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The Effect of Diversity Initiatives by Brands on Consumer Perceptions: Extended Abstract

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BODY OF EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Over the course of the last few years, there has been an increase in the number of brands that are using their platforms to raise awareness for and support social justice causes/initiatives, such as gender equality in sports, Black Lives Matter, and #MeToo. Cause-related marketing (CRM), the broader terminology under which this practice falls under, has been the primary subject of prior research projects. Westberg (2004) suggests that consumers respond more favorably to CRM initiatives compared to sponsorship and sales promotion, and that there is some support that CRM initiatives help in increasing consumer attitudes of a brand. Other prior research suggests that organizations in the sports environment would benefit greatly in both consumer perception and purchase intention from CRM (Roy et al. 2003) and that there are differences in responses to CRM initiatives among different demographic segments (i.e. males and females; Nelson et al. 2017). Furthermore, other research suggests that a consumer's identification with a CRM campaign can increase purchase intention related to a brand and that a brand's fit with a specific cause has a significant relationship with purchase intention (e Silva et al. 2019). The prior literature presents the theme that consumer perceptions and purchase intention following a CRM campaign have a positive correlation, and that consumers will respond more favorably to those brand initiatives that they personally support.

The current research shows that CRM initiatives by popular brands can lead to increases in purchase intention, loyalty, and awareness for that particular brand, which can have the positive outcome of increased sales for the organization. Therefore, this lends to the notion, under the concept of corporate social responsibility, that brands should seek to increase initiatives of this kind not only for the benefit of society and customers, but also for the benefit of the brand as a whole. We conducted a study to test the effect of potential initiatives related to diversity issues on consumer attitudes, opinions, and potential behaviors related to a brand.

We conducted our study in order to understand potential differences between consumer purchase intent, attitudes, and opinions based both on one's gender (male vs. female) and how that brand is viewed by the respondents (feminine vs. masculine). For the purpose of this study, we hypothesize that there will be a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between males and females based on the relationship between condition (brand presented) and consumer behaviors, attitudes, or opinions. We also hypothesize that there will be a statistically significant relationship between respondents' views of a brand and attitudes, opinions, and behaviors related

to that brand following a gender equality sports initiative by the brand. The initial study was conducted using the online survey platform Qualtrics with MTurk participants.

For the purpose of this study, the brand presented is referred to as the condition. Following this opening question, participants were presented with a fictitious article detailing a gender equality in sports initiative related to the brand they were presented with (in this case, Axe Deodorant or Secret Deodorant). Upon review of this article, participants indicated their likelihood of visiting a store to purchase their assigned brand with three seven-point items (Unlikely - Likely, Definitely would not - Definitely would, Improbable - Probable; $\alpha = .99$). Participants were presented with a question related to their view of the brand on a seven-point scale (1 = very masculine, 7 = very feminine). Respondents were also presented with an attention check asking for a specific answer (click five) so as to remove those who may be blindly answering questions, and were also asked to provide demographic information at the end of the study, as the hypothesis is based upon the predicted differences between males and females. In total, 98 responses were received in order to be analyzed.

Analysis was performed using advanced statistical software (SAS) to determine if there were any statistically significant relationships between the condition presented and dependent variables among males and females. To begin, we analyzed our manipulation check of perceived brand gender. Participants assigned to the Secret Deodorant condition perceived the brand to be significantly more feminine ($M = 5.94$) than participants in the Axe Deodorant condition ($M = 2.33$; $t(96) = -14.15$; $p < .0001$). Upon review of the statistical relationships between the condition and the dependent variable, the difference between the probability of visiting a store to purchase either Axe Deodorant or Secret Deodorant following a gender equality sports initiative by the brand appears to be statistically significant. Within this relationship, it appears that respondents are more likely to visit a store to purchase Secret Deodorant upon reading this initiative compared to Axe Deodorant, with a mean score on a seven-point scale of 4.35, while the mean score for Axe Deodorant was 3.53. The p-value for this relationship is 0.0467, appearing to show a statistically significant difference between the intent related to the two brands.

While this is still an early study, it is important to account for possible factors that could influence or change this result. For example, while these results may hold true for a certain segment of the population, other segments may provide different results. Along with this, a larger sample size may provide even more insight into these relationships, leading to an even greater representation of the population while strengthening or deteriorating the strength of the difference. As we continue forward and seek to strengthen the validity of our study through more testing and analysis, these are just some of the factors that we should be exploring.

Throughout our initial study, we were able to gain evidence supporting our hypothesis that there will be a statistically significant relationship between respondents' views of a brand and attitudes, opinions, and behaviors related to that brand following a gender equality sports initiative by the brand. Consumers seem to view products differently based on the way they are marketed to the public, even if these products are in the same category or are nearly identical. This research contributes to the study of CRM, and provides implications for organizations

looking to engage in CRM campaigns and to further their business success. As we move forward with more studies of this kind, we hope to continue to provide further evidence supporting the findings of this initial study, and hope to incentivize organizations in the future to engage in CRM initiatives related to social justice and equality.

Keywords: *Cause-related marketing, diversity initiatives, consumer perceptions, gendered brands, brand fit, gender equality, purchase intention*

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Dolph Fink Nelson, IV: Dolph Nelson, IV is a current fourth-year undergraduate student at Mercer University with a concentration in Sports Marketing & Analytics, and a minor in Human Resource Management. He has a great passion for sports business, and is pursuing a career in sports sales following his graduation from Mercer University. Dolph has placed as a Top-32 sports sales candidate in the country at the National Collegiate Sports Sales Championship, and has also held an internship with the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame, helping to share the rich history of sports in the state of Georgia. Dolph enjoys conducting research on consumer behavior related to sports, as well as fan motivation.

Dr. Laura Boman: Laura Boman is an assistant professor of marketing at Mercer University. Laura earned her bachelor's degree from Auburn University, her M.B.A from Florida Gulf Coast University, and her Ph.D. from the University of Central Florida. Laura's research focuses primarily on how visual cues influence behaviors and evaluations. Specifically, she has studied how visual cues such as brand logos influence purchase intentions, and how a reduction of visual

cues influences food product evaluation. Laura's research has appeared in the Journal of Global Fashion Marketing, the Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, and in many national and global conferences.