

# Reluctance of organisations to sponsor professional female sport in South Africa

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## Keywords

Female sport;  
Sponsorship;  
Women;  
Interviews.

## Abstract

This study investigates the reluctance of organisations to sponsor professional female sport in South Africa, with a specific focus on the four most popular female sport disciplines: rugby, cricket, soccer, and netball, as well as an individual female sport, golf. The primary objective is to discern the factors contributing to organisations' reluctance to sponsor professional female sport in South Africa. The research employs a qualitative method, non-probability with purposive sampling - to explore the intricate factors underlying the reluctance within the South African female sport industry. Semi-structured interviews with experts in professional female sport in South Africa serve as the primary data source. Despite the global growth in female sport sponsorships, this research reveals a persistent reluctance among organisations to sponsor professional female sport in South Africa. Key findings point to issues such as insufficient media coverage, a perceived lack of return on investment and concerns regarding professionalism in female sport. The study culminates in comprehensive recommendations to enhance the understanding of why organisations are hesitant to sponsor female sport, thereby providing actionable and realistic strategies to secure more sponsorships for female professional sport. It emphasises a triple focus on professionalisation, distinctive branding, and increased visibility. These recommendations extend beyond mere strategies for securing sponsorships; they embody a collective effort to reshape societal attitudes towards female athletes.

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# 1. Introduction

Sport, a field filled with passion, competition, and moments of glory, is a dynamic arena that transcends boundaries and brings nations together. However, when one delves deeper into the world of sport, the role of money cannot be ignored (Luiz& Fadal, 2011). As per Ntalakos *et al.* (2022), the global sport sponsorship market has ballooned to an estimated 45 billion US Dollars, showcasing the immense financial stakes. Yet, within this colossal sum, the sponsorship allocation for female sport remains disproportionately minute, with Lee *et al.* (2020:57) projecting the annual sponsorship for females in 2019 to be estimated at less than 1 billion US Dollars.

The underrepresentation of female sport in sponsorship investments is not a recent phenomenon. Kim and Kim (2017:70) found that female sport sponsorship accounted for a mere 0.4% of total sport sponsorship, between 2011 and 2013. This discrepancy has persisted over time, and the question arises: Why does female sport sponsorship lag so far behind? Intriguingly, the landscape is not entirely bleak. Nielsen's (2018:30) data reveals a glimmer of hope, indicating a yearly increase of over 140% in unbundled sponsorship in female sport, far outpacing the below 30% growth observed in 2020. This surge in interest is not confined to one corner of the globe, as more than 80% of South African fans express a keen interest in both female and male sport (Nielsen, 2018:30). During this shifting landscape, there is evidence of corporate companies starting to redirect their sponsorship efforts from men's sport to female sport, exemplified by the move made by Momentum in 2020. This transition marks a turning point, a glimmer of promise that female sport in SA is gaining the recognition and investment they deserve.

## 1.1. Background

The landscape of sport in SA reveals a significant gender imbalance, with females constituting 52% of the population but accounting for just 10% of active participants in sport (Nielsen Sport, 2019:5). This disparity is a pressing issue, and it reflects the need for urgent action to promote and elevate the profile of female sport. Even though there has been increased media coverage and growing awareness, female sport in SA still faces substantial inequalities, particularly concerning endorsements and sponsorships compared to their male counterparts, as pointed out by Repucom in 2016. This persistent discrepancy emphasises the necessity for ongoing efforts to rectify this imbalance (Repucom, 2016). Responding to this challenge, various stakeholders increasingly recognise their responsibility to address gender inequality in sport. Media outlets, corporate entities, and sport enthusiasts are now acknowledging their role in championing females in sport. Sponsors are beginning to address gender inequality in allocating sport sponsorships, as highlighted by Afami in 2021 (Afami, 2021). Sponsorship is pivotal in sport organisations' revenue stream in SA, along with broadcasting rights and government funding, as highlighted by Gardner and Naidoo in 2019. The authors underline the potentially devastating consequences of sponsorship losses in men's Rugby Union (hereafter referred

to as rugby) and cricket. However, they also acknowledge the significant hurdles females in sport face in attracting sponsorships. This challenge significantly hampers the development of female sport in the country (Gardner& Naidoo, 2019:153, 162).

Furthermore, the post-COVID-19 era has ushered in a reality of budget cuts in marketing, which is likely to impact sport sponsorships in SA, especially for female sport. With limited sponsorships available currently, the future budget for female sport is poised to remain constrained. Female sport has often been perceived as less profit-driven, less prone to corruption, and more family-friendly than their male counterparts, as indicated by Burton and LaVoi in 2016 (Burton& LaVoi, 2016:168). In line with this perspective, a report published in 2023 recognised the untapped potential in the sponsorship market for female sport. The report emphasised that it offers many opportunities for brands looking to make a meaningful impact (Lavielle, 2023). Considering these challenges and opportunities, pursuing gender equality in sport sponsorship in SA remains a complex and evolving narrative, yet one with the potential for significant positive change in the South African sporting landscape. Addressing these disparities in sport sponsorship can not only promote gender equality but also enhance the growth and development of female sport in the country.

## **1.2. Problem Statement**

The underrepresentation of female in sport, particularly in sponsorship and funding opportunities, presents a significant obstacle to their progress in reaching professional ranks. Nauright and Hargreaves (1997:199) argue that sport development and sponsorship in SA tend to favour male sport, perpetuating gender disparities in the sporting landscape. The scarcity of female involvement in sport has the potential to adversely affect sponsorship decisions made by organisations (Shaw& Amis, 2001:304). Notably, media exposure plays a crucial role in influencing sponsorship decisions, as highlighted by Meenaghan (1983:55). However, there has been a noticeable shift with the increasing popularity of female sport within SA and globally, suggesting a changing landscape for female sponsorship opportunities. Sponsorship in female sport has shown significant growth in recent years, with a remarkable year-on-year increase of over 140% in unbundled sponsorship reported in 2018 by Nielsen (Nielsen, 2018:7). Nonetheless, this growth rate saw a significant slowdown to less than 30% in 2020, despite more than 80% of South African fans expressing interest in both men's and female sport (Nielsen, 2018:4).

Female rugby has emerged as one of the fastest-growing team sport globally, with more than 2.5 million females participating worldwide (World Rugby, 2021). Sponsorship programs in sport have been recognised as effective means of building communication channels with consumers (Kim, 2010:4). In SA, the funding for sport heavily relies on sponsorship, with sponsorships serving as the lifeblood of sport (Roy& Cornwell, 2003:443). Research on South African female sport sponsorship

is notably scarce. *Therefore, it is imperative to empirically determine the reasons behind organisations' reluctance to sponsor professional female sport in SA.*

### **1.3. Research objectives**

The primary objective relates to the identification of reasoning behind the factors why organisations are reluctant to sponsor professional female sport in SA.

#### **Secondary objectives:**

**Objective 1:** Identification of sponsorship factor differentiators between male and female sport in South Africa.

**Objective 2:** Determine variables contributing towards attracting sponsorships for professional female sport in South Africa.

## **2. Literature Review**

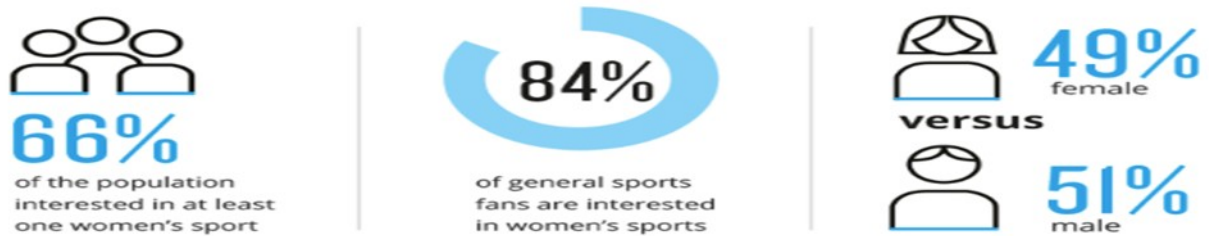
The subsequent content presents a general outline of the global landscape of female professional sport sponsorships, followed by a more focused exploration of the African and South African contexts. Sponsorship, with its historical roots dating back to ancient Greece (Kissoudi, 2005:618), plays a significant role in marketing (Beech, 2007). Its primary objectives are to generate awareness and acceptance of an organisation, its brand, and its products or services (Kim, 2010:1). Sponsorship can be defined as an agreement between two parties where the sponsor provides financial or alternative support to establish a partnership between the sport image rights and the organisation's brand for mutual benefit (International Chamber of Commerce, 2003:2).

However, female participation in professional sport remains disproportionately low compared to their representation in the population. For instance, in Scotland, females account for only 5% (rugby), 8% (cricket), and 15% (football) (Martin, 2018:32). Furthermore, the international value of sport sponsorship exceeds 44 billion US Dollars annually. Still, female sport receives only a small fraction of this funding (Lee *et al.*, 2020:57). Predictions indicate that female sport sponsorship is unlikely to reach one billion US Dollars annually by 2019 (Lee *et al.*, 2020:57). In Australia, only 8% of sponsorship is allocated to female sport, with just 7% of broadcast coverage (McDougall, 2018:486). The underinvestment in and limited media coverage of female sport is evident from historical trends, where female sport sponsorship accounted for a mere 0.4% of total sport sponsorship between 2011 and 2013 (Kim & Kim, 2017:70).

The significance of sponsorship in female sport was highlighted by former Netball SA's CEO in 1998, who linked SA's loss in international competitions to the lack of sponsorship and the resulting lack of international exposure (Haw, 1998:25). Nonetheless, it's worth noting that the rate of change in female sport is considered one of the most exciting trends in the sport industry (Durkin & Siegal, 2019:1). Recent data also underscores the growing interest in female sport. Nielsen reports a yearly

increase of over 140% in unbundled sponsorship in female sport, compared to below 30% in 2020, and more than 80% of South African fans express interest in both female and men sport (Nielsen, 2018:30).

## INTEREST IN WOMEN'S SPORTS



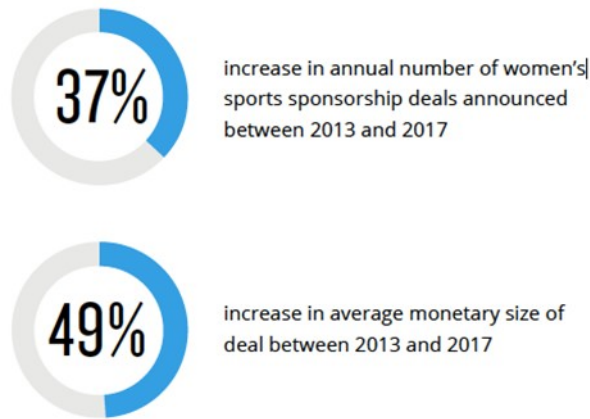
**Figure 1.2: Interest in female sport Worldwide (Source: Nielsen Sport, 2018:29, 30)**

Female rugby is particularly noteworthy, as it is among the fastest-growing team sport worldwide, with more than two and a half million females and girls participating (World Rugby, 2021). In the UK, over half a million new females take up rugby annually, with projections suggesting that 40% of rugby players will be female by 2026 (Pinchbeck, 2020:308).

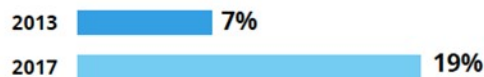
Figures 1.2 and 1.3 illustrate the growing interest in female sport and the increasing sponsorship support (Nielsen Sport, 2018:29, 30). According to Nielsen Sport (2018:28), a significant percentage of the population (66%) demonstrates interest in at least one female sport. This statistic reflects a noteworthy engagement with female sport across a diverse demographic. Furthermore, among general sport enthusiasts, an even higher percentage, precisely 84%, express interest in at least one female sport. This finding underscores the broad appeal and resonance of female sport within the larger sport fan community. The high percentage among general sport fans suggests a pervasive and growing interest in female athletics, highlighting the increasing recognition and appreciation for female sport in the broader context of sport fandom.

In alignment with the significant interest in female sport, there has been a 37% increase in female sport sponsorships between 2013 and 2017. This upward trend signifies a growing recognition and investment in female sport by sponsors during this period. Moreover, the monetary value of these sponsorships has seen an even more substantial surge, experiencing a remarkable 48% increase over the same timeframe. This significant boost in financial backing underscores a heightened commitment from sponsors to support and promote female sport, reflecting positively on female athletics' economic and commercial landscape. Despite the increased interest among the audience, these statistics indicate that there has been a parallel and substantial growth in corporate support for female sport, showcasing a positive trajectory for the industry (Nielsen Sport, 2018:30).

## WOMEN'S SPORTS SPONSORSHIP GROWTH



Of women's sports sponsorship, the number of deals completed by clubs, federations, and teams has increased



**Figure 1.3: Female sport sponsorships Growth (Nielsen Sport, 2018:30)**

What are the reasons behind organisations entering into sponsorship agreements with female sport in SA? Notably, Mastercard has announced a new sponsorship agreement with the South African Broadcast Corporation to broadcast female grassroots rugby content, demonstrating the company's commitment to gender equality in sport (Mastercard, 2021). Increased television coverage of female sport and sponsorship opportunities have led to more brands reaching previously untapped female sport consumers (Infront, 2023). Telkom, a South African telecommunications company, has supported female sport by sponsoring the Telkom Netball League. This sponsorship is expected to contribute to the growth and development of netball in the country, especially considering SA hosted the 2023 Netball World Cup, which drew global attention (World Netball, 2022). Telkom's involvement highlights the potential of corporate sponsorships in driving interest and growth in female sport, particularly in regions where female sport has historically received limited attention and support.

Research by YouGov's "The Game Plan: Female sport fans and sponsors" (2021:34) suggests that females, who often hold significant household purchasing power, favour brands that support female professional sport more than men (36% vs. 31%). Furthermore, female sport sponsorship is considered of great value relative to the cost of men's sponsorships (Lee *et al.*, 2020:63). Scholarly works by Skinner and Rukavina (2003:163), Collett and Fenton (2011:236), Shank (2009:84), Zinger and O'Reilly (2010:58), Séguin, Teed, and O'Reilly (2005:72), Apostolopoulou and Papadimitriou (2004:727), and Greenhalgh and Greenwell (2013:595) emphasise the potential benefits and diverse

objectives of corporate sponsorship in female sport, including increased visibility, reputation enhancement, employee engagement, marketing opportunities, brand awareness, community involvement, and sales growth. Despite the extensive literature on sport sponsorship, studies specifically addressing the reluctance of organisations to sponsor female professional sport in SA are noticeably lacking. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap by shedding light on the underlying reasons for this reluctance and contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of this vital issue. Provide a detailed literature review, citing references in the reference list. Ensure you provide a literature background for the study.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study aimed to capture the subjective and complex dynamics involved in organisations' sponsorship decision-making processes, shedding light on the longstanding disparities within the sector by employing a qualitative research approach. By comprehending these factors, the goal was to pave the way for a future where female sport receives the support, visibility, and investment they deserve, thereby promoting equity in sport sponsorship.

#### **3.1. Empirical methodology**

This study is grounded in the principles and philosophies inherent in the qualitative research approach. Thus, the study used a qualitative approach with non-probability, purposive sampling to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the participants. A qualitative study usually applies non-probability techniques (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003:277).

Non-probability sampling follows a subjective approach. According to Cooper and Schindler (2006:455), non-probability sampling is a subjective approach that involves selecting sample units based on the researcher's knowledge or judgment, with an unknown probability of selecting each unit.

#### **3.2. Population**

Alvi (2016) defines the population as individuals who meet specific criteria for a research investigation. In this study, the primary population is constituted by specialists within the female sport sponsorship industry in South Africa. These specialists were drawn from diverse sectors, including professional female rugby, cricket, soccer, and golf, organisations actively sponsoring or having sponsored female teams and organisations that specialise in brokering sport sponsorships. In lieu of specialists, the research population incorporated individuals tasked with soliciting sponsorships for professional female sport. This encompasses individuals engaged in securing sponsorship arrangements for teams and events within the female sport domain. In addition, the research population encompassed organisations that exclusively sponsor male sport. This inclusion aimed to explore the factors influencing their reluctance to sponsor female professional sport within the specific sport under investigation.

The term "target population," as articulated by Kitchenham *et al.* (2002:17), refers to individuals or groups to whom the study's findings are directly relevant. This target population shares common characteristics and possesses the necessary information the researcher seeks (Quinlan *et al.*, 2015:312).

The research population comprised the national teams in the four-team sport (cricket, rugby, soccer, and netball) and their respective title sponsors. In golf, the population included the Sunshine Ladies Tour title sponsors and the highest-paid tournaments. Each team sport population encompassed all teams competing in the highest league for that specific sport. This approach ensured a comprehensive representation of specialists within the female sport sponsorship industry in South Africa.

### 3.3. Sampling

The participants who participated in the study on the reluctance exhibited by organisations in sponsoring professional female sport in SA were recruited using purposeful sampling. As indicated, purposive sampling was applied, where the researcher deliberately chose specific individuals. (Rule & Vaughn, 2011:64). The selected sample consisted of specialists in female sport sponsorship in SA. The study identified the individuals and organisations when all protocols regarding the POPIA Act had been agreed upon and signed by all stakeholders.

Within the recommended range of participants suggested by Creswel and Poth (2016), typically falling between five and twenty-five, this study deliberately adopted a modest sample size to ensure depth and richness in exploring the subject matter. Data saturation, a pivotal concept in qualitative research, guided the data collection process. The sampling strategy was intricately designed to pursue a qualitative sample until data saturation was achieved, adhering to a saturation-plus-one principle.

To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher followed guidelines by Mertens (2010: 256-259) and Leedy and Ormrod (2005: 100).

### 3.3. Participants

Participants that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the study are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Participants of the study**

Unique ID	Gender	Industry	Position in organisation
PAR001	Male	Cricket	CEO
PAR002	Male	Rugby	General manager of amateur rugby
PAR003	Male	Sponsorship agency	Sport and entertainment marketing specialist (Strategist)
PAR004	Female	Major Bank	Brand experience and sponsorship



Unique ID	Gender	Industry	Position in organisation
			specialist (Integrated Marketing)
PAR005	Male	Sponsorship and rights management agency	HOD of Commercial Department
PAR006	Female	Sponsorship and rights management agency	HOD of Golf
PAR007	Male	Rugby	CEO

### 3.4. Ethics

This research study underwent a rigorous ethical review process by the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) at the North-West University, ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines and principles. The study received approval (NWU-00694-23-A4). In prioritising anonymity and confidentiality, participants were anonymised by referring to them as PAR001, PAR002, etc., when reporting on the findings. Virtual and in-person interviews were conducted.

## 4. Results and Findings

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcribed data as presented in Table 2.

### 4.1 Reduction of data to categories

Data reduction went through a process of transcribing of interviews, identifying of categories (Table 2), and finally, reduction to relevant emerged themes (Table 3). Emerged themes are then discussed, with support from the literature and extracts for participants.

**Objective 1 question:** In your view, what are the sponsorship factor differentiators between male and female sport in South Africa?

**Table 2: Data to categories - colour coded (Extract from transcribed interviews -P1)**

Participants	In your view, what are the sponsorship factor differentiators between male and female sport in South Africa.	Categories
P1	<i>Well, I'll state the obvious, perhaps biological, so that I think that's the important one. And I think there's still this, you know, this perception that men are stronger and faster and so, and they've got more endurance. So that's the one thing. Um, then I think there's historical and cultural factors. You know, the history of sport is specifically some codes are way more male-dominated and there's also cultural perceptions around sport and then even more specific sporting codes. You know, still to this day there's a lot of people who believe female cannot play rugby, female should not be boxing, for instance, so that's still there. And then also the media coverage of sponsorship, traditionally men receive more coverage and then obviously the sponsorship persons are much bigger. Another thing that I think is becoming more and more important is this transgender</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Historical and cultural factors</li> <li>● Perception – men stronger and faster</li> <li>● Some codes – male-dominated.</li> <li>● Media coverage</li> <li>● Sponsorship persons are much bigger.</li> </ul>

<p><i>and non-binary athletes, which I think is also making things a bit more complex these days than in the past, you know, was not something we had probably two years ago, and now it is becoming a thing that, um we need to consider.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Biological.</li> <li>● Transgender</li> </ul>
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#### 4.2 Reduction of categories to themes

Table 3 reflects the identified categories, applying reduction of categories into emerged themes.

**Table 3: Category reduction to themes**

Categories	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Historical and cultural factors</li> <li>● Perception – men stronger and faster</li> <li>● Some codes – male-dominated.</li> <li>● Media coverage</li> <li>● Sponsorship persons are much bigger.</li> <li>● Biological.</li> <li>● Transgender</li> <li>● Perception - Stigma</li> <li>● Coverage.</li> <li>● Perception - boring, they don't play well.</li> <li>● A lack of platforms</li> <li>● Interest</li> <li>● Brand.</li> <li>● Coverage</li> <li>● Gender pay Gap.</li> <li>● Professional Sport v Amateur.</li> <li>● ROI</li> <li>● Female more Engaging.</li> <li>● Perception</li> <li>● Coverage</li> <li>● Media Coverage</li> <li>● Cultural</li> </ul>	<p><b>Media coverage</b></p> <p><b>Cultural factors</b></p> <p><b>Physical attributes</b></p> <p><b>Sales related</b></p>

##### 4.2.1 Theme 1: Media coverage

This theme gained prominence through the participants' responses, as several recognised the disparities in media exposure and its profound impact on sponsorship success. Sponsorship decision-makers often harbour preconceived notions that women's sport lack the potential to garner sufficient media coverage. This perception perpetuates a cycle in which sponsors believe that sponsorship agreements predominantly favour sport organisations over the firms themselves, leading to hesitance in investing in female sport (Shaw & Amis, 2001:3).

The entrenched gender pay gap in sport is tied intrinsically to the uneven distribution of media coverage. Male sport receives a disproportionately greater media attention, resulting in lucrative licensing rights, sponsorship deals, and higher revenue streams. This revenue disparity affords male athletes the leverage to command higher salaries, larger prize purses, and more substantial endorsement contracts compared to their female counterparts (Women's Sport Foundation, 2022).

Despite nearly 40% of professional athletes in the United States being female, they only receive a mere 4% of media coverage (Women's Sport Foundation, 2022:43).

PAR001 emphasised the gender-based disparities in media coverage and sponsorship, stating, *"And then also the media coverage of sponsorship, traditionally men receive more coverage, and then obviously the sponsorship persons are much bigger."* This statement underscores the pronounced differences in how male and female sport are portrayed and covered in the media, directly affecting sponsorship opportunities and support.

PAR002 noted the lack of visibility for female athletes in the media, remarking, *"People just haven't seen these women as being able to display the same athleticism that the men do."* This observation highlights the challenge of gender bias in media representation, impacting female athletes' ability to showcase their skills and attract sponsorships.

PAR004 identified the significance of television exposure, noting that *"Whatever goes through a lens, they don't have enough airtime."* The participant highlighted the pivotal role of media coverage in expanding the reach and visibility of female sport.

PAR007 mentioned the current limitations in live broadcasting of female rugby and the efforts to align it with male fixtures. This statement underscores the need to provide equal media exposure to female sport and align it with their male counterparts for greater visibility and sponsorship opportunities.

#### **4.2.2 Theme 2: Cultural factors**

Historically, male sport organisations have attracted sponsors owing to their well-documented successes, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of continued investment. In contrast, female sport has grappled with establishing a foothold in the sponsorship market, with female sport organisation sponsorships accounting for a mere 0.4% of all sport sponsorships in 2020 (Afami, 2021:43). The historical underinvestment in female sport has been a significant hurdle, impeding their access to crucial resources, including funding, facilities, and coaching. This lack of investment perpetuates a cycle of limited development and competitiveness in female sport, making them less appealing to potential sponsors who may be hesitant to invest in sport that have not seen substantial growth and progress (Afami, 2021:65).

Shank (2009:84) advocates for a holistic approach, recognising the influence of social responsibility, customer perceptions, sales increase, employee relationships, reputation, partnership relationships, and goodwill as pivotal considerations in sponsorship decisions. These considerations are deeply entwined with the cultural dynamics influencing how male and female sport are perceived and treated in the sponsorship landscape.

PAR001 highlighted the significance of historical and cultural factors, particularly in specific sporting codes that have been historically male-dominated. .... "*historical and cultural factors. You know, the history of sport is specifically some codes are way more male-dominated and there's also cultural perceptions around sport and then even more specific sporting codes.*"

PAR002 brought attention to the stigma attached to women's sport, stating, "*We do still find that stigma attached to women's sport not being a real sport*". This perspective reflects deeply rooted cultural biases that impact sponsorship support for female sport.

PAR007 mentioned the differences in the attitudes of male and female athletes toward sponsors. They noted, "*We also find females are more appreciative, willing to go the extra mile for sponsors and have a unique social media presence. We find males are more hesitant and more challenging to do sponsorship activations, whereas females will go out of their way to do anything for sponsors*". This observation could be linked to cultural values and expectations.

These responses collectively support the theme of cultural factors as a significant differentiator between male and female sport sponsorship in SA. The participants' insights highlight the pervasive influence of historical and cultural factors on sponsorship dynamics, including the dominance of specific codes and cultural perceptions.

#### **4.2.3 Theme 3: Physical attributes**

This theme was notably raised by PAR001, who emphasised the perception that men possess superior physical attributes, such as strength, speed, and endurance, influencing sponsorship decisions. While not explicitly mentioned by all participants, the idea of physical attributes remained an implicit factor in sponsorship differentiators.

Physical attributes, particularly concerning femininity constructs and image fit, pose a significant barrier to women's sport, with a specific impact on women's golf. Haig-Muir (1999) highlighted the influence of these constructs in limiting the range of body images, lifestyles, and behaviours associated with female sport. These constructs, coupled with stereotypes about some top players' sexual orientation, have had adverse effects on the allocation of resources, sponsorship opportunities, facilities, and media coverage in the gender divide.

For many female sport organisations, securing sponsorship opportunities is already challenging. This challenge is exacerbated by the stereotypical barriers faced by female athletes and their sport. The perceived alignment between a company's product and the image of its sponsorships plays a crucial role in sponsorship decisions (Williams, 2004).

This aspect relates to the transfer theory. When a company sponsors an athlete, they often consider the public's perception of that athlete's or team's image. Williams (2004) concluded that an athlete's gender, lifestyle, and the nature of their sport can significantly influence sponsors' preferences.

PAR001 highlighted the prevailing perception that men are considered stronger, faster, and possess greater endurance. This perception, rooted in traditional gender stereotypes, shapes sponsorship decisions, with more significant investments typically aligned with male sport. PAR001 noted, "*And I think there's still this, you know, this perception that men are stronger and faster and so, and they've got more endurance.*"

PAR001 also acknowledged the biological aspect.... "*I'll state the obvious, perhaps biological so that I think that's the important one*".

PAR001 further pointed out the increasing complexity introduced by transgender and non-binary athletes.... "*Another thing that I think is becoming more and more important is this transgender and non-binary athletes, which I think is also making things a bit more complex these days than in the past, you know, was not something we had probably two years ago, and now it is becoming a thing that, um we need to consider*".

These responses collectively support the theme of physical attributes as a factor that distinguishes between male and female sport sponsorship in SA. The participants' insights underscore the enduring influence of traditional gender stereotypes on sponsorship decisions while also recognising the evolving nature of gender dynamics in the sport world.

#### **4.2.4 Theme 4: Sales-related**

This theme underscores the significance of financial outcomes, especially in terms of generating revenue for businesses. Increased sales are, in general, the most used objective for sport sponsorship programs since organisations certainly would not spend money if they did not know that they would get something in return for their investment (Abratt *et al.*, 1987; Olkkonen, 1999; Shank, 1999). According to Shank (1999), sponsorship objectives can, in the same way as advertising objectives, be categorised as either direct or indirect, where direct sponsorship objectives have a short-term focus on increasing sales because of the impact on consumption behaviour.

This concept extends to the participants' statements, particularly PAR001, highlighting a contemporary trend of sponsors seeking direct investment returns...."*Since Covid, a lot of the companies that are involved in sport and entertainment sponsorships are looking for sales*" aligns with Shank's argument, emphasising the shift towards sponsors expecting tangible results beyond the traditional benefits of brand awareness and stadium visibility.

Shank (1999) further elaborates on the significance of indirect sponsorship objectives in enhancing sales by creating product awareness and cultivating a favourable image among consumers. PAR002's statement, "You know, it's not a CSI initiative. It's not a Kumbaya. There needs to be a return for the sponsor as well." reinforces this idea, as they emphasise that sport sponsorship is no longer seen as a mere Corporate Social Investment initiative but as a strategic move necessitating returns for the sponsor.

Shank (1999) categorises the primary objectives of sport sponsorship, including awareness, competition, reaching target markets, relationship marketing, image building, and sales increase from the sponsor's perspective. PAR004 states, "Major considerations are still reachable per Rand." The emphasis on "reach per Rand" in their statement resonates with this categorisation, underscoring the multifaceted nature of sponsorship goals. The participant's perspective aligns with Shank's identification of various objectives and reinforces the sponsor's emphasis on reaching their target audience to achieve their sales objectives.

### 4.3 Female sponsorships in South Africa

**Objective 2 question:** Which variables contribute towards attracting sponsorships for professional female sport in South Africa?

Findings regarding this question is presented in Table format – Table 4.

**Table 4: Emerged themes, participant quotes and literature support**

Emergед theme	Participant quote	Literature support
<p><b>Theme 1</b> <b>Brand building</b></p>	<p><i>"To get more sponsorship and get them more visibility. So the first one was we need to build a strong brand identity; people need to, and the communities and societies need to align with this. And this includes a strong name, a logo, and a team colour".</i></p> <p><i>"Engage with the community, get the team involved with the communities, and they need to try and build a fan base around the team and the team identity".</i></p> <p><i>"We needed to showcase ROI and not specifically just in monetary terms, but also in media exposure, social media matrix, and even attendance numbers. I see how we can unbolt the ROI".</i></p>	<p>.....the more individuals are exposed to female sport, the more favourable their attitudes should become, emphasising the importance of expanding coverage (Scheidler and Wagstaff, 2018).</p> <p>Research cited from Adweek.com underscores the significance of visibility in marketing. The Golden State Warriors experienced a 13% increase in ROI by boosting their visibility on platforms like Instagram. This highlights the direct impact that enhanced visibility can have on expanding a brand's reach (Adweek.com).</p>

	<p><i>“They can't argue with the results. So I think, focus on what you can control, which is obviously how you are, you know, seen from an audience perspective, you're if you're seen as the team that's more accessible, or the players that are more accessible or the athletes that are more accessible, the you know, the individuals that really you know, can be potential role models for younger kids, I think you know, sort of focus on focus on those things that you can control, focus on the image that you put out there because ultimately, if you keep on doing that, they're not going to be able to ignore you forever”.</i></p>	<p>Building a strong brand identity is vital for enhancing brand awareness and associations. It involves establishing core values and attributes that the team should be known for and ensuring they resonate with fans. Involving fans in shaping the brand's identity can lead to stronger commitment and acceptance of the team's core values (Richelieu, 2003).</p>
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<p><b>Theme 2</b></p> <p><b>Sport performance</b></p>	<p><i>“.....continue to prove the stereotype wrong, I think let's continue to perform on the field, because the more we perform on the field, they can't, they can't argue. They can't argue with the result”.</i></p> <p><i>"I think there's an element of, you know, we are like the industry is desperate for funding. It's desperate for money, but don't ever sell yourself short just for a little bit of money".</i></p>	<p>Success becomes a prerequisite for fans to connect with and identify with the team, laying the foundation for establishing a successful brand. In the sport field, on-field performance is crucial, and capturing fan loyalty for a consistently losing team proves challenging (Ross, 2006).</p> <p>Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005) highlights the fundamental importance of achieving a certain level of team success for sport teams.</p>
<p><b>Theme 3</b></p> <p><b>Authentic management</b></p>	<p><i>“And we need to professionalise team operations. You know, it's important that we have clear leadership and management structures in place and, and female's sport must be seen to be well organised and well managed and create a bit of comfort there when a sponsor do become involved..... We need to have a professional media presence, you know, it must be spot on and well managed. Then there's a network and relationship building that we needed to look at..... you need to create long-term partnerships”.</i></p> <p><i>“Before you ask for money, spend, and invest in your team to professionalise your team. The sponsor wants to know what they are paying their money into.....Getting in early has a big advantage, and organisations will benefit from this in the long run”.</i></p>	<p>Authentic leadership is crucial in attracting sponsors to professional female sport, encompassing social responsibility, customer perceptions, sales increase, employee relationships, reputation, partnership relationships, and goodwill (Shank, 2009).</p> <p>Sport managers should focus on authenticity dimensions such as continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism (Morhart <i>et al.</i>, 2015) to enhance sponsorship authenticity, a key factor in attracting sponsors (Schönberner&amp; Woratschek, 2022).</p>

## 5. Managerial Implications

In South African sport, advancing female sport necessitates a threefold focus: professionalisation, distinctive branding, and heightened visibility. This endeavour extends beyond mere sponsorship acquisition; it constitutes a concerted effort to reshape perceptions and gather widespread support for female athletes.



**Professionalism:** The cultivation of professionalism is imperative, involving the establishment of robust leadership structures that showcase organisational excellence.

**Distinct branding:** Equally crucial is crafting a recognisable brand, wherein names, logos, and colours resonate with success stories, forging a connection with SA's rich sporting legacy.

**Visibility:** Comprehensive coverage and increased visibility are paramount, requiring the strategic use of both digital and traditional platforms to narrate compelling stories and challenge prevailing stereotypes.

These recommendations transcend mere strategic operations; they constitute a rallying call to fundamentally transform how female sport are perceived, laying the groundwork for a future where they survive, thrive, inspire, and shatter barriers. These proposed recommendations possess the potential to instigate transformative change, addressing gender disparities within the sport sponsorship sphere. The implications of this research extend beyond the immediate context, with the capacity to guide the industry towards a more equitable and inclusive future.

## **6. Limitations, Future Research and Conclusion**

**Limitations:** The study's scope inherently carries limitations requiring careful consideration when interpreting its findings. Notably, the research did not provide exhaustive coverage of all female sport, focusing on the overarching theme of professional female sport in SA. Although the original intent was to delve into the sponsorship dynamics of specific sport, namely rugby, cricket, netball, golf, and soccer—limitations arose due to participant availability and willingness constraints. Consequently, each sport received a more constrained depth of examination, precluding a comprehensive analysis.

**Future research:** Examining existing literature, the findings from the empirical study, and the acknowledged study limitations offer valuable insights for potential future research directions. Some areas worth exploring include:

- **In-depth analysis of female sport factors:** Conduct targeted research focusing on specific female sport to gain a comprehensive understanding of the unique factors influencing each sport. Investigate individual and team sport nuances, challenges, and opportunities separately.
- **Exploration of title sponsorships for female teams:** Undertake a detailed investigation into the dynamics of title sponsorships for established male teams with professional female counterparts. Analyse the impact of title sponsorships on the visibility, financial support, and overall development of female teams affiliated with well-established male sport franchises.
- **Comparative analysis of return on investment in male and female sport sponsorship:** Conduct a thorough investigation comparing the ROI for sponsors involved in men's sport versus

female sport within the same industry. This research could delve into various aspects, including but not limited to viewership statistics, fan engagement and direct sales.

## 6.1 Conclusion

In the quest for equity and excellence within the field of sport, it is imperative to acknowledge that the potential of female athletes is as boundless as that of their male counterparts. This study delves into the reluctance of organisations to sponsor professional female sport in SA, echoing the wise words of Billie Jean King, "*Champions keep playing until they get it right.*" The findings not only mirror the current challenges but also serve as a rallying cry to champion the cause of female sport, reshaping the narrative and envisioning a future where sponsorship opportunities abound, and the achievements of female athletes stand as pinnacles of success. Despite inherent limitations, such as the constrained depth of examination across specific sport and limited stakeholder engagement, the findings shed light on critical factors influencing sponsorship decisions.

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