Who is The Female Athlete Endorser? Experiences from Professional Women's Soccer Players in India

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Former research has demonstrated that brands which endorse male or female athletes seek similar objectives such as image transfer, increase in awareness, extensive customer engagement, and return on investment (Lough & Irwin, 2001). In the context of women’s sports, scholars have identified cues that influence consumers' perceptions of female athletes such as lack of media coverage, sports commentators infantilizing female athletes, sports marketers emphasizing female athletes' attractiveness instead of athleticism (Fink, 2015). Female athletes appearing as endorsers often originate from individual sports compared to a team sport, while male athletes are from a team sport compared to a particular sport (Grau, Roselli, & Taylor, 2007). Olympic Games are the best representatives of all games and sport competition at various levels. As a participating nation of the Olympics, India had a remarkable increase in female participants from 23 in 2012 to 54 in 2016 indicating a 135% increase in women participation (Pandey & Sardar, 2016). Observation leads to identifying that although women sports endorsements in India is evolving, it is more inclined towards individual sport athletes (Jha, 2019). Female athlete endorsers representing India in sports such as basketball, cricket, volleyball, and soccer are fewer identified in academic literature. The national women’s soccer team in India has established itself as a force to be reckoned with their performances over the years (Majumdar, 2003). Indian women's team is ranked 62 out of 152 nations (FIFA, 2019). The team has five consecutive South Asian Football Federation Women's Championship titles, yet endorsement opportunities for members of the Indian team are in a stage of infancy.

Since the nature of the study is explorative and built upon previous work by Picariello, Weatherford, Metende Mballa, and Canelo (2019), there will be a qualitative approach. Recruitment of participants will occur through the All India Football Federation. Participants of this study will include adult professional women soccer players born in India, playing soccer as a primary source of income, and representing the Indian National team in professional leagues in India or abroad. Semi-structured interviews will guide the data collection process. They will aim at addressing two questions: (a) How do female soccer players on the Indian National team describe their endorsement experiences? and (b) What challenges and/or opportunities, if any, did they encounter? NVivo 12 pro qualitative data analysis software will be used to analyze data and following the steps used by Picariello et al. (2019). This research will seek to advance the literature on female athletes' endorsement opportunities and challenges in India and will help raise awareness on endorsement opportunities and/or challenges of members in team sports. The results of this study may potentially help to create and implement educational initiatives, new endorsement strategies to empower female soccer athletes, and draw the attention of brands on female team sports. From a practical standpoint, understanding the potential endorser's traits and appeals can lead to identifying female athletes' distinctiveness and facilitate in discovering endorsement opportunities.