“There’s No Crying in Baseball”: The Effect of Emotional Behavior and Gender on Athlete Brand Authenticity

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A quote from A League of Their Own asserts “There is no crying in baseball”. However, in every sport, there are moments when athletes lose control of emotions. While both male and female athletes show emotional outbursts during competition (Boren, 2019; MacArthur & Shields, 2015), fans’ reactions to those behaviors can vary based on their personal characteristics, attachment with the athlete, and different situations (Lee et al., 2020). For example, some fans sympathized with Williams when she cried regarding an injury, whereas others mocked Neymar’s “meltdown” after losing the Champions League final (Boren, 2019; Reid, 2020). In addition, athletes’ emotional outbursts may influence fans to view such conduct as an authentic behavior, i.e., athletes were acting true to their feelings. However, fan perceptions related to athlete emotions have received little scholarly attention.

As celebrity authenticity is shaped by how celebrities behave according to their true self, a display of emotions during sport competition could be perceived as a candid behavior—straightforward and not a craft of fake image (Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Moulard et al., 2015). If fans perceive emotional behaviors as a reflection of athletes’ true inner-self, it could invoke brand authenticity. Thus, we hypothesized that athletes’ emotional behavior will positively affect fans’ perceived brand authenticity (H1).

Empathic concern has been studied as an affective response to others’ emotions with a sense of welfare and need (Hoffman, 2000; Lee et al., 2020). Research indicates that empathic concern affects how individuals pay attention and process other’s emotions. As fans’ empathic concern will intervene their interest and involvement to athlete emotions, we hypothesized that empathic concern will mediate the effect of athletes’ emotional behavior on brand authenticity (H2).

Van der Graaff et al. (2014) further found women and men have different empathic concern levels. Scholars have assessed how fans view athletes’ crying differently (MacArthur & Shields, 2015; Wong et al., 2011). Crying may be prevalent in certain situational contexts but dominant masculinity stereotypes perceive men’s tears as feminine (MacArthur & Shields, 2015; Wong et al., 2011), while female’s tears may be more accepted (Cetster et al., 1982). Based on this body of literature, we hypothesized that the relations among athletes’ emotional behavior, empathic concern, and brand authenticity will be moderated by gender of athletes (H3) and fans (H4).

We designed a 2x2 factorial design using survey experiments and a mediated-moderation analysis to examine the hypotheses. Participants will be recruited from Mturk and randomly assigned to groups. We created two opposite-sex fictitious tennis athletes to avoid impact from pre-existing athlete associations and sport contexts. The four scenarios are based on news stories, which depicted pictures and texts describing emotional/non-emotional behaviors. After reading the scenarios, participants will report their empathic concern and athlete brand authenticity. Our research is expected to contribute to athlete brand authenticity literature by incorporating fans’ responses to emotional outbursts by athletes. Highlighting the effects of empathic concern and the role of gender, results should provide practical implications on athlete brand management and communication.