

The Rise of Women's Sports and Its Impact on Brand Sponsorship

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Abstract

The study focused on examining the growth of women's sports and its impact on brand sponsorship. While addressing the difference in sponsorship and media exposure between men's and women's sports, it highlighted that through media visibility and commercial sponsorship, women's sports teams can obtain long-term financial stability. The literature review is centred around the areas of women's sports development, corporate involvement, sports sponsorship and structural barriers. The importance of skilful sustainable business models for securing sustainable sponsorship and brand equity is emphasised. An interpretivist philosophy, inductive approach and exploratory design have been implemented to analyse the secondary qualitative sources through thematic analysis to understand how brands are investing in female athletes and leagues. The results highlight growing brand engagement, investment from companies, innovative sponsorship methods, and ongoing barriers in the world of women's sports. Analyses reveal challenges and constraints in developing visibility, the investment process and the commercialisation of the media. In conclusion, the study found that obtaining long-term sponsorship for emerging women's sports teams can help in obtaining sustainable financial stability.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

The rapid growth of women's sports has changed the aspect of sports commercialisation through increasing media visibility and corporate sponsorship. A Deloitte market report found that global revenues in women's sports will increase as compared to 2022 and cross \$3 billion in 2027 with commercial sponsorships accounting for 45% of that increase (*refer to figure 1.1*) (Deloitte Global, 2026). For instance, the league and team partnership of Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL) increased by 35% over seasons with 81 corporate partners including AERO (Nestlé), Door Dash, Global Industrial, and Aveeno (PWHL, 2026). Despite this progress in corporate sponsorships, legacy financial disparities and inequality in broadcast distribution is a threat to the financial sustainability of smaller emerging sports leagues (SponsorUnited, 2025). Thus, this study examines the impact of evolving sponsorship models on brand equity and financial sustainability in women's sports.

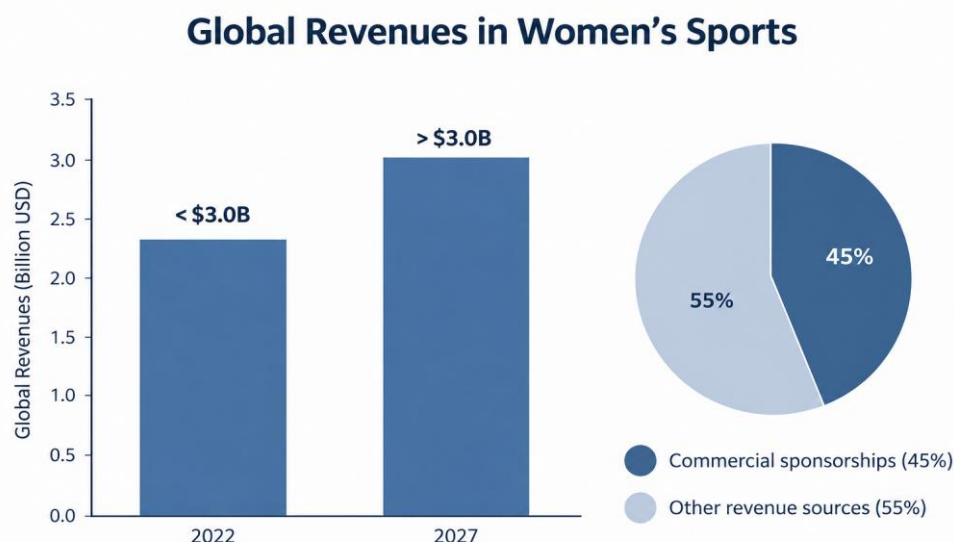


Figure 1.1: Global Revenue in Women's Sports
(Source: Author)

1.2 Research Aim

The study aims to evaluate the rise of women's sports and its impact on brand sponsorships with respect to growth and visibility of women's sports, brand investment, and sponsorship strategies.

1.3 Research Objectives

- To evaluate the growth of women's sports with respect to participation rate, audience engagements, and media visibility.
- To analyse the extent and nature of brand investment in female athletes and women's sports leagues.
- To compare sponsorship strategies for men's and women's sports in areas such as brand positioning, promotions, and commercial partnerships.
- To identify the key challenges faced by women's sports in attracting and retaining sponsorship and determine how these challenges can be addressed.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How has women's sports grown in terms of participation rate, audience engagements, and media visibility?
2. How are brands investing in female athletes and women's sports leagues?
3. What are the key differences in sponsorship strategies for men's and women's sports with respect to brand positioning, promotions and commercial partnerships?
4. What are the key challenges affecting sponsorship of women's sports and how can they be addressed?

1.5 Problem Statement

The main issue is the lack of structural and financial equality in smaller emerging leagues as compared to existing legacy women's sports teams. It is a significant issue as business owners have historically invested in legacy sports teams such as the WNBA, depriving funding from smaller sports teams such as the Boston Fleet (PWHL, 2026). Currently, it is a persisting challenge as the combined spending in elite sports leagues crosses \$195 million while newer leagues are struggling to secure even baseline funding (SponsorUnited, 2025). This study addresses this gap by evaluating a flexible sponsorship model to enable financial equity in different women's sports teams.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it compares the modern commercial approaches for women's sports while underlining the different sponsorship structures of legacy and emerging teams. The key evaluation includes assessing media visibility and sustainable corporate partnerships for women's teams in the current dynamic of

sports. Moreover, the study is significant for future research as it establishes the difference in sponsorships for men's and women's sports along with recommendations to mitigate the issue identified above.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Growth of Women's Sports: Participation Rates, Audience Engagement, and Media Visibility

In recent years, there have been exponential increases in the participation of elite women in sports, online media attention, and spectators in stadiums globally. As an example, the Professional Women's Hockey League set a new high for attendance with 21,105 people at the Bell Centre in Montreal (PWHL, 2024). Industry report shows that women's elite sports exceed expectations, with revenues forecasted to surpass \$2.3 billion globally in 2025 (Deloitte, 2025). On the other hand, Axon (2026) found that sports media still assigns less than 10% of its airtime to female sports. In terms of sporting media, this indicates the presence of fundamental differences in the media's portrayal of sports that occur behind the scenes during major events. Therefore, achieving true commercial maturity demands transitioning from episodic event hype toward equitable, sustained media visibility.

2.2 Extent and Nature of Corporate Brand Investment in Female Athletes and Leagues

In terms of corporate brand investment in contemporary women's sports, the strategy shifted from philanthropic social responsibility to unbundled business growth. For example, Ally Financial made the same commitment of an equal split 50/50 media budget and played a key role in increasing the value of women's sports sponsorship worldwide by 146% (Ally, 2026). As for Nike, they released shoes that belonged to some of the top athletes in the world in order to promote their brand through athletes' identities (Nike, 2026). According to Nie and Wang (2021), it is important to notice that the strategy of unbundled business relationships leads to the direct transmission of cultural values to corporate brand image. However, critics claim that there is a chance of revenue shortfall due to media rights unbundling, while monetising is not going to lead to infrastructure development (Kumari & Bharti, 2026). Therefore, establishing multi-year, unbundled sponsorship commitments remain truly essential for securing sustainable commercial valuation across all professional female athletic properties.

2.3 Comparative Analysis of Sponsorship Strategies in Men's and Women's Sports

The approach to sponsorship in men's and women's sports is radically different, as the former uses a transactional mass exposure strategy, while the latter applies an authentic community-based strategy. On the other hand, the men's leagues pay attention to creating numerous impressions with the help of betting and crypto sponsorships, while female sporting organisations concentrate on their partnerships with companies with common values. For Barclays, for example, 83% of customers intend to buy from their sponsored brands, thereby increasing the likelihood of brand relevance and engagement through shared value sponsorship (Barclays, 2026). According to Cheng & Tan (2025), community trust is important for building fan identity and improving brand equity. Nevertheless, Greenhalgh et al. (2021) state that the excessive use of the purpose-based strategy may limit the sports for women in the budgets of cause marketing. Therefore, the middle ground between mainstream exposure and purpose-driven marketing can help women's sports find sustainable sponsorship growth and stronger commercial positioning.

2.4 Structural Challenges and Strategic Mitigation in Attracting and Retaining Sponsorship

The systemic structural hurdles have significantly affected long-term sponsorship retention of modern female athletic enterprises because of institutional risk aversion. The conventional federations locked the women's teams into trial deals where the duration of sponsorship increased by 12% in the form of a period of less than a year (Meyers, 2025). In contrast, the PWHL uses centralised investment resources to obtain multi-year anchor partnerships (PWHL, 2025). According to Jbara (2023), a long-term (5-Year) agreement with the broadcasting companies will provide operational stability and sustainable competitive gain in the long run. However, the scholars argue that the centralised governance system limits local team autonomy, while trial deals provide flexible financing for corporations during tough economic times (Utami et al., 2026). Therefore,

replacing fragmented trial deals with centralised, multi-year anchor partnerships remains truly vital for overcoming structural underinvestment across female sports.

2.5 Theoretical Perspective

Sponsorship Congruity Theory illustrates the influence of functional and symbolic alignment on consumer perception within women's sports (Maretta et al., 2023). For example, Gatorade attained functional congruence via sports nutrition, while Mastercard acquired values alignment through equitable sponsorship programs (The Gatorade Company, 2022). High congruence enhances sponsor recall while shielding brands against superficial pink washing allegations (Champlin & Li, 2020). However, critical researchers claim that depending only on symbolic alignment without functional congruence decreases business value (Kim & Choi, 2025). Therefore, combining functional and image congruence remains vital for maximising brand equity.

2.6 Literature Gap

The literature highlights growth in audience engagement, corporate investment and evolving sponsorship strategies in women's sports. However, there are still shortcomings in terms of knowing if this kind of increased visibility and investment results in commercial success. Media coverage is still very low for women's sports, whereas sponsorships can be uncoordinated and purposive (Axon, 2026). Moreover, there is a lack of studies regarding sponsorship retention and brand equity in both emerging and well-established women's sports assets. Therefore, longitudinal research is needed to assess sustainable sponsorship models and commercial growth.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy

The research onion includes the different modes of philosophy, design, approach, sampling techniques, time horizons and data collection method that can be used to conduct a research study (Saunders et al., 2019). For this study, an **interpretivist** philosophy has been adopted to explore subjective commercial strategy, stakeholder actions and changing sponsorship models related to women's sport. An interpretivist philosophy includes that "reality is subjective, multiple, and socially constructed through human interaction and interpretation" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this context, it has been used to address complex social phenomena associated with financial equity and brand partnerships as it can help in understanding how newer leagues overcome commercial and systemic disparities in obtaining funding.

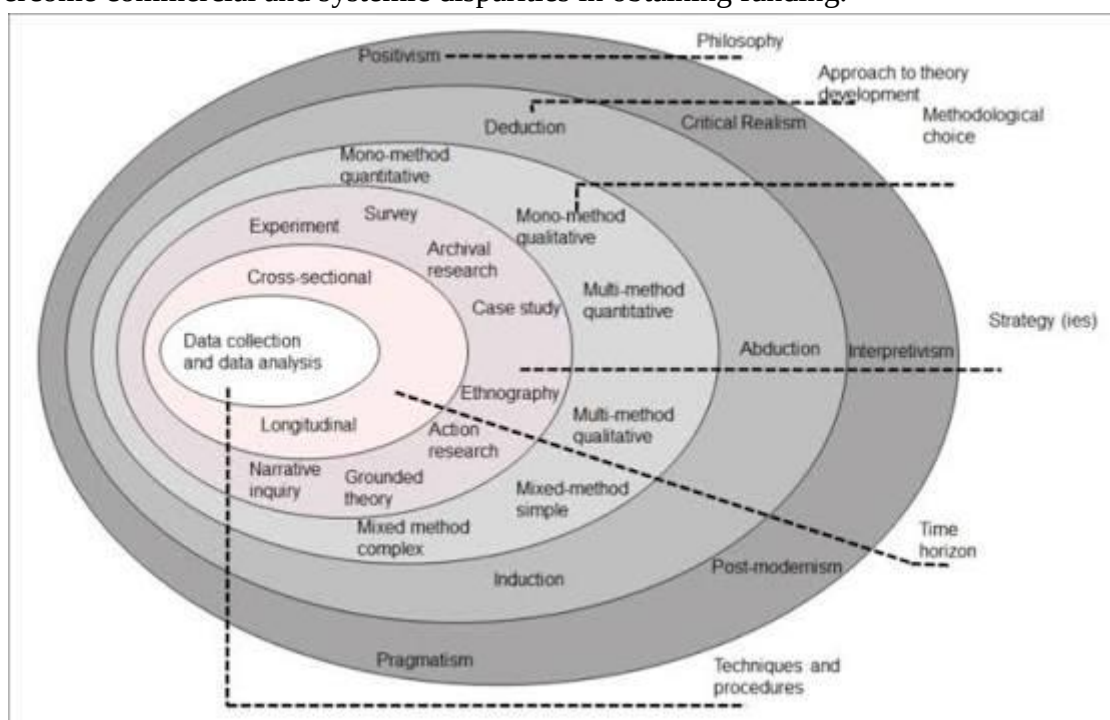


Figure 3.1: Research Onion
(Source: Saunders et al., 2019)

3.2 Research Approach

An **inductive** research approach includes gathering real-world data and identifying patterns rather than testing an existing theory (Saunders et al., 2019). In this study, an inductive approach has been selected to observe existing marketing information on women's sports and uncover patterns of media visibility and commercial sponsorships of women's teams.

3.3 Research Design

The **exploratory** research design is used to “gain initial insights, generate hypotheses, and lay the groundwork for future, more structured research” (Saunders et al., 2019). In this study, this design has helped in identifying the difference in commercial sponsorships in men's and women's sports by examining the dynamic of commercial sponsorship and media visibility due to the current industry shifts in women's sports.

3.4 Data Collection

For this study, a **secondary qualitative** data collection method has been used to evaluate the commercial sponsorships and media visibility in women's sports. Secondary data includes information from sources such as academic journals, news reports, published industry reports, market intelligence updates and institutional reports (Saunders et al., 2019). The secondary data has been used from the year 2020 onwards to analyse the different aspects of brand partnerships, broadcast distribution, and commercial equity in women's sports. Additionally, 8 secondary sources have been used for thematic analysis of this study as displayed in Figure 3.2.

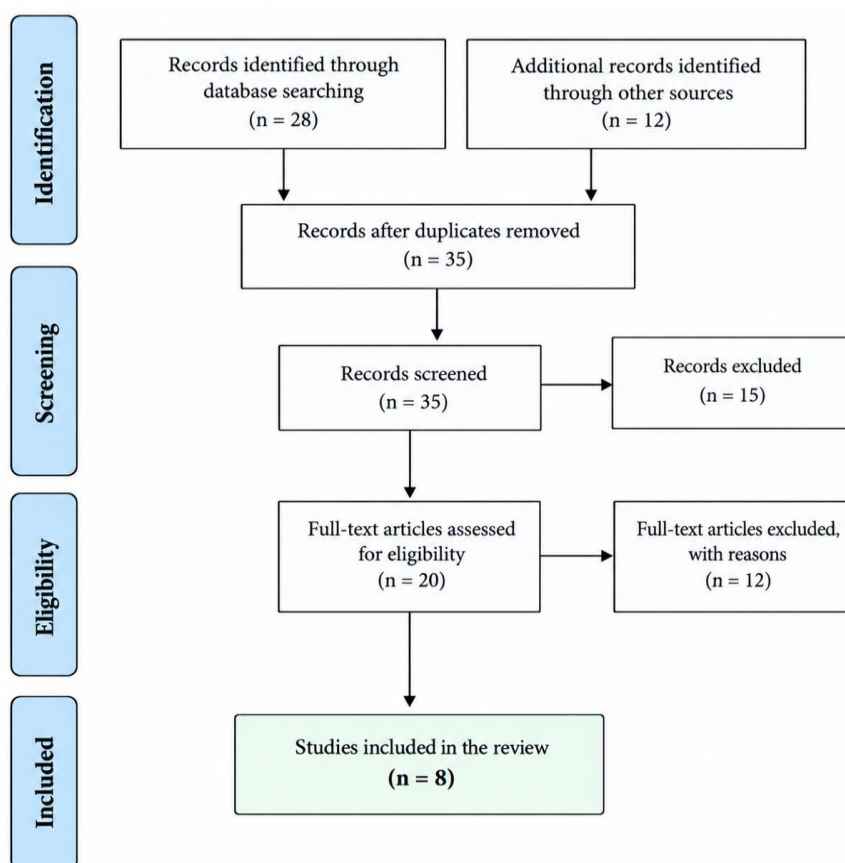


Figure 3.2: PRISMA
(Source: Author)

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis has been used to identify different sports sponsorship strategies through secondary qualitative data. Thematic analysis is a systematic coding approach of textual data to find themes for the data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, these themes include financial inequality, motives of corporate investment, and the imbalance of media visibility. These themes underline how brands interact and influence the commercial landscape of women's sports.

3.6 Inclusion & Exclusion

Criteria	Description
Inclusion	Academic journals, news reports, industry reports, and reputable institutional sources examining the growth and visibility of women's sports, participation, brand sponsorship, commercial investment in female athletes and leagues, and differences between men's and women's sports sponsorship strategies.
Exclusion	Unverified commentary, opinion-based sources, promotional material, duplicate studies, and sources unrelated to women's sports growth, brand sponsorship, or the commercial comparison between men's and women's sports.

Table 3.1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

(Source: Author)

3.7 Boolean Operators

Boolean Operator	Search Terms	Purpose
AND	"women's sports" AND sponsorship	Retrieves sources containing both women's sports and sponsorship.
OR	"women's sports" OR "female sports"	Retrieves sources containing either term, broadening the search.
NOT	"women's sports" NOT "men's sports"	Excludes sources focused primarily on men's sports.

Table 3.2: Boolean Operators

(Source: Author)

3.8 Ethics

For this study, the ethical standards for conducting secondary qualitative research have been followed. It has been ensured that the information from the secondary sources is not misused, adhering to the general data protection principles of the UK (Government Digital Service, 2011). Accurate sources have been cited to avoid plagiarism and ensure transparency in the research study.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Theme 1: Commercial Expansion and Audience Visibility in Women's Sports

Author	Methodology	Findings
Auxier &Harwood (2023)	Primary	The study examined the issue of female sports fans' engagement, noting that 36% cited their fandom as being attributed to family influences during youth sports. This research identified that the fans are more active in the area of viewing and purchasing

		merchandise, in which 62% of the fans were found to be actively engaging in athletics over the course of their lifetime.
WST (2026)	Primary	The Women's Sport Trust report examined broadcast metrics worldwide, noting that fan engagement was at record levels, with an increase in watch time by 27 minutes per year-on-year period. The study revealed that women sport watchers watched more sports via streaming as the service occupied up to 18% of their viewing.

Table 4.1: Findings of Theme 1

(Source: Author)

4.1.2 Theme 2: Mechanisms and Extent of Unbundled Brand Investment

Author	Methodology	Findings
Haskel et al. (2025)	Primary	The Deloitte study examined commercial expansion of women's sports beyond the \$1.28 billion milestone, noting that sponsorship and broadcast rights constitute up to 84% of all revenue. The research revealed that capital investments and separating media deals from their leagues do indeed boost the sustainable valuation of global leagues significantly.
Robinson (2026)	Primary	The study found that brands increasingly treat women's sports sponsorship as a long-term strategic investment rather than short-term promotional activity. The study revealed that brand intervention, specifically targeting selected families, can generate commercial valuation in the millions of dollars.

Table 4.2: Findings of Theme 2

(Source: Author)

4.1.3 Theme 3: Comparative Dynamics of Men's vs. Women's Sponsorship Strategies

Author	Methodology	Findings
Torres-Romay & García-Mirón (2020)	Secondary qualitative and quantitative review	The article states that sponsorship investment in women's sports is 28% lower as compared to men's sports. It states that sportswear companies manage sponsorships through brand visibility and corporate social responsibility by using specialised communication strategies to promote female athletes and improve their market presence.
Pitt et al. (2023)	Comparative secondary	The article examined sponsorships of Australian male and female professional sporting teams and

	content analysis	found that women's teams are sponsored by organisations promoting health while men's teams are receiving more offers from organisations associated with unhealthy foods and lifestyles such as McDonalds'.
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Table 4.3: Findings of Theme 3

(Source: Author)

4.1.4 Theme 4: Structural Barriers and Strategic Frameworks for Sustainable Growth

Author	Methodology	Findings
Lebel et al. (2021)	Secondary qualitative survey	The article states that women's sports are growing with increased visibility, media coverage and corporate support. However, stakeholders identified that securing resources, increasing media exposure and improving marketing is essential for sustainable future growth which can be hindered by systemic barriers of prioritising legacy teams over emerging teams.
Shomali & Keshkar (2022)	Secondary qualitative analysis	The study found that there are 8 major dimensions and 21 sub-components of sponsorship barriers which includes socio-cultural, managerial, legal, media, infrastructure and economic challenges. Further, these barriers should be addressed to attract sponsors for sustainable development.

Table 4.4: Findings of Theme 4

(Source: Author)

4.2 Analysis

4.2.1 Discussion of Theme 1

Theme 1 clearly reflects a contrast between increasing audience engagement and little attention from mainstream media outlets. According to Auxier and Harwood (2023), 62% active athletic engagement may lead to a lifelong fan base and merchandising engagement, and according to WST (2026), there is an average of 27 minutes of annual growth in viewing times and 18% of viewing via streaming. Nonetheless, Axon (2026) suggests that women's sports receive less than 10% of sports-media airtime, thus showing that the growth of digital presence has not been equal to mainstream coverage yet. Moreover, the PWHL's 21,105-person attendance in Montreal shows strong interest in events; however, this isolated case cannot be seen as sustained coverage (PWHL, 2024). Therefore, the mentioned cases demonstrate that audience growth leads to more sponsors, and lack of sustained coverage limits their exposure and benefits.

4.2.2 Discussion of Theme 2

Theme 2 shows a tension between growing corporate investment and the sustainability of the current business model. As Haskel et al. (2025) note, up to 84% of revenues in women's sports are provided by sponsorship and broadcasting rights, which signifies high commercial reliance on the business model. In turn, Robinson (2026) notes a tendency for sponsorship to become a longer-term investment into the ecosystem rather than promotion. At the same time, the 50/50 media campaign of Ally Financial is an example of how corporate investment can grow awareness. However, contrary to the integrated partnership approach, unbundling media rights might be the reason for revenue deficits despite higher investment (Kumari & Bharti, 2026). Robinson

(2026) also suggests that corporate investment may bring value not only in terms of increased exposure. Thus, compared to the current findings, integrated approaches are more sustainable.

4.2.3 Discussion of Theme 3

The third theme draws attention to the difference between values-based sponsorship and the ongoing gender gap in sponsorship investment in men's and women's sport. According to Torres-Romay & García-Mirón (2020), there is a 28% reduction in women's sponsorship investment, and Pitt et al. (2023) have shown that women's teams have a higher number of health-focused sponsors compared to men's teams, which have sponsors focusing on unhealthy products. Such a values-based approach could improve loyalty; however, it will limit the range of categories to be sponsored. In turn, Barclays achieved 83% purchase intention in shared-value sponsorship, proving its business efficiency (Barclays, 2026). Nevertheless, according to Greenhalgh et al. (2021), an excess of purpose positioning could limit budgets for cause marketing. Comparatively, women's sponsorship offers distinctive brand-equity opportunities, but broader commercial positioning is required to address investment disparities and support sustained market growth.

4.2.4 Discussion of Theme 4

Referring to the literature review, Meyers (2025) indicates that lower sponsorship rates for women's sports occur due to systemic and structural issues affecting sponsorship retention in the long run. Moreover, Shomali and Keshkar (2022) added that 8 major sponsorship barriers of socio-cultural, managerial, legal, media, infrastructure and economic challenges must also be considered for sustainable development. However, the PWHL has been effective in using public investment to establish multi-year anchor partnerships (PWHL, 2026). This aligns with the perspective of Lebel et al. (2021) that higher visibility in the media combined with smart use of resources leads to sustainable growth. Thus, organised resources and media exposure helps women's teams to obtain commercial sponsorship that advances their sustainable growth in the long run.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1 Conclusion

In summary, women's sports continue to grow through commercialisation despite the structural funding barriers in rising sports leagues. The research found that new sponsorship structures show the need for multi-year, anchor sponsorship contracts along with media exposure and strong investments can help in bringing financial stability.

5.2 Study Limitations

This study uses secondary data which limits the insights on real-time information from women's sports events. These limitations can be addressed by conducting in-depth interviews of women's sports executives or managers to gain insight on how the commercial sponsorship and media visibility impact their game.

5.3 Future Scope

For future research, primary empirical research can be done on the brand's decision-making process for sponsorship and consumers' loyalty toward women sporting events. Further, comparative studies of the rising sports leagues and their representation in the media can be done to gain an overall global perspective of growth in women's sports.

5.4 Recommendations

1. It is recommended that league executives can aim and obtain one or more partnerships for women's sports that offer long-term financial stability across emerging teams.
2. It is recommended that corporate sponsors can view women's sports as assets for the organisation and offer efficient resources and powerful networks for broadcasting that will eventually lead to more profitability for the sponsors.

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