Projected spending on sport sponsorship in North America in 2017 is $16.3 billion, a 4.3% increase from 2016 (ESP Sponsorship Report, 2017). Yet, in a study emanating from Europe, only .04% of sport sponsorship spending was allocated to women’s sport (Women in Sport, 2015). Considering the enormous buying power of women in today’s society, women’s increased participation in sport and physical activity, and the fact that women comprise a large percentage of fans of women’s sport, it appears there is enormous untapped opportunity for companies to connect to this important consumer group (Fink, 2015; Lough and Irwin, 2001). Nearly two decades have passed since Shaw and Amis (2001) examined managers’ decision-making in sport sponsorship. They determined that three interrelated factors inhibited the sponsorship of women’s sport: the values and belief structures of managers involved in the decisions, differential media coverage, and mimetic pressure. However, since that time, women’s sport has continued to grow and performances by female athletes and women’s teams have captured the attention of fans across the globe (Carter, 2016; Chambers, 2017; Deitsch, 2015; Eboda, 2017). Therefore, through in-depth interviews with key executives in organizations sponsoring men’s or women’s sport, we seek to determine the extent to which the factors in Shaw and Amis’ (2001) conceptual framework still impact sponsorship decisions, uncover additional barriers to the sponsorship of women’s sport, and reveal important influences in executives’ decisions to sponsor women’s sport.

Women currently represent one of the most attractive consumer segments thanks to their growing wealth. In the United States, women control more than 60% of personal wealth and account for 85% of all consumer purchases (Maier, 2015). Women purchase over 50% of traditionally male products, 68% of new car purchases, and 92% of vacations (Loechner, 2015). Further, 46% of women in 24 major countries claim an interest in sport and 43% of women buy products or services from brands that sponsor a team or athlete they follow (Repucom, 2015). Additionally, women typically comprise the largest percentage of fans of women’s sport such as the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) (75%, DeArcangelo, 2017). And yet, while women’s sports can connect organizations with this influential consumer group, not many corporations have entered into such relationships. As Lough and Irwin noted in 2001, “Ironically, the majority of sponsorship dollars are spent trying to appeal to men, who are not typically responsible for product purchases in the U.S. Utilizing affiliations with women’s sport appears to be an effective approach for reaching women consumers” (p.205). The same can be said in 2017.

Shaw and Amis (2001) generated two case studies with different corporations that sponsored women’s and men’s sport. They discovered that the executives’ values and beliefs and the gendered nature of management had considerable impact on the investment and execution of the women’s sport sponsorship. One marketing director made assumptions that women’s sport would fail to bring the networking and social benefits of men’s sport and espoused conservative views relative to the value of women’s sport in general. As a result of the executive’s “masculine values”, the organization entered only a one year agreement with the women’s team and failed to explore a potentially lucrative hospitality opportunity. While masculine values and ideology still permeate corporations, there is some evidence of change. For instance, more firms now have an organizational climate that supports diversity and inclusion and has resulted in organizations’ valuing both feminine and masculine traits and values (Turner, 2012). Further, a recent poll of 400 female executives in five countries found that more than half played sport in college, and 97% had participated in sport at some point in their lives (Fondas, 2014). Considering the current emphasis on diversity and inclusion in the business industry, and the number of female executives with sport backgrounds, we are interested in determining if executives’ values and beliefs about women’s sports have transformed since Shaw and Amis’ research (RQ1).
Shaw and Amis (2001) also discovered that the executives’ views on the potential for media coverage had an impact on the execution of the sponsorship. One marketing director instinctively determined that the women’s team could not generate enough media attention to help the organization significantly. In contrast, the other marketing director in the study invested a significant amount of resources to raise the profile of the team in order to better leverage the sponsorship because they felt the image of the team and corporation were such a strong fit. With the media’s coverage of women’s sport in the US still at all-time lows (only 2% of SportCenter coverage, pressroom.usc, 2017), we seek to understand its impact on decision makers and how (or if) they may strive to mitigate this barrier (RQ2).

Finally, Shaw and Amis (2001) discovered that mimetic pressure was also instrumental in their study. That is, when faced with the risk-infused option of sponsorship as a marketing communication strategy, managers often reduce the risk by imitating the actions of other companies they deem successful. Though one of the managers admitted that his primary target market was women, he chose to invest heavily in men’s rugby which clearly did not fit with his primary demographic. He went on to admit there is a “me too” element of sponsorship—because most other firms sponsor men’s sport, others feel it is the safer path (p. 241). Recently, several high profile companies have entered into sponsorships with women’s sports; in 2014 Kia sponsored the English Women’s Cricket team, in 2015 Energy Firm SSE sponsored the women’s English Soccer FA cup, and Dunkin Donuts sponsored the National Women’s Hockey League (Thomasson, 2015). We hope to understand if mimetic pressure is still a strong barrier to the sponsorship of women’s sport (RQ3).

In order to determine the extent to which Shaw and Amis’ (2001) factors still impact sponsorship decisions, uncover additional barriers to the sponsorship of women’s sport, and reveal important influences in executives’ decisions to sponsor women’s sport, we are undertaking in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key executives (i.e., those involved with sponsorship decisions) in corporations that sponsor men’s or women’s sports. Through our department’s alumni database and industry connections, we have initially identified 20 executives across a variety of industries (insurance, fast food restaurants, banking, energy, sporting goods, etc.) that have worked on sponsorship deals with men’s and women’s sport teams. Twelve are men and eight are women and they are located in all areas of the United States (Northeast, Southeast, Southwest and West). Interviews will be conducted via Skype and transcribed verbatim.

While our interviews will be open-ended, like Shaw and Amis (2001), the questions will ensure theoretical sensitivity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) by tapping into 3 areas: the firm’s rationale for entering the agreement, what they sought from the agreement, and how it fit into their other marketing communications and how they activate the sponsorship—probing questions will be used to further elicit the information sought in the study. The transcripts will be analyzed by the three researchers using an ongoing coding process and method of agreement (Miles & Huberman, 1991). This approach strives to discover common themes and patterns between the responses, yet include crucial exceptions. Once the transcripts are independently coded, we will discuss our findings and note points of dissention and agreement and continue analysis until agreement is reached.

Because it has been nearly two decades since Shaw and Amis’ research, we are not certain whether the gendered nature of management and mimetic pressure will emerge as such strong barriers, but do anticipate that the lack of media coverage will emerge as a strong factor. From a practical standpoint, we hope to glean insight into fostering corporate support for women’s sport in general. The final presentation will thoroughly explain the theoretical and practical implications of the findings and suggest areas for future research.