

Module 2. Sponsoring women's football. Brand associations and reach

Women's football is the fastest-growing sport in many countries. With viewership numbers on the rise, the projection for 2030 is that women's football will generate more than £1bn per year (Visibility uncovered, 2022). To unfold this potential, clubs and leagues rapidly respond to the transformations affecting the football industry. In the case of broadcasting rights, the fragmentation of traditional media (e.g., television and radio broadcasting) offers the opportunity to create innovative deals with subscription-based and free over-the-top (OTT) media channels. The clutter of traditional advertising also affects how sponsors and rights owners approach sponsorship and endorsement deals. Currently, under redevelopment and expansion, sports' sponsorship is going through a moment of affirmation as a communication tool that can provide a return on investment.

Because of the omnipresence of sports content and events, sponsorship deals are a valuable opportunity for sponsors to create new associations, showcase their products, and sustain strong and long-lasting customer relationships. For the most part, sponsorship opportunities remain largely under-explored in women's sports, despite the great potential to impact the revenue of clubs and leagues. In this module, we will look at the fundamentals of sponsorship, the opportunities and challenges of sponsoring women's football, and the strategic approaches to improve sports sponsorship's economic and social impact. We will start by explaining the relationship between rights owners and sponsors, and the factors that influence the effectiveness of sponsorship deals. We will then focus on the global trends in football sponsorship, and the prolific opportunities within women's football.

Sponsorships and endorsements can be classified according to the structure of the sponsored sports entities. In the case of football, governing bodies, leagues, events/championships, stadiums, or teams may be the rights holder. However, the entity's size does not necessarily directly impact the value of the sponsorship contracts. Sports sponsorships are great drivers of the sports industry; without them, many sporting events would not be economically viable. Through sports sponsorships, companies have the opportunity to advertise their brand at sporting events using the most different means. Sponsors can provide services, offer products, display the logo on merchandise and/or sports structures, and opt for any other type of activity previously agreed upon in the sponsorship contract.



Historically, sports sponsorship had more of a philanthropic than a commercial character. Due to the social significance of sport, individuals and companies supported sports teams and events, recognising their value to the local communities. The partnership remained anonymous and provided little direct return to sponsors. In 1970, sponsorship was already used as an opportunity for corporate advertising. In a more commercial context, sponsorship sought to achieve business objectives such as increased brand awareness and sales performance (Calderon-Martinez *et al.*, 2005). The relationship between rights owners and sponsors began to be specified in contracts that aimed to protect the interests of both parties – funding championships and maximising brand exposure during sports events.

For years, sponsors and rights holders barely explored the potential of sponsorship deals as a tool to communicate meaningfully and sophisticatedly with sports stakeholders. In the last four decades, sponsorship began to be used as a more elaborate tool. It combines marketing and corporate communication objectives, carefully integrated with the company's goals. Today, sponsors can seek out favourable brand associations and awareness, drive sales, embrace new roles, gain media visibility to extend their reach and develop corporate image awareness. This evolution was fundamental in bringing new perspectives to the sports sponsorship industry.

New advertising formats were created with the support of technological developments. The expansion of media channels and sports programming filling airtime dramatically increased the coverage of sports events on television. Because of the increased availability of live matches on television, advertising campaigns (from commercials during game breaks to campaigns during competitions and endorsement from athletes) could reach larger audiences. Similar to what happens with broadcast deals, greater visibility also increases the value of advertisement fees. Cost and consumer suspicion toward advertising forced marketing professionals to continue to explore alternative, accessible, and cheaper communication options (Davies and Quattrocchi, 2002).

Several activities fall under the umbrella of sports sponsorship. It consists of business activities that aim to generate a return for the sponsor that exceeds the investment made through rights fees and activation. Most sponsorships can be defined as a deliberate use of various communication activities such as advertising, direct marketing tools, sales promotions, and public relations. What makes sponsorship unique and potentially advantageous is the relationship that is created between rights owners and sponsors – the connections, the alignment, and the power of the narratives that can be conveyed. This type of relationship aims to communicate with various stakeholders effectively, and sports sponsorships offer a unique set of advantages.

Cooper (2003) explains that, by 1990, rights holders and sponsors had no clear idea of how sports sponsorship contracts could be priced. It was a cheaper alternative to advertisements, but there was little understanding of the associated expenses of sponsorship activities or their benefits. Although the fees were less costly, sponsors were



unable to predict how sponsorship activation would require a much higher investment (Davies and Quattrocchi, 2002).

Sports sponsorships expanded at a much greater rate than advertising. It continued to be explored in unique ways – incorporating traditional broadcasting and match day, and the internet and mobile communications. More and more companies turned to sports sponsorship to blend into the special connection between fans, sports, and athletes. This change is supported by evidence that points out that sports fans tend to look kindly upon associations with sponsors (Masterman, 2007).

The sports sponsorship industry has grown globally despite economic recessions and other disruptions, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Some reasons justify the appeal for sports sponsorship. Sponsors aiming to create a favourable brand association or image transfer can have a superior return on investment than other promotional tactics, such as advertising, sales promotion, or public relations. Sponsorships allow brands to transfer image in two ways: 1) right partnership fit and 2) effective activation. Gatorade, the PepsiCo-owned sports drink that has held the position of a market leader in its category for more than 30 years, provides a critical example of a successful partnership. The success of the brand was built on sponsorships that transferred sports property images ('endurance', 'sweat', 'hydration') to the brand. In the context of sponsorship activation, Gatorade was also able to create various innovative and interactive experiences for the audience. Both Gatorade Sports Science Institute and Gatorade Sweat Test offer opportunities to transfer the images of 'sweat', 'dehydration', and 'endurance' to the brand, picturing the sports drink as the ultimate solution for athletes and sports enthusiasts that want to perform and recover better.

As a rule, sponsorship deals have to be two-dimensional and have to mutually benefit the rights holder (sponsored) and the sponsor (the provider can be an individual, a company or an institution). However, other than money, there are several other resources that a sponsor can provide to a sponsee: equipment, clothing, utilities, services, human resources, and/or a combination of these. Sponsorship agreements can also take the form of a trade-out or a sponsorship-in-kind. In these cases, the sponsor will have a proportion of rights that matches the total value of the resources and/or services provided to the rights holder. To make an event viable, sponsored parties might want to explore sponsorship-in-kind agreements, ensuring that critical aspects of the operation such as transportation, accommodation, medical, and security services will be run by reputable providers. Arrangement of this type might also include the provision of media activity via the recruitment of media sponsors/partners. Instead, clubs and leagues might opt to have more flexibility and autonomy to cover their high expenses with player wages, technical and administrative staff, and matchday operations. In this case, the sponsee will rely on sponsorship funds that are acquired through the sponsorship agreement.

Sports properties (also known as property owners), sponsee and rights holders are entities such as the FIFA Women's World Cup, Women's Super League, Olympic



Lyonnais Lyon, Camp Nou Stadium, and UEFA Women's EURO. The sponsorship fees these entities can require from sponsors are based on their respective market value. Traditionally, sports properties created predefined packages that could be offered to sponsors. However, with an eye on the return on investment, sponsors became increasingly interested in contrasting sponsorship deals against their communication objectives. This change creates new dynamics in the sports sponsorship sector, demanding sponsees select which rights can be offered to any sponsor and carefully consider what potential sponsors might expect.

An audit of sponsorship assets and an inventory compilation is required, so rights holders can tailor compelling packages for sponsors. Sports properties want to ensure that their rights are maximised, and that they can focus on several assets to increase the number of sponsors that can fit into the sponsorship strategy (quantity). A more specific plan has to be developed once property owners explore the specific needs of any particular sponsor to guarantee alignment between the two parties (quality). Without that, sponsorship deals might suffer from a lack of direction and function.

With these principles in mind, sports properties need to estimate the value of their rights through a sponsorship asset audit. A sponsorship asset audit consists of an internal evaluation that the rights owner conducts. All possible assets are examined and compiled to create an 'inventory' of possible sponsorship rights. Sponsees also consider how sponsorships rights can be combined to provide sponsors with tailored marketing solutions. The inventory is not a finalised sponsorship programme or a set of sponsorship packages to sell. Not every asset in an inventory list will be offered as rights, and sponsees need to be aware of the temptation of over-commodification. The inventory provides a flexible set of assets that **may be used** to create sponsorship solutions based on the potential sponsor's requirements that have been identified. In the table below, the main sponsorship assets are listed and can be used to guide the process.

Table 1. Sponsorship asset audit

Physical	Zoning of rights according to physical and geographical assets such as sites, indoor or outdoor, levels, locations, venues, and so on.
Territory	Categorisation of rights according to local, regional/provincial, national, and international competitions as well as by round-of-competition.
Time	Division of rights based on timeframes such as session, day or again by round-of-competition.
Programme	Categorisation of rights based on pre-event, mid-event and post-event, entertainment, and other parts of the programming.
Communications	Integration of sponsors' messages into sponsee's advertising, public relations and promotional activity via print, broadcast, and Internet points of contact.



Status	Acknowledgement of exclusivity and/or status as a presenter, namer or official supplier, etc.
Supply	Identification of supplier or service costs that can be reduced or replaced by getting a sponsorship-in-kind agreement. Suppliers can also sponsor and supply at no or reduced costs services and goods such as transport, equipment, accommodation, food product, etc.
Function	Identification of existing assets or creation of new ones that are tailored for sponsors whereby any sponsor can provide a function for or to the rights holder to showcase their products and/or services.

Source: own source based on Masterman (2004).

Sponsees will always seek to maximise their revenue and reduce the total cost of operations by identifying and recruiting fee-paying and/or resource-supplying sponsors. An important point here is that rights owners would have to have all their potential sponsors lined up before deciding on a programme structure.

Reflections for rights holders

1. Will one sponsor, or several sponsors, provide a successful sponsorship programme?
2. Will a tiered hierarchy of sponsors or a flat structure ensure that a rights owner maximises its opportunities?

On the other hand, sponsors will seek the best sponsorship deal that fits into their communication objectives and will pay for itself, generating revenue in the short and/or long term (return on investment). For sponsors, it is fundamental that the sponsorship agreement aligns with the overall marketing and corporate plan and the specific objectives devised to reach the customers you need. Determining the scope and reach of a property (i.e., the value it can provide) is one of the first considerations for sponsors seeking to identify sponsorships to invest in. It includes considering aspects that can impact the total cost of activation and the effectiveness of several sponsorship activities they can explore with a property. Sponsors can focus on direct objectives (e.g. short-term impact on consumer behaviour and the increase in sales) or indirect objectives (e.g. long-term impact on brand awareness that leads to increased sales in the future).

Reflection for sponsors

1. Select a previous sponsorship and identify the objectives for each sponsor. Critically, analyse the extent to which each of these objectives is met.
2. Select a sponsorship that you consider has provided a return on investment for the sponsor. Critically, examine how and why this was the case.



3. Select a sponsorship that you consider has not provided a return on investment for the sponsor. Critically, examine how and why this was the case and recommend ways in which this might have been rectified.

Some sports sponsors focus on direct objectives to create a competitive advantage. For example, when Budweiser became the official beer sponsor of the 2014 FIFA World Cup, the company secured the exclusive right to sell beer on-site. With this move, Budweiser could shut down competitors such as Brahma and Skol, which had dominated the Brazilian market for decades. Credit card companies have also explored the benefits of exclusive deals on direct sales. For the 2006 FIFA World Cup, all the ticket purchases made by credit card transactions were made by Mastercard holds as the company acquired an exclusivity deal for the event.

Indirect objectives include promoting increased awareness, enhanced image and awareness of that image, developing critical relationships, and growing sales for sponsors. This encompassing approach is more likely to secure a return on investment. Previously, sponsors placed too much emphasis on peripheral aspects, such as the visibility and awareness of logos. Although there are cases in which a sponsor's objective is awareness creation, a sponsor rarely invests in sponsorship just for exposure. While logos can be used to communicate messages and form associations in target markets, they should be used as part of an integrated brand-building strategy. More importantly, the sponsor should focus on showcasing a given product and its attributes in a targeted way so that brand associations can be consolidated with particular market segments. Mere signage is not sponsorship, and they do not provide a reliable indication of knowledge about the company or the product/services behind it.

Table 2. Aspects relating to the fit between the rights owner and the sponsor

Aspects	Information required
Rights owner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Does the rights owner have the competencies and resources to conduct the operation? ● Does its brand equity constitute a competitive advantage?
Sponsor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Does the project manager have the competencies and resources to conduct the operation? ● Does the project managing organisation's brand equity constitute a competitive advantage?
Relationship between the rights owner and the sponsor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Is the relationship between the rights owner, the project manager owner, and the project manager a source of conflict? [If necessary] ● What are the risks?

Source: own source.



The relationship between rights owner and sponsor needs to be symbiotic, converging corporate and marketing communication goals. To ensure that sponsorship is cost-effective, congruent and impactful, sponsees and sponsors must carefully explore the opportunities to create differentiation and contribute to the development of brand position. In the following section, we will focus on brand management and the creation of intentional sponsorship interventions.

Brand association

Brand association refers to the many attributes that come to consumers' minds when thinking of a particular brand. It is the mental connection we all make between images, experiences, qualities or defects of a specific brand. For many years, the associations of Gatorade with the 'science of hydration', 'endurance', and 'sweat' were appropriate to Gatorade's primary target demographic: athletic males in the 25-34 age category. However, in 2006, the company faced a severe decline in growth that required a new approach. Consumers can associate implicit and explicit meanings with a specific brand, which is subject to change. Brand marketers always try to develop new strategies to strengthen positive brand associations, reverse negative associations, or respond to changes in a given business context. Gatorade was losing its relevance among competitive and teen athletes. There was also a new demand for energy and recovery drinks that could be taken before, during and after intense exercise. The company redrafted a communication strategy to promote the sports drink as a 'lifestyle beverage', and developed two lines of products – one for endurance athletes (G Series Pro) and exercise enthusiasts [G Series Fit] (How Gatorade Fuelled Its Business Growth, 2018).

Figure 1. Gatorade's brand positioning with the G Series



Source: [online image of Gatorade's brand positioning with the G Series], (n. d.), <https://bit.ly/3xyjJNO>.

Figure 2. Gatorade's brand positioning with the G Series



Source: Gatorade Launches Campaign, 2011, <https://bit.ly/3QRAlH5>.

Brand associations are developed through contact with different references. The use of a product or service and access to information about it made available through advertising, labels or a review are examples of references. In addition, brand associations are also formed through a brand's connection with other organisations, services or products. Two mechanisms need to be considered. Firstly, the higher the brand association, the higher the chances that customers will remember the brand. However, associations can be negative; in this case, they will not translate into brand loyalty. Secondly, the set of information and ideas that are associated with a brand will have an impact on brand image.

In a five-part series of shorts called 'Gatorade Win from Within', the company continued to reframe its image as a sports fuelling company. The series featured athletes that had to mentally and physically push themselves to overcome obstacles to excel on sport-related goals. The campaign featured the story of two female athletes, gymnast Annie Hilton (Gatorade, 2014a) and basketball player Erica Wilson (Gatorade, 2014b) and focused heavily on the narratives around hard work and determination.

The brand relied on the power of inspirational stories of female athletes with physical disabilities to highlight the idea of 'resilience', 'joy of effort', and 'overcoming obstacles'. With this move, Gatorade was able to continue to position itself as a lifestyle drink, by including new references for the brand that could be more relatable and remarkable than the traditional portrayal of professional male athletes. This decision was only possible because the company invested in market research to better access data and insights from a broader range of groups – particularly women and younger customers (How Gatorade Fuelled Its Business Growth, 2018).

When it comes to brand association, numerous opportunities can be explored to favour the dissemination of positive references and, ultimately, improve the value of a brand (brand equity). At this point, you might be asking: how can we measure the value of a brand? Brand equity differs from the value of a company's physical assets, and its measurement requires several abstract evaluation criteria. Brand equity assets include



brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and so on. As we already explained, having an easily recognisable identity is not enough. After all, many brands are negatively recognised (negative brand association) due to their perceived quality, and it will not result in brand loyalty.

How customers perceive the brand will make the biggest difference in profits and the company's valuation as a whole. In other words, the stronger the company's image, the greater its market value. To continue growing, sponsors need to focus on brand management strategies, targeting existing and new consumers. By doing so, organisations can protect the brand's reputation while expanding and creating new opportunities. Brands that have never invested in women's football before can do so as an opportunity to strengthen and amplify their references for brand association. Women's sports are seen as more progressive and conducive to ideas and connections to equality, diversity, and inclusion issues (Global Interest in Women's Sports, 2018; World Football Report, 2018).

Even though 84 % of sports fans are interested in women's sports, only 0.4 % of sponsorship dollars go to women's teams and athletes (Global Interest in Women's Sports, 2018; World Football Report, 2018; Women in Sport, 2015). A sponsor that promptly invests in women's football can benefit from early adoption by creating a competitive advantage by acquiring exclusive rights. A sponsor can take advantage of being in a less saturated context that facilitates renewing and adjusting subsequent contracts with the sponsee. More importantly, brands can benefit from an evolving partnership with teams and professional leagues in full expansion to create new revenue streams.

Investments made by companies have multiplied during the past years, and this trend needs to be closely followed by rights holders and the potential sponsors of women's football. The ongoing growth in spectatorship number, records on game day attendance, and the unprecedented interest in the game are all contributing to more robust deals. However, despite the unquestionable potential, sponsorship of women's football remains in its infancy. The current contribution of sponsorship deals to club revenue is still very unequal, with significant differences between countries, sports and associated events.

Table 3. Contribution of sponsorship deals to total revenue

Country	Percentage of club revenue
Japan	77
Germany	59
Denmark	56
Argentina	49
Sweden	49
Colombia	46
Netherlands	43
France	42



China	42
Norway	34
Switzerland	31
Iceland	30
Costa Rica	29
Spain	27
England	24
Australia	21
Hungary	15
Brazil	14
New Zealand	3

Source: FIFA Benchmarking Report, 2021, <https://fifa.fans/3UhhhFg>.

Aware of these opportunities, some brands have already started to invest in sponsorship deals with national teams. Before launching the #ThreeLionesses campaign in 2019, Lucozade Sport (2019) had been a long-standing sponsor of the English men's football team. The company partnered with Powerleague and goals to offer 1,500 hours of free football nationwide when the demand for women's football on TV was rising – bringing the competition to a broader audience. The company made an impact by providing equal support to the women's team while also addressing the issue of unequal coverage of the women's game. In addition, the company rewrote the lyrics to England's football anthem, Three Lions, in honour of the women's team. With women and girls constantly overlooked by sports sponsors, Lucozade stood out with a campaign that celebrated the players and allowed them to talk openly about their struggles for recognition.

NRK (2015), Norway's government-owned radio and television public broadcasting company, launched a provoking 'mockumentary' in 2015. The short focused on sexist stereotypes around women's football. It featured the midfielder Emilie Have, goalkeeper Ingrid, and the long-time defender Trine Ronning – all great stars of the national team. The players responded satirically to an interviewer and played around with negative comments about women's athletic ability, the quality of women's football and players' sexuality. They even ironised FIFA's former president Sepp Blatter, who once suggested that women's football would be more interesting if players wore tighter shorts (Christenson and Kelso, 2004). This production was celebrated for the intention to tackle outdated sporting ideals and persisting prejudice against female players.

In both examples, using different approaches, NRK (2015) and Lucozade Sport (2019) intended to raise the profile of women's national teams in England and Norway. The campaigns gained traction with the melding of traditional and social media. By doing so, these brands could amplify their platform of influence with the advantage of gaining more accurate insights into total viewership, engagement, and overall impact of their campaigns.



Negative association

Dealing with the issue of negative association is one of the most complex tasks for a brand manager. It occurs when a chosen sponsorship vehicle is inadequate in terms of image and characteristics. The extent to which certain sponsorship vehicles become a poor fit is highly contextual and depends on the nature of the fit and the expectations for the sponsorship agreement. In the context of sports merchandising, the 'pink it and shrink it' strategy is extensively criticised. It is characterised by the attempt to rebrand and market existing (male) products to women by simply making them smaller and pink. This practice tends to create products that cost much more than their 'male' equivalent, even though they do not include any functional feature or superior quality.

In a market with minimal options for female consumers, there is a real need to develop comfortable sports kits and make more product sizes and styles available to fans and athletes. However, this is not what a 'pink it and shrink it' strategy offers, which is why it is not enough. Some customers might welcome the new aesthetics of such products, but most customers consider this strategy disingenuous and exploitive. Evidence from the National Football League indicates that, shortly after the league abandoned this strategy, there was a significant increase in female customers purchasing merchandise (Mertes, 2022).

Big retailers such as Nike and Adidas are investing in research and development to address the expectations of female athletes and sport enthusiasts. Moreover, from football boots to sports bras, the improvements in design and functionality are making sports kits more comfortable and available to all. These much-needed improvements are a response to the understanding that women are not small men. Differences in hydration, thermoregulation, and particular nutritional and biomechanical needs in women justify the demand for tailored products.

For the 2019 Women's World Cup, Nike produced bespoke kits that included different lengths of shorts, V-neck tops and curved hems following extensive consultation with women. When the kits were presented, the improvements were widely publicised and appraised. Just over a year after the successful campaign, Nike was again in the headlines after the company developed a new kit made of 100 % recycled polyester for the Matildas, the beloved Australian team. However, the partnership with Australia's Football Association disappointed many fans, who were surprised by the announcement that the replica of the away team would not be available in female sizes until 2022.



Figure 3. Nike away kits for Brazil



Source: [online image of Nike away kits for Brazil], (n. d.), <https://bit.ly/3LmQ1Bh>.

Figure 4. Nike away kits for Australia



Source: [online image of Nike away kit for Australia], (n. d.), <https://bit.ly/3Lm7ERL>.

Despite the extensive investment in new kits that attended to female fans' demands, the new release's repercussions caused negative reactions. Nike failed to satisfy the target market, and the associations were perhaps not as effective as planned. The Matildas had just won the dispute with the Football Federation to guarantee the same pay scale as the men's team, and there was a lot of excitement around New Zealand and Australia winning the rights to host the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup. That could have been an excellent context to push direct sales and celebrate women's football. In 2018, the company also

failed to produce female sizes of the very expected Māori-inspired New Zealand football kits (Strang, 2018).

Sportswashing

Sportswashing is a term created by human rights organisations. It is used in situations in which sport is used to clean up the reputation of a group, a person or even a country. In football, some recent cases have caused negative global repercussions, especially among fans and activists. The purchase of the English team Newcastle by the Saudi sovereign Public Investment Fund (PIF) generated controversy. Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi Crown Prince and Deputy Prime Minister, is a controversial figure. Faced with accusations of persecution of political opponents, censorship of journalists, and attacks against freedom of expression and executions, Saudi's investment in the football market is interpreted as a strategy to improve the country's image in the world. Other sports cases are also well-known examples of sportswashing. Arab investments in Manchester City and Qataris in Paris Saint-Germain fall within the same spectrum of concerns for activists.

Saudi Arabia is not the only country accused of sportswashing. Other countries also sought to attract mega sporting events to show another side of the country. Qatar has invested heavily in acquiring rights to host sports events, including the 2022 FIFA World Cup and FIFA Club World Cup. The government has been criticised for failing to address wide-ranging human rights concerns, including the abuses against migrant workers involved in building the infrastructure for these events. Pressed over the business relationship with Qatar since 2017, Bayern Munich's first Annual General Meeting was the scene of a controversy involving fans and executives (see more here: Af24 News Stories, 2022). The team's fans demanded the partnership with the airline Qatar Airways was not renewed. The previous year, at the match against Freiburg, Bayern fans protested at the Allianz Arena with a banner that read 'We wash everything for money'. The company's chief executive that runs the professional structure (FC Bayern München AG), Oliver Kahn, and the club president, Herbert Hainer, were represented on the banner. Both were washing bloody clothes next to a washing machine with the inscription 'FCB AG'. In his left hand, Kahn was holding a suitcase full of money with the words: 'you can trust us.'

Figure 5. Poster in the Bayern fan block 'for money we wash everything in'



Source: [online image of poster in the Bayern fan block], (n. d.), <https://bit.ly/3QXfFNY>.

This is not the first time a World Cup host country has been accused of sportwashing. Russia, the host of the Russia 2018 World Cup and the 2014 Winter Olympics, has been heavily criticised for its treatment of the LGBTQIA+ population and corruption scandals.

While the allegation that an event sponsor or host is engaged in reputation laundering does not always result in the event or contract being cancelled, it imposes a significant risk for both parties. Sports sponsorship is expensive and does not guarantee that one will successfully cover up vices, crimes, or scandals. Consumers and fans are attentive to information about the sponsors' reputation and ready to condemn any exploitation attempt. Ultimately, rights holders are accused of greed and corruption by associating with governments and companies with a legitimacy crisis. Inevitably, they will be pressured to undo their sponsorship agreements and must work hard to regain trust and respect.

Demographics

Generations can be defined as a group of individuals born in a given period and collectively influenced by its historical, social, and cultural contexts. Each generation has unique characteristics that are directly linked to their behaviour, preferences, and values. To better understand each generation, it is essential to know their individualities and their impact on engagement and interest in sport.

Table 4. Generational groups

Baby boomers	Following World War II, from 1946 to 1964, baby boomers received this name because of the 18 years with elevated birth rates. Boomers were the first generation to grow up natively with television and rock' n' roll, and their childhoods coincided with significant post-war economic growth. Many boomers came of age during the politically tumultuous 1960s and 70s, experiencing civic mobilisation, the rise of feminism, and the Vietnam War.
Generation X	Gen Xers were born between 1965 and 1980 and were the first natives of personal computers, video games and cable TV. They are also the first generation to grow up with both parents working. Gen X experienced key 20th-century moments of world peace and reconciliation, including the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the crumbling of the Berlin Wall and the end of South African apartheid. But, economically, Gen X became the first generation less well off than the preceding one.
Millennials	Born between 1981 and 1996, millennial childhoods occurred during the economically successful 1990s, but the generation came off waves of economic recession. Millennials were the first to grow up with the internet. In the United States, they were the first to feel the effects of Title IX legislation — millennial girls embraced sports participation from the earliest ages like never before.
Generation Z	Gen Zers were born between 1997 and 2009. Gen Zers are complete digital natives; most cannot remember life without smartphones, social media, fantasy sports, mobile purchasing or streaming. They are more comfortable communicating digitally than in person.
Generation Alpha	Born in 2010 or later, this is the first generation entirely born in the 21 st century. The oldest alphas turned ten years old in 2020, so there is not much information about them yet. But they are the first generation whose parents widely used mobile device screens as pacifiers, and their long-term effects are unknown. Expect alphas to continue accelerating many of the diversity, education and technology trends that started with millennials and Gen Z.



Source: own source based on Sports Business Journal (2020).

Millennials (25-40), Generation Z (11-24) and Generation Alpha (10 and under) seem to be far less interested in traditional sports than the previous generations (Manefee, 2022). Esports, NBA, fantasy sports, sports gambling and sports-based video games are the exceptions to this trend. Generally speaking, these younger generations are less likely to consume sports on television, often seeking alternative sports content on streaming platforms and social media. Known for the greater familiarity with technology and the digital universe, Gen Z and Alpha have a shorter attention span and are avid consumers of game highlights (Chasing the next generation of fans, 2020). How Gen Z and Alpha consume sports will most likely reshape the sports, entertainment, and international broadcasting industry.

Figure 6. Fans playing eFootball



Source: [online image of fans playing eFootball], (n. d.), <https://bit.ly/3dqcJfe>.

Changes in football fans' prospect of engagement disrupt two critical revenue sources of football clubs: sponsorship and ticketing. Streaming services delivering programming have changed the game for traditional cable TV transmissions, and the industry has been reacting to it in promising ways. Mass marketing, TV commercials and home game billboards are still widely used strategies. Still, clubs and leagues can create a tremendous advantage by focusing on the data trail fans are leaving behind in streaming services. There is an opportunity to shift the focus to content creation, reaching fans where they are with a personalised, compelling and attractive approach that impact the sales of tickets and merchandise [sponsee] (Ourand, 2017a) and/or the overreaching strategy of a sponsor. Teams can not only target fans who are already interested in their content (younger generations), but also use social media engagement as a tool to continue to capture the loyalty of other fans and grow their fan bases (Ourand, 2017b).

Regarding game-day attendance, football teams are increasingly disputing fans' attention with the convenience of broadcasting and streaming services and other widely available entertainment offerings. Busy schedules affect young and older fans, so even those who have traditionally purchased tickets to live events will continue to expect more flexibility. Fans know they have more options and will continue to access alternatives to game-day attendance. The home's comfort, affordability and convenience are tempting, so many teams are already transforming the concept of season tickets to attract a wider variety of fans. Flexibility and customisation are vital for the younger generations, and football organisations need to attend to these new demands.

Instead of selling packages for the whole season, some teams are experimenting with pre-purchased passes that allow fans to attend a predetermined number of matches for a fixed price [see examples from [Portsmouth FC \(2021\)](#) and [Carlisle United FC \(n. d.\)](#)]. Other teams might opt for a banking system that allows fans to debit their advanced deposits as they buy tickets spontaneously through the season. Manchester City created the Ticket Exchange, through which season ticket holders can let the club re-sell the seats of the matches that they will not be able to attend. With greater flexibility and discounted prices, clubs can continue advertising the game-day experience and attracting fans to the stadium. With a renewed interest in game-day attendance, clubs and leagues can continue to invest heavily in innovation, interactivity and stadium enhancement, which opens up the opportunity for more exclusive, tailored ticket offerings.

Clubs and leagues should continue to invest in stadium experience, including cafés, restaurants, bars, virtual games arenas, childcare and/or kids entertainment areas, museums and other amenities that can be used as a social hub. Camp Nou, the biggest stadium in Europe, is an excellent example of ticketing creativity. The stadium offers visitors a whole range of experiences [see more [here: FC Barcelona \(n. d.\)](#)] and plans to continue investing in a strategic partnership to improve fans' experience. Continuous investment in this front will allow clubs to reinvent the stadium, and it will not only be a place to watch a football game, but also a space where people meet others, try exclusive products, and spend time with the whole family.

It will be critical for clubs to consider the impact of social changes on the stadium experience. With fans perceiving women's football as more inclusive and family-oriented, clubs can continue to innovate and respond to the demands of a new generation of fans. Clubs can reframe the stadium experience as one is as safe and enjoyable for mothers, young kids, same-sex parents, and people with disability as for everyone else.

The engagement of female fans and minorities in football cannot be underestimated. Some authors have argued that women are motivated to watch sports by family and social concerns (Bahk, 2000; Janet Fink *et al.*, 2002). However, it is fundamental that clubs recognise that, historically, there have been several barriers to diverse spectatorship in football (Lawrence and Davis, 2019; Magrath, 2021; Mintert and Pfister, 2014). Any attempt

to revert the negative effect of discrimination in spectatorship will have to consider the perspectives of the target group – their concerns, expectations and revindications.

Opportunities within sponsorship

Brand activism – or woke-washing – happens when a brand, company or institution adopts a public discourse that signals the defence of a social cause, typically marginalised. At the same time, in practice, it continues to cause harm to vulnerable communities. It is almost impossible to approach brand activism without mentioning Gen Z's and millennials' digital power. Hashtags supporting movements that fight for the emancipation of women, anti-racism, the LGBTQIA+ cause, and the environment flood platforms like Twitter and Instagram every day. It is led by the commitment of new generations to values and principles associated with building a fairer world, less unequal, more tolerant, and socially responsible.

The interest in activism and social change has drawn the attention of brands, which need to devise strategies compatible with consumer profiles. Gen Z and millennials are more selective in the products they consume. In this scenario, the ideal advertisement must convince the potential user that the brand is ethical, sustainable, and committed to social justice – just like the consumer. After all, the consumer's conscience is at stake – and attacking them in their principles can represent a detachment with no return. In addition, a company that maintains misleading, discriminatory and/or socially irresponsible public practices, and positions often becomes a target of rejection in digital environments. The public's rejection of brands includes boycott threats, thousands of negative comments in reviews, and loss of mass followers on social media.

Pregnant footballers? A response to Nike's omission

Recently, FIFA (Women's Football, 2020) introduced a new regulation stating that clubs are 'under an obligation to reintegrate' players and coaches after pregnancy, and that they need to provide 'adequate ongoing medical support' for both groups. The normative guarantees that the athletes and coaches will be supported before, during, and after pregnancy. Athletes are entitled to a minimum of 14 weeks' maternity cover, including the support to breastfeed and/or express milk at work.

Some argue that after-pregnancy support should include permission for athletes to bring their children to training sessions and tournaments, and support to cover childcare expenses. In fact, since 1996, the United States national team has been guaranteeing such support to their stars.



Figure 7. Jessica McDonald celebrates with her son Jeremiah after winning the 2019 World Cup



Source: [online image of Jessica McDonald and her son], (n. d.), <https://bbc.in/3RTFfoA>.

Jessica McDonald of the USA celebrates with her son following her team's victory in the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup France Final match, July 7, 2019, in Lyon, France.

The new regulation did not come from anything. Alysia Montaño, an American middle-distance runner sponsored by Nike, published an opinion piece in the *New York Times* that exposed the lack of support once she found out she was pregnant (Montaño, 2019). Most sponsorship deals with athletes have included non-disclosure agreements that kept athletes from addressing pregnancy-related issues. Without any option, many athletes end giving up on their careers or their plans to get pregnant. The story mobilised many other athletes to speak up against the lack of support from Nike and other sponsors.

Nike, the kit sponsor of the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup, reduced and terminated sponsored athletes' sponsorship payments because they could not hit performance-based targets during pregnancy. People wanted to know why the company and other sponsors had failed women's athletes. Nuun (Rutherford, 2019), Altra (Altra Running, 2019), Brooks and Burton (How We're Supporting Women, 2019) responded to the pressure, announcing a wave of changes in their policies to implement contractual guarantees to athletes. Sports sponsorships are reciprocal in terms of reputation. As such, FIFA (FIFA steps up protection of female players, 2020) needed to establish an approach to support pregnant athletes and coaches, mitigating the tensions and potential reputation damage created by one of its key sponsors: Nike.

Clubs that engage in brand activism can start with developing a charter statement that the organisation can stand behind and publicise. This initiative can encourage sponsors and donors to make decisions based on league and team policy rather than specific player actions.

Historically, most corporations have avoided positioning on controversial issues. In the case of sports organisations, this is even more significant, as the idea that sports and politics do not mix continues to be in vogue. Despite that, as a marketing strategy, companies are choosing to step away from a position of neutrality to engage in socio-political activism (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020).

As a new approach, it should be carefully considered. Sponsors need to include many stakeholders' perspectives and consult with diversity and inclusion specialists. Inappropriate tone, culturally insensitive language, and misrepresentation will cause adverse reactions, and customers will perceive the efforts as inauthentic, disingenuous, and unethical (Hoppner and Vadakkepatt, 2019).

With more brands using brand activism to attract customers, perceived authenticity becomes critically important. For instance, if a club or a sports sponsor wants to position in favour of gender equality, it is of paramount importance that their internal policies and practices reflect the messages that are being used in advertising efforts. Without that, the organisation will be perceived as only virtue signalling, without any real commitment to social transformation and the emancipation of women. More and more brands may attempt to work with women's football teams to create a positive narrative associated with female empowerment and equality.

Any brand getting involved in women's football should be capable of understanding its role in co-creating change. It includes supporting athletes, coaches, and the next generation of players. Nike, a brand driven by culture, has recently made attempts to advocate for the future of women's football. With the [Nike Rebel Girl](#) (Dear Rebels, n. d.) project, the company compiled twenty-five digital stories inspired by the achievements and critical moments in the lives of female stars. These stories are an apparent effort to celebrate and promote the feats of female athletes and the relevance of women's football.

So far, we have argued that sponsorship has excellent value in an integrated marketing communications approach. Sponsorship can be used as a unique strategy. For example, sponsorship can take place locally, allowing a global brand to navigate linguistic and cultural differences. In this way, communication and marketing strategies can be quite effective, as they can directly affect buyers' decision-making process. For this, the sponsorship must always be integrated with other actions of the company to avoid dissonances.

The controversy involving Nike and the pregnant athletes represents the effects of a disarticulation between the corporate goals and the communicative strategy. This is due to the fragmentation and dissolution of marketing activities in the organisation's daily life when, in fact, should be an integration between the brand, marketing, and corporate performance. Competitors were ready to respond to this failure and quickly responded to market demands by creating exclusive policies that function as differentiation strategies.



In cases in which the company needs to mitigate some reputational damage, it may be interesting to choose to create product differentiation. It is possible to continue working with the brand's repositioning through an innovative discourse. An example of this is the creation of the Nike Rebel Girl, with a focus on children and teenagers – which quite possibly were unaware of the criticism involving pregnant athletes. Indeed, the attempt to regain the trust of the adult female audience with a similar project would raise more suspicion than praise.

Sponsors are constantly working with objectives linked to the cycle of a product (introduction, maturation, growth or decline). For this, there must be an alignment that favours the chosen strategy, be it an attempt to penetrate, expand markets, create new markets or introduce new products.

All sports entities have these two primary goals: 1) revenue generation and 2) favourable reviews. Sports entities, even amateur and recreational, need to create popularity to continue their operations. Even those non-profit leagues and clubs need funding to play, as do local school sports entities. Revenue generation is essential for any sporting entity because of the cost of operation.

Sports merchandise can be an essential source of revenue for the sports industry. Teams can take the unique opportunities provided by sports merchandise to generate revenue. Consumer behaviour when purchasing sports goods is a little different. Loyalty to a sports team is often a way of expressing one's identity. Personalised products are often a welcome gift (from national team shirts to sports memorabilia). Sports merchandise also has the advantage of being readily available. Today, it is possible to offer products online, at sporting events, and in specialised stores. Brand recognition that can be gained from strategic partnerships is valuable and has long been considered a reliable return on investment for sponsors and sponsees. However, sponsorships and endorsements are the most significant revenue category in the sport.

Finally, reputation attracts attention from both sponsors and fans. A good valuation is built from the relationship with stakeholders and is essential in determining how much a team is worth (Shea, 2018). The better the reputation, the better the valuation of sponsorship rights. Therefore, the opportunity with women's football should not be underestimated as the teams receive better public perception evaluation, have immense growth potential, and favour brand activism activities based on an agenda of transformation (Strauss and Hensley-Clancy, 2021).



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