Sponsorship Opportunities for Professional Women Soccer Players: Their Perspectives

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Despite increased participation rates, women and women’s sports continue to be under-represented in terms of news coverage, sponsorship opportunities, and monies the athletes receive (for a review, see Fink, 2015). Illustrative of this pattern, the championship game of the 2015 Women’s World Cup was the most watched soccer match in the US. Despite its popularity, Fox garnered only US$17 million in ad revenue, compared to US$529 million ESPN gathered a year earlier for the men’s tournament. Further, FIFA allocated US$2 million to the winning US side, a small fraction of what the Germany side was awarded (US$35 million) a year earlier (Harwell, 2015).

These data suggest point to the gendered nature of sponsorship opportunities for elite female athletes. The purpose of this study is to examine this issue from the perspective of the players, themselves. In drawing from feminist theory, we examined the sponsorship opportunities held by women playing professional soccer, as well as sponsorships they believe would be a good match for them and their clubs.

Theoretical Background

We frame our work in feminist theory. One primary tenet of this theory is that people are gendered beings, with their experiences in sport being gendered in nature. As such, sport and the related activities are structured in such a way as to privilege men and masculinities. The aforementioned data related to ad revenues and winner awards point to these very structures. Further, because men are privileged in sport, there is a need to arrange strategies to challenge this condition (for reviews, see Ely & Padavic, 2007; Eitzen & Sage, 2009; see also Burton, 2015).

Couching our work in this position, we sought to understand the opportunities for sponsorships among women professional athletes, as well as sponsorships they believed would be ideal. We developed the following research questions to guide our analyses:

RQ1: What sponsorship opportunities do professional women soccer players perceive for themselves and their team?

RQ2: What sponsorships would provide a good match for the professional soccer players and their teams?

Method

Participants included 10 women participating on a professional soccer team in the US. All had played for at least a year professionally and 2 of the players were also on the US National Team.

We conducted in-depth interviews with the participants, asking them about the sponsorships they secured, those the team secured, and what sponsorships they believed would be a good fit. The first author was also a professional soccer player for that team so was able to generate access and had a good rapport with the participants.

Anticipated Results and Discussion

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. We are in the process of analyzing the data. To do so, we will follow Schwandt’s (2007) suggestions for a priori coding, whereby theory guides our coding process. In addition to developing initial codes and larger themes, we will also engage in several steps to enhance credibility ad trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These include member checks, analysis of secondary sponsorship data, and the use of peer debriefers.

We anticipate observing few opportunities among the players for sponsorships. Consistent with feminist theory and the gendered nature of sport, we also anticipate many of the available sponsorships to reinforce gender norms and expectations for the players.
The study has the potential to inform the understanding of sponsorship opportunities among elite female athletes. In drawing from their words, we will also identify ideal sponsorships that could be leveraged, thereby benefiting the athlete and the sponsor.