertisements. The way women are portrayed in advertisements had the ability to influence how the consumers felt about the advertisements and brand itself, which may have impacted their likelihood to purchase (Zimmerman, 2008). This was seen the focus groups in both negative and positive ways. For instance, in the focus group with half females and half males, all the participants agreed that they related to the Under Armour advertisement with the

unidentified athlete who was running in a “real” and “untouched” environment, as they felt this runner could have been any of them. They continued by saying that this made them want to buy it as it was promoting actual physical activity. On the other hand, the focus group of all females felt unmotivated to purchase KSwiss after seeing their advertisement starring Anna Kournakova in a sexually suggestive position. The participants from all groups focused so much on the athlete’s body and physical features that it took them significantly longer to identify the product or brand being advertised. This finding confirmed Fink’s (2004) notion that there is an increasing trend in female athletes being portrayed in sexualized or degrading ways, rather than their athletic skills. The participants agreed that the KSwiss advertisement should have included the athlete actually performing something athletic as it would have made more sense and may have possibly given them more of a reason to purchase the product.

Zwilling (2013) established the concept that if an athlete did not relate or match with the product they endorsed, it had the ability to influence the purchasing behavior of the consumers. The findings of this study corresponded to this notion in that multiple participants made comments on the athlete not fitting the product, although it was unclear on whether or not it affected their likelihood to purchase the product itself. For example, participants questioned Danica Patrick’s watch advertisement because they felt it should have been a male athlete, as it was a male watch or it should have been changed to an athlete of a different sport that was more applicable to expensive watches.

According to existing knowledge, a consumer’s existing attitude towards a specific athlete may influence their purchasing behavior (Chao-Sen, 2013). This study agreed with this notion in that an athlete’s current reputation in the sport world contributed to how a consumer perceived the advertisement they starred in. However, in saying that, it was unclear on whether

the athlete's reputation affected the buying behavior of the consumer, as most participants said they felt indifferent about whether or not they would buy the product even though they had their own preexisting thoughts on the athlete.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations. Some limitations from this study include not getting enough responses to form more focus groups to have two groups of all males, two mixed groups, and two groups of all females. Having more focus groups of each would have broadened the basis in which the responses were interpreted. Lastly some individuals felt more uncomfortable than others while talking about sexual features and characteristics in front of other participants, as they did not want to offend anyone.

Delimitations. A delimitation that could have been altered to provide more distinctive results included selecting a target sample that would have led to a more diverse pool of participants. For this study, the sample used included St. John Fisher College student-athletes and sport management majors. Looking back, to broaden the results, the sample should have included students from other schools, both private and state, as well as other majors. Of course, if the sample included students of all majors, a larger screening process would have been needed in order to confirm that each individual was an avid sport consumer and the research was relevant to them. Broadening the sample to other schools may have provided different data, as it would have included individuals from different backgrounds and demographics than those at St. John Fisher College. Lastly, another limitation that could have been controlled would have been to create a more comfortable environment where the camera was not as obvious as some participants were hesitant and nervous when they noticed they were being recorded on camera or saw the interviewer taking notes.

Recommendations for future research

If this research was to be done over, more time should be given to gather additional participants from different colleges, demographics, and backgrounds in order to expand the findings. Also, perhaps advertisements can be compared to one another to clarify and expand on certain areas regarding athlete- product fit, relevancy of the advertisement and other common ideas that surfaced in this study. Also, preparing more follow-up questions before hand can help dig deeper into some of the common responses given in each focus group in order to further grow this body of knowledge.

Summary

In order to determine how consumers viewed and interpreted female professional athletes in advertisements, a compilation of previous literature was examined as well as primary data collected through a series of focus groups. There were no specific data or answers being looked for, but rather the data from each of the focus groups was analyzed in order to recognize the common themes that emerged. After the focus groups were examined, the answers that emerged were that when participants were first shown an advertisement, they looked at the athlete's appearance and body language first, rather than the product of the ad, whether the athlete was hyper sexualized or used for their athletic abilities, the athlete relationship with the product and whether it made sense or not, and how relatable an unpopular athlete is when paired with a popular brand, and vice versa.

The findings from this study confirmed the results of previous research in that consumers, more often than not, form opinions on the product being advertised and brand itself, based on the way a female athlete is portrayed. Although in this study it was left unclear as to whether or not these opinions related to the purchasing behavior, the product/athlete fit, athletes reputation and

objectification of the female athlete played a role in the overall view and analysis each participant had on each advertisement, just as previous literature had determined.

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Appendix A
Consent Letter

Project Title: The Objectification of Professional Female Athletes in Print Advertisements and the Consumer's Response

Researcher: Angela Wallin

Email: Alw07673@sjfc.edu

Advisor: Katharine A. Burakowski, PhD.

Email: Kburakowski@sjfc.edu

Phone: (585)385-7389

Purpose and Description: The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how sport consumers view and interpret advertisements that feature various professional female athletes. As a participant in this research, you will be a member of a focus group where you will be asked to converse about your thoughts and opinions on how each athlete is portrayed in the given advertisements. The focus group session will be 30- 60 minutes long and will be video recorded for future review.

The information you provide will help to further develop strategies on how to utilize professional athletes in advertisements. Risks associated with partaking in this survey include other participants being students from St. John Fisher College, which will make others aware of your personal thoughts and opinions that are expressed during the focus group. Also, students and faculty may notice your participation through observation and outside conversations. However, I will work to protect each participant's identity and publish his or her responses and opinions anonymously.

There is no incentive for participation other than the fact that your thoughts and opinions will help sport and advertisement organizations around the world as they gain information to reach their target market more effectively.

Participation in this experiment is completely voluntary. Each individual within the focus group holds the right to not participate as well as stop participating at anytime throughout the experiment. Your decision will be respected and will not result in a loss of benefits you were previously entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, by signing and turning in this form to the interviewer you will give permission for the use of your responses in this study. You may keep a copy of this consent letter for future reference. If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this research, please contact Katharine A. Burakowski, PhD, St. John Fisher College, at (585) 385-7389.

Participant Name (Print)

Date

Participant Signature

Researcher Signature

Date

Appendix B
Invitation to Participate

Subject line: SJFC Athletes and Sport Enthusiasts Needed

Because you are a devoted sport consumer, you have been personally selected to have the opportunity to participate in my senior thesis study on how consumers view and interpret professional female athletes in advertisements.

This study includes a focus group session in which you will be asked to comment and discuss various advertisements featuring professional athletes and sport products. Your thoughts will help researchers within the sport and marketing world more effective in using professional athletes to endorse or advertise their products.

Please respond to this email to indicate that you are interested in becoming a participant for this study. With questions or concerns, you can reach me at alw07673@sjfc.edu.

Thank you,
Angela Wallin

Appendix C
Follow Up Invitation to Participate

Subject line: SJFC Athletes and Sport Enthusiasts Needed

As an athlete or general sport consumer, you have received an email earlier in the week inviting you to participate in my senior thesis study on how consumers view and interpret professional female athletes in advertisements.

I have attached the original email and ask that you take a look at it, as your involvement in this study can affect the future of sport advertisements.

Thank you!
Angela Wallin

Appendix D
Question Guide

RQ: How do consumers view and interpret professional female athletes in advertisements?

- 1.) Pretest: name, gender, age, - Who is the athlete starring in this advertisement? -How often do you consumer sport? I.e.) play, watch, read about, buy any sport product, or exercise.
- 2.) What is the first thing you notice when looking at the ad? What ad is more appealing?
- 3.) Tell me about your thoughts on how the athlete is positioned. -Follow up: What is the athlete communicating to you?
- 4.) What is the message of the advertisement?
- 5.) What about this advertisement makes the product appeal to you? How does that ad affect your purchasing behavior?
- 6.) If given the choice, who would you change the athlete starring in the advertisement to? Follow up- why them?