

Gender comparison of the perception of brand image and purchasing preferences of users of a sports service

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Abstract:

This research aims to analyse the brand perceptions of users a sports service and to subsequently carry out a comparison of the results based on gender. We aim to determine what perceptions men and women have of the different variables related to the brand perception of a sports service, what their preferences are when choosing a brand and what aspects are the most important in that election. In addition, we aim to identify which aspects are perceived to be significantly different depending on gender and which of those aspects are those that significantly predict loyalty and future purchase intentions for both genders. Mean comparisons will be carried out using T tests for independent samples and linear regression analysis to obtain the predictive information of the aforementioned variables. This information will allow us to better understand the behaviour of consumers of sports services based on their gender, which can provide valuable information to managers to guide their marketing actions in one way or another, depending on whether the target audience for such actions includes the male or female users of your service.

Key words: Brand image, sport services, consumer behaviour, gender.

Introduction

Theoretical framework

Attitudes

Attitudes towards the brand are considered a filter that will make the consumer, in this case, a user of sports services, more predisposed to the information they perceive about the brand. For this reason, the term attitudes has been linked throughout the literature with the disposition of the user, being considered a dimension belonging to attitudes (Keller, 1993). The concept of attitudes is understood to consist of three components: cognitive, affective and conative. Cognitive refers to the user's knowledge of what the brand is. Affective elements are related to your emotions and feelings, while the conative aspect refers to your behaviour. Given that attitudes are a predisposition towards a response, for example, of information received from a brand, and that attitudes have a variable action or non-action threshold, the generation of attitudes should not remain on the cognitive and emotional levels but should be associated with behaviour triggered by appropriate activation of the user (Alexandris, Douka, Papadopoulos, & Kaltsatou, 2008).

These attitudes that users will generate, which may be positive or negative, will make them more favourable or unfavourable towards the brand (Ratneshwar & Shocker, 1991) and will obviously influence the purchase decisions they make about the brand. Attitudes play a very important role in these purchase decisions since users see different advertisements of certain brands, which make them generate an attitude towards that advertising and consequently give shape to their attitude towards those brands (Paul & Bhakar, 2018); thus, this aspect will decide to a large extent whether the user later decides to buy those brands and not others. Therefore, it is important to create and reinforce user attitudes so that the marketing actions carried out adequately transfer what is intended to be transmitted to the audience, generating symbolic associations of the product (Saavedra, Urdaneta, Pirela, & Colmenares, 2008).

Credibility

Credibility is a key element for a brand to succeed. Without it, it does not matter the actions or the investment made because if users do not believe what is being proposed to them, they will clearly not generate positive attitudes towards the brand, and consequently, they will not buy it. Despite this, brand credibility studies have been largely focused on the study of tangible goods rather than services (Bougoure, Russell-Bennett, Fazal-E-Hasan, & Mortimer, 2016). Based on the classic definitions of the concept, we see how Herbig and Milewicz (1995) establish that credibility is related to the commitments and promises that a company establishes; a company is credible when users can predict what the company will do in a given situation based on the actions it

has taken in the past. Obviously, credibility is based on a relationship of trust in the actions of a company since if we do not consider information to be credible, we will hardly have confidence in it, understanding trust as the feeling of security that a user has when interacting with it (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003).

Credibility will influence the considerations that users will make when purchasing a product (Erdem & Swait, 2004). These decisions will be based on a trichotomy made up of credibility, trust and perceived risk, three interrelated aspects that will largely define what a user will consider when buying one brand instead of another. This perceived risk clearly generates an inverse relationship with credibility (Erdem, Swait, & Louviere, 2002). Therefore, looking at the logical relationship, if we manage to convey the absence of risk, the brand will enhance the levels of confidence and credibility. Blackshaw (2008) argues that credibility has six dimensions: trust, authenticity, transparency, listening, responsiveness and assertiveness.

Congruence

The congruence or identification of the user with the brand has been considered an element that improves brand loyalty (Ghantous, 2016; He & Li, 2010) because users buy products that are similar to their own concept (Kwak & Kang, 2009). Keller (1993) proposes the measurement of the congruence between the different associations for a brand. Obviously, if there is congruence between the associations, positive attitudes will be generated, which will have an impact on a better perception of the brand image and, therefore, on an increase in purchasing intentions.

Klein (2001) argues that when a consumer chooses a brand, he or she does so in accordance with the congruence between the values of the brand and his or her own personality, which is why it is so important to be a brand that is congruent with the target audience that is intended to buy your products; if the image we project differs greatly from the image that consumers have of themselves, it will be very difficult for the consumers to feel identified and for the purchase decision to be made. This is even more important today, as we live in a market environment where the brand takes on a much greater role and sometimes the real product is left in the background; as Klein (2001) said, currently, a successful company must focus above all on creating a brand rather than on creating a product.

Perceived Quality

Perceived quality has proven to be an important element in different areas of study, including the sports field, where the way of understanding and living services has changed. Today, the enjoyment of a service is a process in which users have greater interaction with each other, distribute more opinions both physically and online and make more influential recommendations (Ko & Pastore, 2004). With regard to this online aspect, there are increasing opportunities for electronic commerce in all types of services, and this has consequently led to increasing contributions to the scientific literature on this subject, as is the case of the contribution of Alonso-Dos Santos, Calabuig, Montoro-Ríos, and Alguacil (2017), who analyse variables such as attitudes, E-quality and E-satisfaction of consumers of online sporting events. On the other hand, users now have a greater knowledge of the service, both of its functioning and of their rights as consumers, which means that in general terms, they tend to be more demanding with the quality of the service provided (Calabuig, Burillo, Crespo, Mundina, & Gallardo, 2010).

This requirement is also increased by the ability of today's consumers to be aware of multiple offers for the same service and by the ease of switching between one option and another. Although the analysis of the quality of services, in this case, sports, is always more complex than in the case of goods, since differential characteristics such as the intangibility or coincidence of production and consumption mean that we do not have as many objective elements to be able to assess this quality (Alguacil, Alonso-Dos Santos, Pastor-Barceló, & Colino, 2016), we must continue to work to understand the relationship between quality and the consumer, adapting to the different contexts that are generated for in-person and virtual contexts.

Brand Equity

The new technological advances that are taking place generate greater pressure on the quality of the service that is provided to consumers, such as the growing use of information technologies, which means that new data sources exist and that we have to pay more attention to the analysis of these data to reach the consumer more effectively (Gürhan-Canli, Hayran, & Sarial-Abi, 2016). This will lead us to better understand the needs of users and the improvements to be made in our strategy so that the work of brand equity and brand equity in general is more effective and efficient. The cognitive aspect of brand capital or brand equity, the perception of brand image, and whether that perception is positive or negative will make that brand more or less valuable. Aaker (1991) describes brand capital as a multidimensional concept and defines it as the set of assets and liabilities that are related to the brand (associations and behaviours) and that increase or decrease the value or capital generated by a product or service in the process of exchange between the company and consumers. One of the best-known theoretical models in this regard, which has served as a basis and provides depth in the study of this variable, has been the multidimensional model established by this same author a year later.

Aaker (1992) divides the concept between cognitive and behavioural aspects and identifies, in the case of cognitive aspects, brand awareness (notoriety), associations and perceived quality, while in the case of behavioural aspects, he speaks of loyalty. The expansion of the model has included the description of brand capital as a multidimensional concept of a cognitive nature (notoriety and perceptions), attitudinal nature (attitudes and preferences) and behavioural nature (purchasing intentions and effective purchasing behaviour).

This brand capital is also known in the business world as the added value that a brand provides to a product as perceived by the consumer.

Personality

Brand personality is a fundamental aspect in the process of creating a brand because we can provide the brand with certain characteristics that will give it a differential value with respect to other brands. When consumers think or talk about a brand, they can refer to it as if it were a person (Plummer, 1985). In this process, consumers use a symbolic expression of the brand and try to transfer human personality traits to be associated with the brand (Aaker, 1997). Among the definitions of the concept, one definition that stands out is the one proposed by Aaker (1997), who defines it as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand. It is understood that consumers will select products according to whether they want to be associated with certain aspects or not, using marks with which they feel related and which confirm their own self-image (Biel, 1992). In this sense, there are brands that have particularly symbolic implications (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998) that help consumers to express their self-identity in terms of three components: real identity, ideal identity and social identity (Sirgy, 1982).

According to Aaker (1997), the symbolic or self-expression use of brands is possible because consumers can easily attribute personality traits or human characteristics to the brands. Brand personality has prompted the study of its relationship with other variables, being part of the current research trend in this area aimed at verifying, for example, whether brand personality has an influence on the confidence and commitment that users have towards the brand (Tong, Su, & Xu, 2017).

It is also known that brand personality contributes to a better congruence between the user and the brand because when a consumer buys a product, he does it partly to express his own image, and he does it through the dimensions of that brand personality (Su & Reinolds, 2017). Bearing in mind that congruence influences the generation of higher levels of loyalty (Ghantous, 2016), brand personality should be considered one of the starting points in the study of brand loyalty.

Loyalty

The concept of loyalty is defined as the repetition of the purchase process by customers (Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998), and that relationship between the company and consumers maintained over time will be the one that certifies that a company is successful or not. The degree to which consumers will have brand loyalty will depend not only on the general disposition of those users towards the brand but also on brand evidence and rumours about it (Krystallis & Chrysochou, 2014). Today, that differentiation is, among other things, in the innovation in offering the product; this is one of the elements that are used to try to achieve loyalty (Pappu & Quester, 2016). The development of loyalty is a fundamental aspect for companies and has been an increasingly important issue in the marketing and services literature due to the benefits of retaining existing customers (Wu, 2011).

This loyalty, in addition to being beneficial in itself, will increase the brand's recommendation intentions and make customers less sensitive to price increases (Calabuig, Núñez, Prado, & Añó, 2014). Regarding the relationship between loyalty and other variables, we see a positive relationship among brand credibility, loyalty and word of mouth recommendations from users, which are also influenced by the role of satisfaction. This is explained by Sweeney and Swait (2008) in their article "The effects of brand credibility on customer loyalty", in which they analyse aspects of the service sector, such as banks, where long-term relationships with consumers should obviously take precedence. Kotler and Keller (2006) report that such brand loyalty will make users less price sensitive, so users will be willing to pay a higher price for the products or services they want. On the other hand, Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) identify this aspect of brand loyalty by users and indicate that this loyalty corresponds to the intention to pay higher prices for a brand compared to another brand that offers similar benefits.

Method

Sample

The study sample corresponds to 191 users of sports services in the city of Valencia (Spain). Of the total sample, 100 were women, and 91 were men, representing 52.36% and 47.64% of the study sample, respectively. With regard to the socio-demographic data of the respondents, the age and frequency of use of the facilities were first considered. In the case of women, the average age was 39.72 years (± 13.94), and their average frequency of use of the service was 3.19 days/week (± 1.38). In the case of men, the average age of the users surveyed was 30.87 years (± 11.09), and their average frequency of weekly use was 2.62 days/week (± 1.31).

Finally, with regard to the employment situation of those surveyed, in the case of women, 38 users were working full time, 15 were working part time, 36 were studying and/or unemployed, and 11 were retired or pensioners. In the case of men, 28 were working full time, 15 were working part time, 45 were studying and/or unemployed, and 3 were retired or receiving some form of pension.

Table 1. Sociodemographic data of the users

		N	%	X Age	DT	X Use	DT
Males	Full time	28	30.8	30.87	11.09	2.62	1.31
	Part time	15	16.5				
	Unemployed/Student	45	49.5				
	Retired	3	3.3				
Females	Full time	38	38	39.72	13.94	3.19	1.38
	Part time	15	15				
	Unemployed/Student	36	36				
	Retired	11	11				

Instrument

With regard to the instrument used to collect data to measure the brand perceptions of users of the sports service, a survey was created based on validated scales that had been used in the existing literature in each of the analysis sections. In the case of attitudes towards the brand, the information was drawn from Gwinner and Bennet (2008) and Besharat (2010), and for credibility, the statements of Sweeney and Swait (2008) were used. To collect information on the variable of brand equity or brand capital, the Besharat (2010) proposal was followed, while for the case of brand personality, the Schlesinger and Cervera (2008) scale was adapted for the context of sports services. Scales were subsequently adapted for the analysis of user loyalty (Lee & Leh, 2011; Tong & Hawley, 2009; Yoo & Donthu, 2001) and for the analysis of the consistency of these users with the brand (Grace & O’Cass, 2005). Finally, for the measurement of perceived quality, the proposals made by Yoo and Donthu (2001), Buil-Carrasco and Montaner-Gutierrez (2008) and Lee and Leh (2011) were used, while for the users' future purchase intentions, which is the last variable of the questionnaire, the scale used was extracted from Yoo and Donthu (2001).

Table 2. Sources consulted to create the questionnaire

Dimension	Authors
Attitudes	Besharat (2010); Gwinner & Bennet (2008)
Credibility	Sweeney & Swait (2008)
Brand equity	Besharat (2010)
Personality	Schlesinger & Cervera (2008)
Loyalty	Lee y Leh (2011); Tong & Hawley (2009); Yoo & Donthu (2001)
Congruence	Grace & O’Cass (2005)
Perceived quality	Buil & Montaner (2008); Lee & Leh (2011); Yoo & Donthu (2001)
Purchase intentions	Yoo & Donthu (2001)

Procedure

For the data collection procedure, the people in charge of the sports service were first contacted to explain the objective of the study and the need for its correct execution. After this meeting, consent was obtained to attend the facilities and pass the survey on to the users in person. To this end, the facilities granted by the management of the service were used to contact the monitors of the different activities offered so that they could recommend and even collaborate in the process to ensure that the greatest number of users could carry out the survey at the end of each activity.

Statistical analysis

To carry out the statistical analyses of this research, the statistical package SPSS version 23 was used. First, the frequencies and descriptive statistics were extracted both from the sociodemographic aspects of the users and from their opinions related to the different variables measured. Subsequently, mean comparisons were carried out using T tests to confirm the existence or absence of significant differences between the results of men and women, obtaining information on their behaviour as consumers. Finally, linear regression analyses were carried out to observe which variables significantly predict the future intentions of both men and women who were users.

Results

First, the descriptive analysis of the different variables that make up the questionnaire was carried out, considering the values offered according to gender. As seen in Table 1, in terms of attitudes towards the brand, men obtained an average of 3.05 (± 0.79), while women scored 3.31 (± 0.81). Regarding the credibility variable, women obtained higher values than men (3.23 ± 0.89 and 3.02 ± 0.08 , respectively). Later, in the congruence variable, we found the lowest average value of the set of variables for men, with a value of 2.90 (± 0.08), while women obtained a value of 3.15 (± 0.97). In terms of perceived quality, equity and brand personality, again, men

obtained lower values than women, with 3.11 (\pm .80), 2.98 (\pm .69) and 3.05 (\pm .64) for women and 3.20 (\pm .89), 3.16 (\pm .80) and 3.20 (\pm .72) for men, respectively. Finally, in the variables related to brand loyalty and future purchase intentions of service users, men obtained values of 2.92 (\pm .75) and 3.18 (\pm .78), the latter being the highest value of the set of variables for men. In the case of women, the results obtained were 3.11 (\pm .76) and 3.52 (\pm .97), respectively, with both values being the lowest and highest for the women in the set of variables analysed.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the dimensions

	Gender	N	Mean	SD
Attitudes	Males	91	3.05	.79
	Females	100	3.31	.81
Credibility	Males	91	3.02	.76
	Females	100	3.23	.89
Congruence	Males	91	2.90	.80
	Females	100	3.15	.97
Perceived quality	Males	91	3.11	.80
	Females	100	3.20	.89
Brand equity	Males	91	2.98	.69
	Females	100	3.16	.80
Personality	Males	91	3.05	.64
	Females	100	3.20	.72
Loyalty	Males	91	2.92	.75
	Females	100	3.11	.76
Purchase intentions	Males	91	3.18	.78
	Females	100	3.52	.97

Subsequently, a comparison of the different variables related to the perception of the service brand was carried out by comparing the averages of these variables using the gender of the service users as the grouping variable (see Table 2). Once the results have been extracted, we have been able to verify that men and women have significantly different opinions on 2 of the 8 variables analysed. Based on the data, we see that these differences of opinion are found in attitudes towards the brand ($p=.026$; $p<.05$) and in future purchase intentions ($p=.009$; $p<.01$), in both cases being the most positive opinion in women, as has been seen previously in the values of the descriptive statistics of each variable.

Table 4. Independent samples T-test based on gender

Variables	T	P Value
Attitudes	-2.24.03	
Credibility	-1.70.09	
Congruence	-1.94.05	
Perceived quality	-.71 .48	
Brand equity	-1.64.10	
Personality	-1.46.15	
Loyalty	-1.79.08	
Purchase intentions	-2.63.01	

An analysis was then made of the preferences of the users when choosing the brand they buy. As shown in Table 5, in the decision to choose between a white label and a recognized brand, both male and female users prefer to buy a recognized brand, although the large percentage that is indifferent in both cases stands out. Specifically, in the case of men, 18.7% prefer to buy a white label, 40.7% prefer the known brand, and 40.7% are indifferent. On the other hand, in the case of women, we see that 18% would choose a white label, 35% would choose a recognized brand, and 47% are indifferent.

Table 5. First brand choice

	N	%
Males	White label	1 18.
	Recognized brand	7 7
	Indifferent	3 40.
Females	White label	7 7
	Recognized brand	1 18
	Indifferent	8 35
		4 47

The next element that was analysed was the one that has to do with which is the most important aspect for users to consider when choosing whether to buy a white label or a recognized brand (see Table 6). In the case of men, we see that 8.8% prioritize brand confidence; 17.6%, the quality; 18.7%, the price; and 54.9%, the quality/price ratio. On the other hand, as far as women are concerned, 10% prioritize the trust in the brand; 13%, the quality; 8%, the price; and 69%, the quality/price ratio. At first glance, we observe that the most pronounced differences appear in the consideration of the price factor as the most important aspect for choosing to buy a white or recognized brand: women do not attach as much importance to the price factor as men.

Table 6. Most important aspects of the brand

		N	%
Males	Trust	8	8.8
	Quality	17	17.6
	Price	19	18.7
	Quality-price ratio	55	54.9
		0	0
Females	Trust	10	10
	Quality	13	13
	Price	8	8
	Quality-price ratio	69	69
		0	0

Prediction of future purchase intentions in women

The results obtained in the case of women (see Table 7) show that some of the variables proposed significantly explain their future purchase intentions ($F(61.07)=74$; $p<.001$). As we can see, the variable with the most weight in the explanation of future purchase intentions in the case of women is congruence ($\beta=.58$; $p<.001$), followed by quality ($\beta=.45$; $p<.001$) and brand personality ($\beta=.23$; $p<.05$). If we look at the predictive capacity of the model, we see that these variables are capable of explaining up to 79% of the analysis variable ($R^2=.80$; $R^2_{adj}=.79$).

Table 7. Prediction of future purchase intentions in women

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.71	.22		3.19	.002
Attitudes	.20	.11	.17	1.82	.071
Credibility	-.01	.13	-.01	-.04	.968
Congruence	.58	.09	.58	6.14	.000
Quality	.49	.11	.45	4.45	.000
Equity	-.08	.14	-.06	-.54	.588
Personality	-.31	.13	-.23	-2.36	.020

Prediction of future purchase intentions in men

For men, future purchase intentions are explained in a significant way ($F(18.35)=31.33$; $p<.001$). There are two variables that are significant in this explanation: the one that carries the most weight is perceived quality ($\beta=.38$; $p<.01$), followed by congruence ($\beta=.29$; $p<.001$). For its predictive capacity, the model is capable of predicting 57% of the variance of men's purchasing intentions ($R^2=.57$; $R^2_{adj}=.57$).

Table 8. Prediction of future purchase intentions in men

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.67	.28		2.40	.019
Attitudes	.14	.13	.14	1.07	.286
Credibility	-.19	.17	-.18	-1.08	.283
Congruence	.29	.12	.29	2.35	.021
Quality	.37	.12	.38	3.10	.003
Equity	.23	.17	.20	1.37	.174
Personality	-.01	.16	-.01	-.06	.954

Discussion

The results extracted in this research and the proposed relationships between the different variables coincide with studies carried out by other researchers, confirming that in the context analysed, these relationships develop in a similar way. Attitudes towards the brand have proven to be a good indicator of future intentions of users to purchase a good or service (Besharat, 2010; Gwinner and Bennett, 2008; Lee, Byon, Ammon and Park, 2016). This relationship has been analysed throughout the literature and not only is seen in traditional commercial exchange but also is an aspect of the growing digital environment. In this sense, Seo Green, Ko, Lee and Schenewark (2007) identify that when the attitudes generated towards a website are more positive, consumers have more intentions to use it. In the relationship between brand credibility and consumers' future intentions, credibility has proven to be a precedent for consumers' future intentions (Ghorban and Tahermejad, 2012; Jeng, 2016; Wang and Yang, 2010); prestige is also a factor, but credibility is the most important factor in this relationship (Baek, Kim and Yu, 2010). With regard to brand equity, its relationship with other variables has been studied in various areas, from sports services (Sheriff, 2017) to football teams (Biscaia et al., 2016). On the other hand, Nam, Ekinici and Wyatt (2011) carried out an investigation in which they aimed to analyse the mediating effect that the satisfaction between perceived brand equity and its future behaviour could have; this effect was verified, and undoubtedly, satisfaction is an element that precedes an increase in the intentions to buy or recommend the service. Finally, brand personality is the last variable introduced into the equation to explain future intentions. This element has proven to be influential in satisfaction (Ghantous, 2016), and this satisfaction has always been considered a good indicator of the future intentions of consumers. In the same vein, Wang and Yang (2008) find that the dimensions of sincerity, emotion, competence and sophistication influence purchasing intentions, so that personality significantly predicts future intentions, as occurred in our study in the case of women.

Conclusions

The study found that women generally value the dimensions analysed more positively than men, finding the highest values in the variable of purchase intentions for both men and women. In terms of gender comparisons, we can conclude that women show significantly different brand attitudes and purchasing intentions than men, with higher scores for women. In terms of brand preferences, men show high percentages of both the white label and the recognized brand option, while women are more indifferent in this regard, with the quality-price ratio being the main reason why both genders buy a particular brand. Finally, with regard to the prediction of future purchase intentions, we see that in the case of women, the significantly influential variables are brand congruence, quality and personality, with the greatest weight in the prediction being given to brand congruence. In the case of men, the variables that significantly influence purchasing intentions are also congruence and quality, while the variable that shows the greatest predictive weight is perceived quality. This is not the case with brand personality, which has not shown significant values.

Limitations and future lines of research

Among the limitations of the research that go hand in hand with those that could be future lines of research is the size of the sample. Although the sample size was sufficient for the research carried out, it would be advisable to carry out studies with a larger sample to see if these results can be verified in the same way, making them more generalized. On the other hand, this increased sample collection might allow the sample to be categorized according to the activity carried out in the sports service, to later carry out comparisons that would allow us to observe whether the users of the different activities offered in the facilities feel significantly different or not.

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