

Sportswomen as Brand ambassadors: Prospects, challenges and possibilities.

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Introduction

Brands choose to sponsor a sportsperson as a way to reach out to their consumers. Sports personalities are considered as vehicles for advertisements or product endorsements¹, and athletes who carry symbolic messages can attract companies seeking effective endorsers. Athletes 'carry very strong images, have a mass international audience, and appeal to all classes'². Nike sponsors LeBron James and Cristiano Ronaldo to be its brand ambassadors, whereas Adidas sponsors James Harden and Leo Messi to promote its products and brand to its target consumers. The established brand value of the athlete will help his/her post-athletic career; well-branded athletes can leverage their brand value through their post-athletic careers³. Sportsmen are more often chosen to become brand ambassadors because they are generally of a higher profile and attract a larger audience, which can increase the profit margins of the brands they endorse.

For the first time ever, Forbes' list of the 100 top-earning athletes of 2018 contains no women. This list is an annual rich list of athletes around the world and consists of their earnings from endorsements, prize money, salaries and bonuses, and appearance fees. Evidently, sports personalities are considered vehicles for advertisements or product endorsements (Arai, Ko and Ross, 2013), and athletes who promote symbolic messages can attract companies seeking effective endorsers. This raises questions about the prospect of sportswomen and their commercial viability as brand ambassadors during and after their careers.

This research found that sportswomen do not appear to have the same opportunities to partner with brands compared to their male counterparts. Often the media is blamed for not providing coverage for sportswomen. While we are not absolving them of the blame, this study aims to further explore this issue from a holistic point of view, not just from the viewpoint of media coverage or support for a particular sport but an evaluation of the prospects of sportswomen in becoming brand ambassadors.

This study was funded by the University of Greenwich Seedling Funds to understand the prospects, challenges, and possibilities for sportswomen to become brand ambassadors. Semi-structured interviews with 15 sportswomen, ten members of the public, and five brand managers were conducted; the results highlight the challenges that limit opportunities for sportswomen. Recommendations for relevant stakeholders were offered. From a business management and social marketing perspective, the study extends the research on the commercial viability of sportswomen and their limitations in securing brand endorsements.

¹ Arai, A., Ko, Y.J. and Kaplanidou, K., 2013. Athlete brand image: scale development and model test. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 13(4), pp.383-403.

² Gwinner, K. and Swanson, S.R., 2003. A model of fan identification: Antecedents and sponsorship outcomes. *Journal of services marketing*, 17(3), pp.275-294.

³ Rein, Irving, Philip Kotler, and Ben Shields. *The elusive fan: Reinventing sports in a crowded marketplace*. McGraw-Hill, 2006.

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Methodology

Qualitative research method was adopted for the research.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between March 2018 and June 2018 across the United Kingdom with three groups of participants.

- 15 sportswomen across nine different sports: athletics (four), football (three), gymnastics (two), tennis (one), rugby (one), volleyball (one), hockey (one), netball (one), and boxing (one). The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 35. Most of the participants were Caucasian (60%). This was followed by Africans, including Black Caribbean people and Black Africans (26.6%), and Asians, including Asian/Asian-British, Indian, and Pakistani (13.3%).
 - Five brand managers: food and beverage (1), sportswear (2), fashion (1) and software development (1); 40% female and 60% male.
 - Ten adult members of the public: the participants' ages ranged from 18 to 47; 60% female and 40% male.

Measures were taken to ensure informed consent regarding participation in the study. Before the interviews were conducted, an information sheet that gave a clear idea of the focus of the research and consent forms were sent to participants. Participants were notified that the interview would be audio recorded and were reminded that the information collected would be kept confidential. They were assured that the information would be deidentified.

The recorded data were read several times before coding commenced and exported to NVivo software for further analysis, capturing the challenges of sportswomen in becoming brand ambassadors and attitudes towards brand sponsorship and brand ambassadors.

Findings

There is evidence that there are opportunities for women to become brand ambassadors, and the findings from this research indicate that sportswomen are interested in becoming brand ambassadors as well. However, this research identified the challenges facing sportswomen and offered recommendations for various stakeholders (the media, brand managers, the public, governing bodies, and sportswomen themselves) to improve sportswomen's prospects of becoming brand ambassadors.

Being a woman when sport is gendered

Sportswomen believe they face some inherent limitations because of their gender, physical strength, and societal expectations. They also acknowledge that motherhood takes its toll because they need to play the role of mothers, nurturing their children and sacrificing their careers. Sportswomen also feel they must always justify why they are good and often compare their success with that of sportsmen. They feel there is no equal opportunity and that they have to work extra hard just to be credited. Finally, they believe they put as much effort as men into their sports, but opportunities to showcase their success do not exist.

"The fact that I am a woman seems to reduce my chances, brands and media just see us like the second citizen" SW3, Athletics, 24

"I've been approached once or twice by a group company before the last world cup, but it's just a case of they'll give you some kit which you never get off with money for it. Whereas obviously, if you are a guy, they'll have to pay you and give you kits. I

resent having it, to be honest with you, so I don't really do it too much.” SW11, Rugby, 34

“I think they see that the men make the most money, so they have the most amount of time and attention, when it comes to advertising footballers' boots, it is all about men as if women don't use boots and come to think of it, women footballers don't have many options when it comes to boots unlike men, it can be frustrating.” SW5, Football, 27

“I still think it is a society thing, women are expected to focus on their family and not think of sports. I had to sacrifice my career to have my baby and raise the family, if it's a guy that wouldn't have happened.” SW4, Athletics, 28

This experience was further corroborated by the customers who feels sports is still being considered solely for men.

“People don't seem to care about sportswomen. I think it must go back to back in those days when women just traditionally weren't really athletes; they sit at home, cook, clean. Men are out there; they're strong. Men have had this huge ramp of time and a lot more men, I imagine. I know a lot of women who participate in sport, especially now, but men have had that extra time.” CN1, Male, 29

The vicious cycle of male popularity

Sportswomen believe that sportsmen have the upper hand and benefit from what is referred to as the 'vicious cycle' in brand sponsorships. Sportsmen get more exposure in the media (as they dominate the sporting landscape), resulting in them becoming more popular with the general public. Therefore, when presented with a product endorsed by popular sportsmen, consumers are more likely to buy into them as brand ambassadors. As a result of being brand ambassadors, sportsmen get more exposure in the media from brand campaigns, and so the cycle continues. This vicious cycle also becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy because the more opportunities that are given to sportsmen, the more sportswomen feel helpless and want to give up or retire from a lack of either support or money, reducing their chances of becoming brand ambassadors even further.

“Nobody really knows me as there is no publicity or awareness when I play and I can understand why a brand will not approach me.” SW13, Hockey, 25

“This is a man's world, a world of popular vote, a world of highest likes and retweets. I don't think there is much I can do to break this ceiling; women sport is still not well appreciated.” SW15, Boxing, 32

“You don't really want to make a fuss, you sort of appreciate the little they give you, it like the crumbs from the table of sportsmen, this should not be so, there should be an equal opportunity” SW6, Football, 28

Limited media coverage

The lack of media coverage is also considered a challenge for sportswomen in becoming brand ambassadors. Sportswomen do not have control over this challenge because they acknowledge that they cannot control whether they are put in the limelight or not. Therefore, they have to take responsibility for their own publicity. This is taking a toll on their family members and friends.

"I think they are very male based, I don't think women get a half as much attention the men do. The men's event is a massive event and the women's events are severely overlooked." SW11, Rugby, 34

"I'm very active on social media, so I try and post a lot about what I do but at the same time compared to some other people that they post a lot, they might also go out of their way and pay to do photo-shoots for their own personal use." SW2, Athletics, 22

"I say I am going to play, they always ask what channel is that going to be on, how can we watch, how we can support, and I say they'd have to go online. Then even if it's shown online, often the links are never released on time." SW12, Volleyball, 26

"Organisers and governing bodies needs to make the sports attractive, then fan will find it interesting to watch, media will provide coverage and then sponsors can come on board." BM2, M, Sportswear

"How often do you hear about sportswomen? The media is responsible for creating this awareness and this can give us the motivation to approach them." BM5, F, Fashion

This lack of media coverage was also echoed by the customers, however getting involved in other activities like charity work was considered an avenue to raise awareness about their brand and engage more with their audience.

"I wonder how many female athletes become famous that everybody knows them versus male? I think that's the first problem is that they're just less known. I don't know if it's just media coverage. I don't know if the press cared more about the male celebrities and they're not bothering with the female athletes. I think that could be problem number one. People just don't know who they are who they are." CN2, Female, 25

"If it is through charity work or something that they've been doing, we will get to know them better. Like in some ways that they've made themselves present and would probably-- At least I'd have some association, I'd know what sport they're into." CN3, Female, 30

Being ready for sponsorship opportunities

Sportswomen understand the possibilities and opportunities being a brand ambassador can offer, and they are aware of the financial benefits, but often, there are pressing needs they need to meet that sideline their brand sponsorship ambitions. Sportswomen's primary need is to fund their training, so they sometimes take on extra jobs to get the financial support they need to fund themselves. As such, seeking out brand endorsements takes a backseat to this

primary need. While some sportswomen are aware of the expectations from brands when they become ambassadors, some focus more on their sport and are not aware of the opportunities to develop their professional brand. Some sportswomen do not have even a website or brand identity and are not sure when to get an agent to represent them.

"I would like to be a brand ambassador but the issue now is even getting a grip on my game, I need to establish myself, do extra work to fund myself since I don't get any funding so that is not a priority now." SW10, Tennis, 20

"I actually don't think I need an agent right now because I actually don't know much about that side of things now, I think I am not successful yet or let me say well known yet to consider that route." SW9, Gymnastics, 19

Brand Managers were of the opinions that sponsorship doesn't necessarily has to be from a sports brands. They believe sportswomen seems to have sports brand as their own source of endorsement whereas there are other opportunities outside sports brand.

"There is more to sponsorship than just sports brand, we were trying a fitness app and we wanted to a sportsperson who can use it and give us feedback. Social media was our first point of call, not many were engaging at all, perhaps we were not Nike or Apple." BM3, M, Software Developer

Sexualisation of sportswomen

Sportswomen claim that commercial brands are more concerned with their brand ambassador 'looking pretty', 'soft', and 'feminine'. Therefore, women who appear strong believe that their appearance may work against them. Some sportswomen even claim that brands alter a sportswoman's appearance to make them appear more feminine and appealing to the public. Because there appears to be less emphasis on the achievements of sportswomen and more emphasis on their aesthetics and physical appearance, if sportswomen do not have the 'looks', then their chances of becoming a brand ambassador are even lower. Some sportswomen feel they do not have the looks to become a brand ambassador, especially black and minority ethnic (BME) sportswomen compared to white British sportswomen. Generally, sportswomen believe they should be made brand ambassadors based on their capabilities instead of being treated as sexual objects to sell products.

"They are not investing in your capability as a runner – more in the beauty. Even though I'm way faster than her ... she just fits the look" SW1, Athletics, 26

"[BME Sportswomen Brand Ambassador], they've almost had to make her more feminine just to sell something" SW7, Football, 22

"I don't want to be in an advert because I am a sexually appealing woman, I don't want to be sexualised but recognised for my hard work, perseverance and success on the court." SW14, Netball, 24

While no explicitly identifying with the sexualisation of sportswomen, Brand Managers acknowledge that some of their customers may not find sportswomen appealing from an advertising point of view and because they are making a business decision, they have to go with the person that is more likely to engage and warm up with the market.

“You might want to blame the brands for not featuring sportswomen but you need to remember this is a business decision which needs to be justified. Our market doesn’t find sportswomen appealing.” BM1, M, Food and Beverage

“You need to really understand what we want from brand ambassadors, someone who can say well of our products and we can support as well, most sportswomen are not there yet in terms of pulling the crowd to support a campaign like a sportsman will do.” BM2, M, Sportswear

“The publicity about women sport is growing and brands will start looking in that direction but maybe not soon. The media needs to do a bit of groundworks and the sportswomen need to show themselves as well, these are what brand managers needs to identify who aligns with their brand.” BM5, F, Fashion

Moral compass

There are other factors that can affect the prospects of sportswomen. Often, these have to do with their personal values and efforts to discuss any commercial brand endorsement deal they may receive. These values can also shape the public’s perception, knowledge, and exposure towards sportswomen. Perhaps a brand may want to use a sportswoman as its ambassador, but the sportswoman’s personal values and beliefs may act as a deterrent to the sponsorship. Sportswomen seem to have a strong moral compass with regard to themselves and their future association with a commercial brand. They want to ensure the best possible outcome for themselves, which is why they prioritise the message communicated about the brand and themselves over money. This appears to be incongruent with the notion that brands’ primary concern is revenue; therefore, prioritising personal values may limit sportswomen’s brand endorsement opportunities. Sportswomen would rather commit their time to encouraging young girls to consider sports as an act of social justice than partner with a brand primarily for the sake of money.

“It’s important not to just associate yourself with any brand just for the sake of money” SW8, Gymnastics, 21

“I would have to agree with their philosophy and they would have to appreciate the fact that my sport is being strong” SW1, Athletics, 26

“I would like to be a brand ambassador. It’s just finding the right brand” SW3, Athletics, 24

Consumers are aware that celebrities/sportspersons are paid by brands to sell or put their name on certain products to add credibility, however they believe that the products need to be sold in a certain way in order for it to be appealing to the consumer. They believe that the sportsperson needs to show passion for what they are selling, make it seem authentic and believable and it needs to be relevant to the celebrity and their fan base.

“If I saw a celebrity that’s an athlete selling face cream, it just wouldn’t do anything for me, to be honest. I think it doesn’t matter what they’re selling. I think it’s more of a compliment if they’re selling sports stuff or something that you associate them with- to do with their job.” CN5, F, 22

Media team

Having the right people to work with can be challenging for sportswomen as well because they believe they need to work with a credible media team to tell their story -their successes, struggles and an agent to sell them to prospective brands. Unlike in the case of traditional media coverage, which is beyond sportswomen's control, sportswomen have the agency to overcome this challenge through social media. However, having a strong media team to promote their brand is an issue many sportswomen still face. Often, they feel they have to do it all alone while still dedicating time to their sports and other jobs to make ends meet. Some find this difficult because they believe the opportunities available to become brand ambassadors are few; consequently, sportswomen often have to tell their own stories using social media and sometimes approach brands themselves for endorsement opportunities.

"I mean you do extra work with my social media page to show the life of a player. I do it out of my own effort because I don't want the next generation of kids to be unmotivated because there is no publicity about the sport." SW11, Rugby, 26

"I work with a very good agent, she herself even said when I started, she's not going to be able to get any sponsorship or brand ambassador roles because unfortunately, for women's sport, they're just not out there." SW6, Football, 28

"So, if [my agent] is trying to market me as something to get you into the Urban, London life zone, I want to now start approaching people that run just recreationally in London, I'm trying to make everything link together so that it all benefits me in the end. The brand thinks they're just giving me a little bit. I'm just trying to make a lot out of it." SW1, Athletics, 26

Brand Manager acknowledge the role of a strong media team to bring sportswomen into limelight. They find little or no engagement as an indication of poor management which they may not find appealing.

"It really depends on how they brand themselves. The way they present themselves is also important for the public and for prospective sponsors as well." BM4, F, Sportswear

"Sportswomen need to engage beyond their track and field, these days, social media is so important and that is an avenue for the women to create an identity for themselves." BM1, M, Food and Beverage

Recommendations

With these challenges, there are implications and recommendations for various stakeholders, namely, sportswomen, brand managers, the media, governing bodies, and the public.

Sportswomen

Sportswomen need to keep competing in and enjoying the sports they play; however, the importance of self-promotion cannot be overemphasised. Sportswomen need to take responsibility for their own media coverage and build their professional brand personality, especially through social media. They should be authentic, tell a story, and create an identity while simultaneously be appealing to consumers. Sportswomen also need to know when to work with a talent agency and what opportunities are available and achievable. Sportswomen should not be limited to sponsorship opportunities with sports brands; rather, sportswomen should also consider other brands in so far as these brands align with their personal values.

Brands

Brands see sponsorships and endorsement deals as business decisions that should make commercial sense in terms of yielding a return on investment. In this regard, brands want to sponsor a personality that resonates with their target audiences. However, brand managers should take more creative risks. Even if such risks do not make commercial sense, brand managers should see them as a part of their corporate social responsibility, particularly in the area of diversity and inclusion. Moreover, given that consumers have demonstrated a positive attitude towards brands that sponsor a less conventionally popular sportsperson/team, there is an opportunity for more brands to sponsor sportswomen and their teams. Additionally, sportswomen offer brands an opportunity to reach new audiences, which, in turn, can lead to an increase in sales.

The media

The media plays an important role in overcoming the challenges sportswomen face with regard to media coverage and public perception of female sports. Additionally, the media serves as the bridge between sports and the public. The media needs to improve its coverage of sportswomen and make a greater effort to have more sportswomen on TV as reporters and pundits to create wider exposure for sportswomen. Effort should be made towards providing the same amount of coverage to sportswomen as that given to sportsmen, and female sporting events should not be portrayed as less than male sporting events.

Governing bodies

Sportswomen have acknowledged that there are limited funding and few opportunities for them compared to sportsmen. They believe they are treated as second-class citizens because they do not bring in as much money as their male counterparts. Governing bodies should make an effort to provide resources for sportswomen to enable them to compete at elite levels. Governing bodies should also endeavour to provide an equal amount of support to both male and female sports, from grassroots support to leadership support. A level playing field should be offered to both genders to grow.

The public

We expect the public to be more open to diversity and to show an interest in female sports, either by participating in or going to watch a female sport. This will create more awareness about female sports and provide moral support to sportswomen. The public should be incentivised to explore other less known sports such as table tennis, shooting, or volleyball rather than always going for obvious choices. Social media can also play a crucial role in increasing awareness of female sports. The public should be encouraged to share pictures and videos of female sporting activities that they have attended or been involved in.

Conclusion

The limited number of sportswomen who are brand ambassadors is alarming. There is little media coverage and few sponsorship opportunities for sportswomen. Through semi-structured interviews with sportswomen, brand managers, and members of the public, some of these challenges were identified.

However, it is reassuring that there are some possibilities for sportswomen to become brand ambassadors. There are a few sportswomen who are brand ambassadors, but many of them still face barriers to becoming an ambassador. The vicious cycle of male popularity, the limited media coverage, and brands' need to make business decisions that produce a return on investment are just some of the challenges highlighted by this research.

Though numerous efforts have been made to improve the attitude towards female sports, there is still a long way to go because sports remain heavily gendered in favour of males. Recommendations for relevant stakeholders are offered to address these challenges, including specific efforts that can be made to improve the prospects of sportswomen and create more opportunities for sportswomen to become brand ambassadors.

This study extends the understanding of the commercial viability of sportswomen, capturing the unique challenges of sportswomen in becoming brand ambassadors and their attitudes towards brand sponsorship.

Acknowledgement

Thank you to:

All the research participants – The Sportswomen, Brand Managers and

All the experts that gave their time and expertise

All the research team who supported us with the research.

This research was funded by University of Greenwich, London.