The Impact of Strategic Alignment in Sponsorships: A Women’s Sports Perspective

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Executive Summary

Sports sponsorships continue to serve as an integral marketing tool that allows brands to reach massive audiences and accomplish a range of objectives. A large stream of academia is dedicated to investigating sponsorship effects, but most research is viewed through the lens of men’s sports. As such, there is a lack of understanding about sponsorship optimization within women’s sports, which is particularly problematic considering the exponential growth in participation and viewership in these contexts. Moreover, fans of women’s sports represent a unique audience in that a distinct motivation of fandom includes supporting women’s opportunities in sports, which is absent from male counterparts.

Thus, quantitative research was conducted to uncover how the degree of strategic alignment between a sponsor and sponsee influences outcomes of a sponsorship in women’s professional sports in the United States. The research investigated how gender, fan identification, perceptions of fit, and perceived goodwill affect attitudinal outcomes towards a sponsorship. The study involved a survey about a fictitious partnership between the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) and a gender-neutral versus women-oriented sponsor category. Respondents were conditioned with one of the two sponsors and asked a series of questions to gauge if identification, evaluations, and attitudes towards a sponsorship differed based on the sponsor’s strategic alignment with NWSL. Survey data was then analyzed using structural equation modeling techniques.

Ultimately, the degree of strategic alignment between partners influences sponsorship outcomes in women’s sports. The women-oriented sponsor cited higher evaluations and attitudes among both men and women compared to the gender-neutral sponsor. Moreover, while fan identification does a poor job at directly explaining attitudes towards a sponsorship, perceptions of fit and goodwill are stronger predictors of attitudinal outcomes. As such, brand managers seeking to enter the growing women’s professional sports market should recognize that a higher degree of strategic alignment can positively dictate sponsorship outcomes within these settings.

*Keywords*: Sponsorship, strategic alignment, sports inequalities
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Introduction

Sports have evolved from leisure endeavors reserved for upper-class men, to activities that provide opportunities for people worldwide (Reiss, 1994). In 2020, nearly a quarter (23.4%) of people in the United States engaged in exercise or sports daily, representing an almost 5% increase from 2010 (BLS, 2021). This coincided with an increase in sports viewership as over 57 million people in the US watched live sports (digitally) in 2021, which is expected to grow by over 33 million in 2025 (Verna, 2021). The exponential growth in sports participation and viewership has accelerated the value of commercial opportunities in these contexts. The numerous professional sports leagues worldwide attract enormous audiences, which present opportunities for organizations to reach consumers. As such, sponsorships within sports have become a very popular marketing and communication tool for brands. Thus, a large stream of academia is dedicated to how firms can optimize sponsorships in sports to generate significant returns on investment. Yet, sponsorship studies have a commanding focus on men’s sports, which leaves a tremendous gap in knowledge and research related to implications within women’s sports.

Research Background and Question(s):

Long-standing patriarchal structures have contributed to society placing greater value on men compared to women, arguably contributing to the disparities between genders in sports and related research today (Farrell, Fink & Fields, 2011). Men’s sports have remained at the forefront of live entertainment and constitute the majority of media coverage, which represents a fruitful avenue for brands to reach audiences (Guagliione, 2021). As such, organizations have generally neglected lucrative, long-term sponsorship deals within women’s sports despite being lower-risk investments compared to male counterparts (Lough & Irwin, 2001). Nevertheless, the exponential growth in popularity, participation, and viewership within women’s sports in the US necessitate a better understanding of sponsorship effects in these environments.

While sponsors have cited positive consumer-related outcomes in men’s sports, little is known about whether similar effects exist in women’s sports contexts. This is particularly problematic considering some of the distinct motivations driving women’s sports fandom. In addition to the overarching rationales that constitute sports fandom (i.e., excitement and unpredictable outcomes), women’s sports fans are also motivated by inclusivity and to support women’s opportunities in these contexts (Farrell et al., 2011; Funk, Mahony & Ridinger, 2002; Trail & Kim, 2011; Ridinger & Funk, 2006; Heere & Newland, 2013; Guest &
Luijten 2017; Allison & Pope, 2021). A motivation to ‘support men’s opportunities in sports’ is non-existent because these activities were initially developed for male participants. As such, these distinct and prosocial motivations suggest that men’s and women’s sports fans are not homogenous and could have different evaluations and subsequent attitudes towards sponsors. Thus, this research seeks to uncover sponsorship effects on the basis of strategic alignment through the lens of women’s professional sports in the US.

Strategic alignment is the decisive parameter for this research because the many women’s professional sports leagues in the United States are supported by sponsors that reflect male-skewed or gender-neutral positions. For example, there are currently 11 total corporate sponsors (Appendix 1) of the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL), seven being financial, cellular, airline, or insurance services, which are argued to reside in gender-neutral ‘product’ categories. Two sponsors, a video game streaming service and a classic American beer brand, are specifically positioned to cater to male audiences. Lastly, the two remaining sponsors, a media conglomerate and sports apparel brand, represent gender-neutral positions at best. Thus, the corporate sponsorship landscape in women’s sports demonstrates a need to understand whether sponsoring brands that are positioned and more aligned with the distinct motivation(s) of fans could cite more positive outcomes. This research is proposed to have important implications for brand managers seeking to remain in or enter the exponentially growing market of women’s professional sports. Ultimately, the increasing popularity of women’s sports and the prevalence of gender equality in these contexts warrants a better understanding of factors that could dictate sponsorship performance and effectiveness in these environments. Thus, the research questions to be addressed in this thesis are:

**RQ(s): How does the degree of strategic alignment between a sponsor and a women’s professional sport in the United States influence consumer evaluations and attitudes towards the sponsorship?**

1. How does the gendered position of a sponsor influence evaluations and attitudes towards a sponsorship in women’s professional sports in the US?
2. What are the effects of fan identification, perceptions of fit, and goodwill perceptions on attitudes towards a sponsorship within women’s professional sports in the US?
3. How does consumer gender play a role in attitudes towards a sponsorship within women’s professional sports in the US?
Literature Review

Introduction to Sponsorships

The integration of sponsorships as marketing and branding strategies continues to generate value for organizations and sponsored entities. In sports contexts, sponsorship is defined as an exchange between a sponsor (i.e., brand) and sponsee (i.e., sport consumptive object) whereby the latter receive monetary benefit, or some token of value, and the former obtains the right to associate with the sponsored property (Meenaghan, 2001). A sport consumptive object (henceforth “SCO”) is a broad concept that represents an entity related to sports and can used to describe an athlete, team, league, or sporting event (Junghagen, Besjakov & Lund, 2016). Thus, the relationship between a sponsor and SCO will be frequently referred to in this thesis. Moreover, leveraging and activation are integral components within sponsorship and respectively refer to “the additional investment and activity in a sponsorship beyond the rights fee spent to initially acquire the property” (O’Reilly & Horning, 2013, p. 425). Sponsorships encompass a myriad of possible activities, which have contributed to the immense growth within this marketing approach. In 2020, global expenditure on sponsorships in sports was predicted to reach almost $50 billion, representing a 5% increase from the previous year (Christie, 2020).

The exponential growth of sponsorship can be partly attributed to the comparatively subtle nature of these activities, the potential to reach many audiences, and their ability to accomplish a range of brand-building objectives (Boshoff & Gerber, 2008; Ryan & Fahy, 2012). Ultimately, sponsorships have evolved tremendously and Ryan & Fahy (2012) offer a framework on five different approaches to these activities that have emerged over time, which are also depicted in Figure 1.

Philanthropic Era

The philanthropic era viewed “sponsorship as a gift,” and strategies served to address philanthropic motives by reflecting an organization’s desire to appear socially conscious (Ryan & Fahy, 2012, p. 1138). While this early approach sought to generate a sense of goodwill towards the organization, practitioners quickly realized that utilizing sponsorships to fulfill philanthropic motives limited value potential for organizations (Ryan & Fahy, 2012). Thus, the commercial benefits of these activities revealed themselves and the Market-Centered era of sponsorships emerged.
**Figure 1:** Evolution of Sponsorships (derived from Ryan & Fahy, 2012)

![Evolution of Sponsorships Diagram]

- **Philanthropic Era**
  - Pre-1980’s
  - “Sponsorship as a gift” (Ryan & Fahy, 2012, p.1139)

- **Market-Centered Era**
  - 1980’s- early 1990’s
  - “Sponsorship as investment” (Ryan & Fahy, 2012, p. 1139)

- **Consumer-Centered Era**
  - 1990’s
  - “Sponsorship as meaning” (Ryan & Fahy, 2012, p. 1139)

- **Strategic Resource Era**
  - Late 1990’s- early 2000’s
  - “Sponsorship as a source of competitive advantage” (Ryan & Fahy, 2012, p. 1139)

- **Relationship & Networks Era**
  - Present day
  - “Sponsorship as interaction” (Ryan & Fahy, 2012, p. 1139)

**Market-Centered Era**

The *market-centered* era of sponsorships was heavily focused on brand-building activities. Since sponsorships provide a way to reach large audiences, brands sought to use these activities to drive awareness and enhance image in hopes of ultimately generating a sizeable return on investment (Ryan & Fahy, 2012). Consumers tend to simplify purchasing processes by selecting from a set of brands that they are aware of or knowledgeable about, thus salinizing the potential value of sponsorships (Boshoff & Gerber, 2008). This approach coincided with cultural shifts towards an increase in consumer event and activity engagement.

Cultural factors played a role in the exponential growth of sponsorships during this era as more consumers were becoming involved in leisure activities (Ryan & Fahy, 2012). As a result, brands were presented with
more opportunities to connect with consumers via sponsorships in new environments. In addition, the advertising landscape was becoming saturated, leaving consumers to be much less receptive to traditional forms of marketing (ibid). In contrast to the philanthropic era of sponsorship, the market-oriented era offered a more calculated way to drive the effectiveness of these activities. This more standardized approach allowed marketing managers to utilize new criteria when selecting potential sponsorship deals, including assessing the connection between the sponsored entity and the firm’s target market. While the market-centered approach revolutionized the sponsorship landscape by recognizing the commercial and brand-building benefits of these activities, there was a lack of focus on consumers, which catalyzed the rise of a new era.

**Customer-Centered Era**

The emergence of the *consumer-centered approach* was a result of a general neglect for how consumers perceive and respond to sponsorship activities of an organization. While marketing managers were focused on ensuring that selected sponsorships reached target markets and generated brand awareness, a new perspective was necessary to encapsulate more specific consumer responses to such activities. Since this approach was focused on sponsorship as meaning, practitioners paid particular attention to variables like the congruency and fit between entities, exclusivity (or ubiquity) of a sponsor, event frequency, and consumer identification (Ryan & Fahy, 2012). Congruency and fit between the sponsor and sponsee were at the forefront of sponsorship research and strategy during this period (ibid). There was a general consensus that a higher fit between the two entities led to a greater likelihood that consumers would develop positive brand perceptions, which still holds some truth today (Ryan & Fahy, 2012; Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, Ross & Maroco, 2013). Thus, managerial decisions were guided by sponsorship factors that influenced consumer evaluations of the brand.

**Strategic Resources Era**

The commercial advantages of sponsorships initially created a very transactional relationship between sponsors and sponsees, but the strategic resource era revealed competitive benefits of a longer-term relationship between entities (Ryan & Fahy, 2012). By building off some of the concepts from the market- and consumer-centered approaches, this perspective considers sponsorship activities as a source of competitive advantage, assuming that organizations have adequate internal resources and capabilities to drive this advantage (ibid). Although this perspective provides an interorganizational strategic approach to
sponsorship, it can heavily rely on the sponsoring organizations’ resources and capabilities (Lund, 2010). Nevertheless, this era salinized multiple benefits of sponsorships and drove investment and competition within these domains, which led to the prominence of ambush marketing tactics.

Broadly defined, ambush marketing occurs when a business’ name, brand(s), products, or services is associated with an event without formal permission (Ryan & Fahy, 2012; Han, Choi, Kim, Davis & Lee, 2013). This marketing tactic can take many forms based on the level of intent and legality. Ambush marketing can be harmful for legitimate event sponsors because it contributes to additional brand clutter in these environments, thus reducing the value sponsorship investment (Wakefield, Wakefield & Keller, 2020). To avoid the threat of ambush marketing tactics, sponsors must generate a significant level of brand awareness among consumers, which can also enhance equity for the firm (Biscaia et al., 2013). The emergence of ambush marketing was one factor that salinized the importance of shifting towards a relations and networks approach.

Relations and Networks Era

Interorganizational relationships are a critical concept in modern business practice that can be applied to sponsorships. Moreover, it is important that (sponsorship) constituents minimize “interorganizational dependency and [preserve] one’s autonomy while recognizing the value of resource sharing through interorganizational relationships” (Morgan, Adair, Taylor & Hermens, 2014, p. 1649). The need for more relationship-focused sponsorship agreements is four-fold. The escalating costs for sponsors, continual ambush marketing efforts, increasing sponsorship clutter, and the ambiguous value of these strategies all reflect a need for entities to collaborate and mutually generate more value from the partnership (Farrelly & Quester, 2003). Contrary to a general disregard related to the value of the SCOs resources, a relational approach emphasizes that both constituents should be active participants in strategic execution (Ryan & Fahy, 2012).

Today, sponsorships are widely considered to be forms of co-marketing alliances or strategic partnerships because of the mutually beneficial outcomes of these relationships (Morgan et al., 2014). The relations and networks approach represents the most recent era of sponsorships and emphasizes the mutually dependent relationship between sponsors and SCOs (Ryan & Fahy, 2012). Previous research related to this perspective suggests that organizations experience a higher degree of sponsorship success when both
parties are dedicated to a relationship-based approach where sponsorship objectives are clearly defined and co-developed (Shaw & Amis, 2001). This networked perspective is also consistent with modern approaches to ‘regular’ business wherein firms are realizing the benefits of open- rather than closed interorganizational relationships that offer value beyond transactional outcomes (Ind, Iglesias & Markovic, 2017). The evolution of sponsorships suggests that interorganizational relationships are currently best suited for driving the most positive outcomes. As such, this research recognizes the potential value of strategic alignment and interorganizational relationships between sponsors and SCOs, which will be further discussed.

Relevant Marketing & Management Perspectives

Sponsorships in sports have evolved from philanthropic, short-term to post-commercialized, longer-term strategies, which recognize the value of relationships that surpass transaction-based engagements (Ryan & Fahy, 2012). As such, sponsorships have the ability to function as co-marketing alliances or strategic partnerships, where both constituents (i.e., the sponsor and SCO) contribute to achieve personal and shared strategic goals (Urriolagoitia & Planellas, 2007). This perspective can be vaguely related to the relational paradigm of brand management presented by Louro & Cunha (2001), which encompasses a multilateral brand orientation and focuses on brands as relationship partners (Appendix 2). Further, this paradigm posits that brand management is an iterative and changing process where value and meaning are generated between firms and customers. Nevertheless, it is argued that this approach assumes a predominantly dyadic relationship between brands and customers, which salinizes a need for a perspective that encapsulates interorganizational exchanges.

Extant research contends for a relationship marketing paradigm in sponsorships because of the value derived from the interdependency between a sponsor and an SCO (Morgan et al., 2014; Lund, 2010; Farrelly & Quester, 2005). The relationship marketing paradigm in these contexts “seeks to understand marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (Jensen & Cornwell, 2021, p. 791). Relationship marketing in sponsorships has been discussed through the lens of co-marketing alliances and strategic partnerships, both of which explain how sponsors and SCOs can mutually generate value from the agreement.
Co-Marketing Alliances

Co-marketing alliances involve interorganizational relationships, which serve as a way to drive business performance by “providing complementary capabilities that would ordinarily exceed the capacities of a singular firm” (Morgan et al., 2014, p. 273). Moreover, outcomes of marketing efforts and strategies are becoming increasingly dictated by the “synergic action of networks of firms” (Grieco & Iasevoli, 2017, p. 972). There is a lack of standard definition of this term because co-marketing encompasses a wide range of activities, including brand, advertising, promotion, product development, and online retail alliances (ibid). Moreover, co-marketing relationships can generate value for involved firms in a number of ways, like granting access to products, brands or services as well as providing the opportunity for organization to gain new knowledge and skills (ibid). As such, are a host of integral components that can impact the degree of success within a co-marketing alliance. Some of the most widely recognized components include strategic compatibility, goal convergence, trust, and commitment (Farrelly & Quester, 2005; Lund, 2010).

Strategic compatibility refers to the degree to which sponsorship partners have complementary goals and share comparable positions that allow for the coordination of strategies (Farrelly & Quester, 2005). Similarly, goal convergence is important because the sharing of similar goals helps drive relationship optimization and synergy (ibid). As such, it is argued brands that are positioned as supporting gender equality are best suited for engaging in sponsorships with women’s SCOs. While some firms engage in short-term marketing initiatives to show support for gender equality in sports, these efforts are cyclical. Thus, brands that reflect long-term commitments to supporting women are arguably best equipped for deriving value from the sponsorship because they have the goals, resources and competencies to perform in this domain.

Trust another vital element in sponsorships and can create positive effects on relationship outcomes. However, imbalances in power between constituents can be detrimental to the establishment of trust and openness (Lund, 2010). The importance of equalized power is reflected through the commitment dimension of co-marketing (Farrelly & Quester, 2005; Lund, 2010). Research suggests that power asymmetry exists in traditional sponsorships because SCOs tend to depend on sponsors for financial support, which creates an imbalance of commitment (Lund, 2010). However, effective interorganizational strategies surpass transaction-based relationships, which suggests that the contribution of non-monetary resources is essential in generating value for both constituents (Urriolagoitia & Planellas, 2007). As such, while sponsors
typically supply financial support, SCOs can contribute important resources in the form of knowledge and skills that address the distinct motivations and values of women’s sports fans. In addition, the accessibility to athletes within women’s sports creates an opportunity for sponsoring brands to better utilize these women in leveraging and activation strategies (Guest & Luijten, 2017).

Traditional approaches suggest that brands provide the most value in a sponsorship agreement through financial contributions. This outdated perspective neglects the range of resources that SCOs can contribute, which is particularly relevant within women’s professional sports. There is a tremendous lack of knowledge about women’s sports, and brands can optimize a sponsorship to gain new knowledge and skills within this domain, which could ultimately be mutually beneficial for constituents. Co-marketing broadly holds that interorganizational exchanges can create greater value for constituents and there are many elements that can facilitate the effectiveness of these relationships (Urriolagoitia & Planellas, 2007). Some of these elements are also prominent in strategic alliances, which represent another, related, form of interorganizational exchange.

Strategic Alliance
Strategic alliances are also prevalent in the domain of relationship marketing. A strategic alliance refers to a "close, long-term, mutually beneficial agreement in which resources, knowledge and skills are shared with the objective of enhancing the competitive position of each partner" (Urriolagoitia & Planellas, 2007, p. 158). The ‘whole is greater than the sum of its parts’ phenomenon is evident in both co-marketing and strategic alliance research and these two terms are often used interchangeably in literature. However, it is argued that the slight distinction between these concepts lies in targeted outcomes. While co-marketing alliances focus on ways to generally derive mutual value from the relationship, strategic alliances are centered around processes to help establish and/or sustain a competitive advantage for both partners.

In strategic alliance contexts, there are four possible sources that contribute to interorganizational competitive advantage, namely specific relational investments, knowledge sharing routines, complementary resources and/or capabilities, and effective governance (Dyer & Singh, 1998). Specific relational investments refer to time, money and effort invested in establishing lasting relationships (ibid). In sponsorship settings, right fees in themselves are not sufficient to warrant a successful strategic alliance. Rather, investments in leveraging and activation strategies are necessary in the establishment of lasting
relationships (Urriolagoitia & Planellas, 2007). In the context of women’s professional sports, it is argued that sponsor investments that surpass financial contributions could include activities that help the associated women’s SCO gain recognition and/or seek to narrow the gender inequalities that exist in sports. By engaging in these activities, the sponsor can simultaneously strengthen association to the women’s SCO and related gender inequalities, thus facilitating an image transfer process for consumers. The sponsor’s additional efforts do not only provide direct benefit to the SCO, but arguably also helps the firm achieve individual sponsorship goals, like driving brand awareness and associations. Ultimately, specific relational investments help sponsoring firms foster stronger associations with the SCO while also demonstrating a long-term commitment to the partnership and women’s sports.

Knowledge sharing routines is the second element that contributes to an interorganizational competitive advantage and refers to constituent interactions that aid in the creation of specialized knowledge (Urriolagoitia & Planellas, 2007). The sharing and transfer of knowledge is an integral component in value co-creation research, which also emphasizes how distinct processes between relationship partners can extract value (Lund, 2010). Thus, antecedents of efficient knowledge transfer include the nature and characteristics necessary for transfer, the absorptive capacity of both constituents, and reciprocal behaviors (ibid). While all factors collectively contribute to knowledge transfer processes, absorptive capacity relies on complementary or similar resources, structures, and processes, which also increases synergy between constituents (Lund, 2010; Farrelly & Quester, 2005). Ultimately, knowledge sharing fosters effective communication and learning between alliance partners, but resources and capabilities of both organizations can impact the knowledge transfer and value creation process.

The third factor that facilitates the establishment of an interorganizational competitive advantage is the presence of complementary resources and/or capabilities. As such, complementary resources and capabilities are distinctive and seek to “collectively generate greater rents than the sum of those obtained from individual endowments of each partner” (Urriolagoitia & Planellas, 2007, p. 159). Similar to knowledge transfer, the combination of resources and capabilities are only effective when both alliance constituents engage in complementary processes that allow for the utilization of such resources and capabilities (ibid). Consequently, a lack of process-related synergy between constituents can detrimentally limit the value of a sponsorship (Farrelly & Quester, 2005). Thus, harmony in processes between strategic alliance partners is paramount to the establishment and maintenance of a competitive advantage. Moreover,
successful sponsoring brands typically view the sponsorship agreement as a strategic resource in itself, which is subsequently transformed into a distinctive competence, and ultimately leads to the establishment of a sustainable competitive advantage (Urriolagoitia & Planellas, 2007).

The final factor that can lead to an interorganizational competitive advantage is effective governance, which involves the existence of both formal and informal agreements between partners (Urriolagoitia & Planellas, 2007). While former encapsulates economic alignments, trust is a central component within informal agreements. Trust has arguably a great potential to aid alliance partners in achieving a competitive advantage because of the socially complex and inimitable nature of this construct. Sponsorships have the ability to function as strategic alliances where both constituents jointly contribute to achieve both individual and shared goals (Farrelly & Quester, 2005). Ultimately, the relationship between constituents serves as an important unit for understanding and realizing a competitive advantage for both partners.

Regardless of the nature of existing interorganizational relationships, singular firms invest capital and resources in sponsorships to pursue a variety of business strategies and to achieve marketing as well as competitive objectives (Morgan et al., 2014). However, both co-marketing and strategic alliance research suggests that fostering and strengthening the relationship between a sponsor and SCO can have positive implications for both constituents and other stakeholders (Urriolagoitia & Planellas, 2007; Farrelly & Quester, 2005; Lund, 2010). The main distinction between co-marketing and strategic alliances arguably lies in the general value- and competitive advantage-based goals of such engagements, respectively. Nevertheless, both perspectives reside within the relationship marketing paradigm as well as the resource- and knowledge-based views within business management (Deitz, Myers & Stafford, 2009; Santala & Parvinen, 2007). Hence, both approaches recognize that interdependency and complementary contributions between partners helps derive more value from the sponsorship compared to short-term, transaction-based relationships. Ultimately, sponsorship agreements that understand and exploit the value of strong and mutually dependent relationships between constituents are better positioned for reaching individual and shared objectives.

The extension of the relations and networks era discussed above is necessary because research argues for the additional value that strategic alliances can bring both sponsorship constituents. Thus, complementary resources and processes, trust as well as shared goals and values related to gender equality between a
sponsor and women’s SCO could play a role in generating distinct knowledge and positive sponsorship outcomes. This is particularly relevant because this research seeks to investigate how the degree of strategic alignment between a sponsor and SCO impact evaluations and subsequent attitudes towards a sponsorship within women’s professional sports in the United States. As such, the current landscape and existing research in the domain of women’s sports will be discussed.

Women in Sports

Long-standing patriarchal structures have limited the ability for sports to reach complete equality among men and women (Farrell et al., 2011). Sports initially emerged as a leisure activity for elite men with the time and financial stability to play (Reiss, 1994). This inhibited the ability for females to participate due to the societal expectation for women to stay at home. Consequently, sports continued to evolve with a commanding focus on men, thus reinforcing a link between male identity and sports (Pope, 2012). The idea of hegemonic masculinity has long been reflected in sports, which refers to an emphasis on authority, physical toughness, strength, violence, heterosexuality, and paid work within these contexts (Pope, 2012; Ridinger & Funk, 2006). Moreover, emphasized femininity is a social norm that suggests women tend to accommodate the desires, needs and interests of men and thus act in ways to support male dominance in sports (Pope, 2012). There are a number of interrelated and deep-rooted explanations behind the disparity between men’s and women’s sports. However, in 1972, the passage of Title IX—a law stating that no person in the United States can be discriminated against in sports on the basis of gender—catalyzed a new wave of participation and opportunities for women in sports (Funk et al, 2002; Ridinger & Funk, 2006; Newland & Hayduk, 2020). While marketing strategies are still predominantly focused on male consumers, new streams of research have emerged to address female fandom as well as participation in sports (Pope, 2012).

Title IX served as a major contributing factor to the exponential increase in participation and sports fandom among females in the United States. For example, women make up between 40% and 50% of the fan bases in the NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL, MLS, and NASCAR in the US (Ridinger & Funk, 2006). Yet, the misconception of female sport consumers is evident through the nature of product offerings within these contexts. For example, the “shrink it and pink it” phenomenon refers to the production of sports merchandise specifically for female consumers, which oversexualizes their bodies and assumes that all women prefer pink products (Tilburg, Lieven, Herrmann & Townsend, 2015). This approach is aligned
with the gender schema theory, which refers to the tendency to classify products as being outwardly male- or female-oriented (Newland & Hayduk, 2020). Since these types of products are developed on the basis gender stereotypes rather than actual needs and interests of female fans, they have become outdated and notably ineffective. The lack of attention paid to female sports and fans can be partly attributed to fundamental discrepancies between men’s and women’s sports.

Current Landscape in Women’s Professional Sport
The inequalities that exist between men’s and women’s sports have long been acknowledged but seldom adequately addressed. While the number of female athletes and fans continues to increase, many brands have failed to capitalize on this growing market. Instead, sponsors are predominantly driven to fulfill objectives through men’s sports, which cite more proven success in sponsorships. Yet there is a tremendous amount of sponsorship clutter that exists at men’s (professional) sporting events, which has led to the belief that brands are wasting money on ‘lost messages’ (Lough & Irwin, 2001). Although male sports attract the most lucrative brand deals, female athletes (and teams, by extension) are considered to be a much lower risk for sponsorship investment in terms of damage to brand image (ibid). There is a lack of research dedicated to explaining the advantages of investments in female SCOs. Indeed, certain interrelated factors contribute to these entities receiving 25-50% less financial support from sponsors compared to male counterparts (Lough & Irwin, 2001). Some of these factors include discrepancies in revenue generation, media coverage, visibility and viewership, pre-existing beliefs of decision-makers, and mimetic pressures (Afami, 2021; Lough & Irwin, 2001; Shaw & Amis, 2001).

Revenue Disparities
Revenue generation continues to be a very prominent factor that explains the equality discrepancies (i.e., visibility and salaries) between men’s and women’s professional sports. SCOs rely on many different components to generate revenue including, ticket sales, merchandising, media rights, and sponsorships (Pompliano, 2021). Since viewership and fandom within men’s sport is much higher, the abovementioned streams of revenue are also greater than that of female counterparts. Therefore, men’s sports provide sponsoring brands with larger audiences to target messages, and higher financial returns compared to female sports. Media visibility is another contributing factor behind these discrepancies and is interrelated with revenue and viewership.
**Lack of Visibility**

Visibility and viewship are closely tied together because as the frequency in which an SCO is exposed in media increases, the more publicity it generates. A high level of publicity or SCO awareness is arguably attractive because it provides sponsors with a higher probability to reach larger audiences and marketing-specific goals. While almost 40% of professional athletes in the United States are female, they account for just 4% of media coverage (Women’s Sports Foundation, 2022). The enormous visibility of men’s sports in media reinforces viewership and fandom, which in-turn creates greater inequalities for female counterparts. As a result, the lack of media coverage among women’s sports contributes to a continual cycle of increased viewership and popularity of men’s sports. Similarly, Shaw & Amis (2001) attribute lack of media coverage as one of three major contributing factors to the lack of financial support among female SCOs compared to male counterparts. The authors found a consensus among sponsorship decision-makers that women’s sports are incapable of generating an adequate amount of media coverage to aid firms in effective ways. Since women’s sports attract smaller audiences, most of the tangible outcomes from a sponsorship agreement benefit the SCO more than the firm.

**Memetic Pressures**

The other factor that contributes to a lack of financial support directed towards women’s SCOs are the values and beliefs of sponsorship decision-makers as well as the memetic pressures that exist in these environments (Shaw & Amis, 2001). Research findings suggest that sponsorship decision-makers have preconceived beliefs about the ability of men’s versus women’s sports to help fulfill corporate and marketing objectives (ibid). However, some decision-makers are driven to engage in sponsorships that reflect congruity between organizational and SCO values (Morgan, 2019). Therefore, there is contradicting explanations behind why many decision makers neglect sponsorships of female SCOs while some embrace these opportunities. Nevertheless, mimetic pressures of sponsorships contribute to the discrepancy in financial support between men’s and women’s SCOs (Shaw & Amis, 2001). Mimetic pressures refer to decision-makers’ desire to engage in sponsorships with SCOs that have experienced tremendous success with other organizations (ibid). Since sponsorship effectiveness is so difficult to accurately measure, some organizations attempt to avoid risk through selecting SCOs that have a history of generating substantial levels of success for sponsors (Diorio, 2020; Shaw & Amis, 2001). As a result, male SCOs have no issue with continually attracting sponsors because of well-documented success in previous agreements. In 2020, female SCO sponsorships accounted for just 0.4% of all sports sponsorships (Afami, 2021). This creates an
even more challenging landscape to attract sponsors because the lack of proven success of sponsorships within female compared to male SCOs.

Research within Women’s Professional Sport
Although there is a lack of understanding about sponsorship implications for female SCOs, some research has investigated the underlying reasons behind why certain organizational decision-makers opt to sponsor women’s sports entities.

Sponsorship of Women’s Professional Sport
While men’s sports obtain most sponsorship attention, some brands sponsor female SCOs out of a desire to support women’s sports and narrow the gender gap in this industry (Morgan, 2019). Moreover, some decision-makers believe that sponsoring women’s sports helps fulfill CSR-related organizational initiatives connected to equality (ibid). Similarly, some firms engage in sponsorships to catalyze a perception of goodwill among consumers (Shaw & Amis, 2001). Firms that share values regarding leadership, innovation, and ethical practices with certain female SCOs opt to sponsor these entities because of the value-fit they present (ibid). Yet some (particularly male) decision-makers hold sponsorship values related to masculinity, despite being part of organizations that cater to female audiences. The contradicting explanations for sponsorship investment between women’s and men’s sports suggest that there is not a standard framework or strategy for selecting sponsorships.

While there is a growing stream of research on women’s sports sponsorships, most studies have sought to understand sponsor decision makers’ motivations behind such strategies. Thus, there is a tremendous lack of understanding and research related to consumer and/or fan perceptions of sponsorships specifically in women’s sports contexts. This is particularly problematic because some of the most prominent women’s professional leagues in the United States are sponsored by brands that reflect masculine-skewed or gender-neutral positions at best. For example, more than half of corporate sponsors of the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) are in the financial, cellular, airline or insurance service categories, which are predominantly represented by C-suites consisting of white men (Appendix I). Moreover, other corporate sponsors including a streaming service for gamers and American beer brand, cater to men and arguably reflect masculine American ideals, respectively. Thus, a knowledge gap exists on if sponsors that are more aligned the gender of athletes on the field cite any greater effect compared to gender-neutral sponsors. This
is particularly interesting gap to investigate when considering some of the distinct differences in fan motivations to attend, watch and follow men’s versus women’s sports.

**Distinct Fan Motivations Related to Women’s Professional Sport**

People are motivated to attend, watch, and follow professional sports for a host of different reasons. For example, Wann (1995) developed a Sport Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS) to salinize integral aspects of sport fandom. Similarly, Trail & James (2001) developed the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption (MSSC), which identifies and subsequently examines numerous aspects that motivate spectatorship of professional sports. There are many overlapping motivations within the SFMS and MSSC, which include entertainment aspects, aesthetics, presence of skillful players, escape from daily life, drama, vicarious achievement, and socialization (Wann, 1995; Trail & James, 2001). However, similar to most other research on sports spectatorship, both of the aforementioned scales were developed on the basis of motivations to attend, watch, and/or follow men’s sporting events. Indeed, most research on sports fandom contributes findings through the lens of men’s sports.

In response to the tremendous lack of attention attributed to the women’s sports domain, there is a small but growing stream of research on fan motivations related to spectatorship of women’s sport. As such, findings suggest that there are similarities and some distinct differences in motivations behind fandom and spectatorship of women’s sport. Similar motives include aspects of excitement, presence of skillful and attractive athletes, vicarious achievement, and socialization (Allison & Pope, 2021). Yet distinct motivations behind women’s sport fandom include presence of and accessibility to positive role models, inclusivity, and *to support women’s opportunities in sport* (Farrell et al., 2011; Funk et al., 2002; Trail & Kim, 2011; Ridinger & Funk, 2006; Heere & Newland, 2013; Guest & Luijten 2017; Allison & Pope, 2021). Undoubtedly, there are numerous positive role models within men’s sports. However, it is argued that fans are not primarily motivated to attend, watch, or follow men’s sports to “support men’s opportunities in sports.” In addition, men’s sporting environments do not provide the same level of inclusivity compared to female counterparts because of perceptions about hooligan culture and generally more aggressive fan bases (Williams, 2022). As such, the motivation to follow female sports for the opportunity to support women is inherently unique to these contexts. The unique motivations tied to fandom of women’s sports heavily drives this research and will be discussed throughout the thesis.
The above discussion revealed the immense discrepancies in research and knowledge between men’s and women’s sports. Nevertheless, regardless of gender, sports as a “product” are unique because of the highly emotional and hedonic nature as well as unique fan passion tied to these contexts (Syzmanski & Wolfe, 2017). As such, sports marketing in general provides a direct way for brands to reach large, heterogenic audiences. Thus, many sponsor objectives have emerged with each era of sponsorship, and the most relevant ones to this research will be further discussed.

**Objectives of Sponsorship**

There are many variables that influence sponsorship effectiveness but investigating consumer-related outcomes, like attitudes and subsequent behaviors towards brand sponsors, constitutes a large portion of research in this domain. However, in order to ultimately generate evaluations, attitudes and behaviors, sponsoring brands seek to accomplish a range of sub-goals. A non-exhaustive list of such goals includes driving brand awareness, associations, knowledge, and image, enhancing customer relationships, community engagement and employee morale, as well as fostering the development of loyalty, preference, and purchase intentions (Wakefield et al., 2020, Lough & Irwin, 2001; Morgan, 2019; Junghagen, 2018). The goals that are most related to this research will be discussed.

**Drive Awareness, Associations & Knowledge**

Brands with both high and low levels of awareness among consumers use sponsorship to generate or reinforce awareness, respectively (Wakefield et al., 2020). Since sports settings attract large audiences, these environments are ideal for exposing brand-related stimuli to a wide range of consumers, thus driving brand awareness. Research shows that sponsorship activities increase brand awareness through enhancing unaided recall and increasing brand recognition (Boshoff & Gerber, 2008). Conveniently, the presence of ambushers or other interference from competitors has been found to have little impact on consumers’ ability to recall the sponsoring brand of an SCO (Cornwell & O’Boyle, 2017). Brand awareness generally increases over time and plays a role in consumer attitude formation towards sponsors as well as behavioral responses (Wakefield et al., 2020; Biscaia et al., 2013). Therefore, awareness is an important variable and serves as an avenue for sponsors to meet subsequent objectives.

The highly hedonic and emotional nature of sporting events creates an attractive opportunity for brands to also drive positive associations and knowledge (Gardan, Petronela, Andronic & Dumitru, 2020). Indeed,
brand associations and knowledge have been shown to enhance sponsorship outcomes, including positive attitude formation (Wakefield et al., 2020). This is because these strategies continually pair sponsoring brands and SCOs together, which can ultimately foster a degree of association or transfer of image between the entities (Chien, Cornwell & Stokes, 2005). Image transfer in sports contexts is the process of when consumers’ associations and sentiments towards an SCO are transferred over to the sponsoring brand (Meenaghan, 2001). Since sponsorship activities intentionally seek to bridge a connection between a SCO and brand, image transfer concepts are central to these strategies. Research has demonstrated that positive attitudes towards an SCO leads to a transfer of positive image attributes towards respective sponsors (Ryan & Fahy, 2012; Boshoff & Gerber, 2008). Yet the effect of image transfer is a double-edged sword because if perceptions of a SCO are negative, then this could subsequently generate similar perceptions towards the sponsoring brand, and vice versa (Bergkvist, 2012). Successful and positive image transfer can be very beneficial for sponsoring brands, but it is also important to consider potential negative effects of this process. While awareness, associations and knowledge can all eventually contribute to attitude formation, a narrow focus on fulfilling consumer-related these objectives limits additional potential that sponsorships can bring organizations (Wakefield et al., 2020).

**Build Brand Equity**

All of the above-mentioned goals have been shown to influence attitudes and also contribute to a widely studied outcome of sponsorship, which is enhancement of brand equity (Wakefield et al., 2020; Mazodier & Quester, 2014; Woisetschläger, Eiting, Haselhoff & Michaelis, 2010). According to Keller (1993) brand equity consists of the knowledge that consumers hold about a brand in memory. More specifically, knowledge refers to the awareness, images, associations, that consumers have about a specific brand (Appendix 3). While this construct undoubtedly has important implications for sponsoring brands, it resides outside the scope of this thesis. This research studies the effects of sponsorships through the lens of brand categories rather than specific brands. As such, it is merely impossible to understand brand equity enhancement when vague product categories are involved in the sponsorship situation within the research. Nevertheless, brand equity is an integral outcome of sponsorships and thus a brief discussion on this construct could not be excluded from the thesis. Ultimately, awareness as well as positive associations and knowledge about a sponsor can lead to the formation of favorable consumer attitudes and subsequent behaviors including purchase intentions, brand preference, and loyalty (Wakefield et al., 2020; Lough & Irwin, 2001).
The abovementioned outcomes represent a short list of objectives that brands seek to achieve through sponsorship activities. Other objectives were excluded from the discussion because they reside outside of the domain of this research, which is to investigate factors that could directly play a role in consumer evaluations and subsequent attitude formation towards sponsorships in women’s sports. While most research on sports sponsorship is viewed through the lens of men’s sports settings, the following antecedents of sponsorship effectiveness have been shown to be prominent in both men’s and women’s sports contexts.

**Integral Antecedents of Sponsorship Effectiveness**

Sports sponsorships encompass the most common and sought-after deals, partly because of the massive and passionate audience that these activities and events attract (Meenaghan, 2001; Biscaia et al., 2013). A large stream of research is dedicated to the antecedents that dictate outcomes and effectiveness of sponsorships. As such, some of the most widely recognized and studied components include fan identification, fit, goodwill, and demographic as well as psychographic variables (Meenaghan, 2001; Ryan & Fahy, 2012; Biscaia et al., 2013; Demirel, 2019; Wakefield et al., 2020). The following discussion encapsulates factors that are proposed dictate sponsorship outcomes in both men’s and women’s sports context.

**Fan Identification**

The degree of vested interest a consumer associates with an SCO plays an integral role in how they form varying evaluations and attitudes towards SCO-related stimuli (Biscaia et al., 2013). As such, fan identification can be conceptualized along a spectrum and refers to the level of personal relevance as well as importance an individual assigns to a respective SCO (Wakefield et al., 2020). Extant literature also uses terms like “involvement” or “team identification” to broadly describe the degree of attachment that an individual assigns to an SCO but thesis uses “fan identification” to refer to this phenomenon. Fan identification is the axiom of this research because it represents a prominent factor that can dictate evaluations and subsequent attitudes towards a sponsorship.

Research has investigated how different levels of identification impact the ways that fans process sponsorship related information. The audiences at sporting events are not homogenous in that they fall on a spectrum in terms of identification with the SCO (Hunt, Bristol & Bashaw., 1999; Tapp & Clowes, 2002). This is important because greater fan identification can lead to more critical cognitive processes and
evaluations of sponsorship stimuli compared to low levels of identification. For example, it was found that a higher degree of fan identification generally implies more knowledge (and dedication) towards an SCO (Biscaia et al., 2013). As a result, these fans are also more likely to deeply process sponsorship information. Similarly, Demirel (2019) utilizes the Elaboration Likelihood Model to explain how high and low identified fans use central and peripheral routes of persuasion, respectively, to process sponsorship stimuli. Since highly identified fans represent a devoted segment for sport marketers, a lot of research is centered around studying this audience. Yet fans with low identification also form evaluations towards sponsors, particularly with appropriate persuasion cues (i.e., fit). Therefore, considering a range of communication and activation strategies within sponsorships is necessary for brands to ensure messages resonate with fans of varying degrees of identification.

Fit

Fit refers to consumer perceptions regarding the logicality of the relationship between a sponsoring brand and the SCO (Olson & Thjømøe, 2011). The influence of fit between constituents on sponsorship outcomes emerged during the consumer-centered approach to sponsorship (Ryan & Fahy, 2012). Research widely recognizes two categories of fit in sponsorships, namely functional- and image-related fit. More specifically, functional fit represents a “situation where the sponsor’s product could be used by (or in connection with) the sponsored object” (Bergkvist, 2012, p. 66). Contrarily, image-fit occurs where “there is an overlap on one or many aspects of the images of the object and the sponsor” (Bergkvist, 2012, p.66). Both of these types of fit are prevalent in sponsorships. For example, Gatorade’s sponsorship of Arsenal FC represents a functional fit because athletes consume energy drinks while playing sports (Gatorade, 2022). Moreover, Jaguar’s sponsorship of Wimbledon reflects a degree of image-related fit because it is argued that both the sponsor and event uphold images related to prestige and luxury (Jaguar, 2022). Regardless of fit category, there is an abundance of research that investigates how different fit conditions (i.e., high versus low) impact sponsorship effectiveness (Wakefield et al., 2020; Speed & Thompson, 2000; Bergkvist, 2012).

A high perceived fit between the sponsor and SCO has been shown to be beneficial because it upholds some level of cognitive consistency in which consumers seek (Woisetschläger et al., 2010). Further, increasing the fit between a sponsor and SCO drives positive consumer sponsorship responses, which arise from personal liking, perceived status, and attitude towards the sponsor (Speed & Thompson, 2000). Most
The literature agrees that high fit between a sponsor and SCO can lead to positive outcomes. However, low fit conditions can also foster positive perceptions when cues are used to narrow the distance between a sponsor and SCO (Wakefield et al., 2020). While a higher fit between a brand and SCO clearly has beneficial outcomes, low fit conditions can be rendered through other initiatives (ibid). Ultimately, fit is an integral component in sponsorship literature as well as research and has also been closely linked to fan identification with the SCO (Demriel, 2019; Deitz et al., 2009).

**Goodwill**

The concept of goodwill serves as a major distinguishing factor between sponsorship and traditional advertising and refers to an appreciation among individuals “who recognize the benefits of sponsorship to activities with which they are involved” (Meenaghan, 2001, p. 102). The subtle-nature, perception of benefit, and disguised commercial intent of sponsorships have contributed to a ‘halo of goodwill’ that consumers assign to sponsors (ibid). Since sponsorships are a comparatively less aggressive form of marketing, the halo of goodwill lessens consumer defense mechanisms towards the SCO’s sponsoring brand (ibid).

There are three distinct levels of goodwill, namely generic, category and individual activity, “with the intensity of goodwill varying by level of aggregation,” (p. Meenaghan, 2001, p. 102). Sponsorship as a general activity resides at the most generic level of goodwill and is abstract in that it does not affect consumers in a deeply meaningful way (ibid). Alternatively, at the category level, different disciplines (e.g., sports, arts, etc.) are commonly associated with varying degrees of goodwill. Thus, the goodwill effects within this level are felt more intensely, and consumer sentiments are directed towards the focal category of sponsorship rather than sponsorship as an activity in itself (ibid). As such, the sponsorship of social causes typically generates greater perceptions of goodwill than other categories, like mass arts or sports. Finally, goodwill perceptions at the individual activity level (e.g., sponsorship of a sports team) are generated when individuals have a vested interest or involvement in the specific activity/team (ibid). When an individual is actually involved in an activity that a brand sponsors, their perceptions of benefit, related appreciation, and goodwill effects are highest (ibid). Thus, it is argued that goodwill effects at the individual activity level can be dictated by the degree of fan identification with the activity.
Extant literature has mostly defined goodwill by referring to a version Meenaghan’s (2001) conceptualization. This thesis extends the definition of goodwill by also relating it to the concept of (perceived) altruism, which reflects the degree that individuals believe a sponsor is genuine in their support of an SCO (Joo, Koo & Fink, 2016). Hence, it is argued that goodwill and altruism are somewhat related in that the former encapsulates the (perceived) benefit that a sponsor provides an SCO whereas the latter is more concerned with perceptions of how genuine a sponsor is in their desire to support the SCO. Perceptions of goodwill could emerge at the forefront of sponsorship strategies. This is because environments that attract sponsorship investments are becoming highly cluttered, which inhibits the effectiveness of these activities (Wakefield et al., 2020; Ryan & Fahy, 2012). Further, more consumers are recognizing the commercial intent of sponsorships and are more skeptical about the sincerity of brands that sponsor SCOs (Le Ferle, Kuber & Edwards, 2013). Fans that perceive a sponsoring brand as being driven by commercial motives tend to generate less favorable attitudes compared to brands that are evaluated as having genuine intentions (Joo et al., 2016). Hence, the degree of goodwill assigned to a sponsor is very important because it can dictate the degree of positive evaluations and subsequent attitudes towards the sponsorship agreement (Biscaia et al., 2013).

Gender
The abovementioned elements are frequently mentioned and studied within sports contexts. However, Wakefield et al. (2020) shed light on some understudied factors, including the influence of demographic and psychographic characteristics of consumers. While there are a host of such factors that could dictate sponsorship outcomes, fan gender, values as well as motivations related to equality for women are particularly relevant to this thesis. As such, a short discussion on gender effects within sports will follow.

There is a growing body of literature that recognizes sports participation and fandom is increasing among women all around the world. For example, it was found that female viewership of the National Football League (NFL) in the United States grew by almost 30% between 2009 and 2013, and women makeup almost half (45%) of the NFL’s fan base (Shane-Nichols, McCrohan & Chung, 2020). However, research on sponsorship through the lens of SCO gender (i.e., men’s versus women’s sports) has been understudied (Allison & Pope, 2021). Most information on fandom and fan characteristics has been revealed through research within men’s sports, which has contributed to the large gap in knowledge about fandom implications within women’s sports specifically. This is particularly problematic because as discussed
earlier, there are distinct fan motivations behind attending and supporting women’s professional SCOs. Such distinctions related to inclusivity and supporting women’s opportunities in sports suggest that fans of women’s SCOs could form different evaluations and attitudes towards sponsors within these contexts. The widely cited distinct fan motivations are somewhat recent findings, so sponsorship implications tied to this information have not been adequately researched. Evidently, there is a tremendous lack of research on women’s sports and even less related to sponsorship implications within these environments. As such, this thesis seeks to partially fill this knowledge gap through investigating sponsorship effects specifically in women’s professional sports in the United States.

The literature review provided information about prominent eras and concepts within sponsorships and a discussion on the current landscape of women’s sports. Clearly, women’s professional sports are understudied, particularly in the domain of sponsorships. Thus, the rest of the thesis is dedicated to applying integral concepts from sponsorship literature to the context of women’s sports. The following section constitutes a theoretical review of the relevant sponsorship concepts, and ultimately proposes a hypothesis model that guides the research.

Theoretical Review

This theoretical chapter is structured to closely mimic the ultimate casual-oriented hypothesis model for this research. As such, fan identification is used as an independent variable to examine the formation of attitudes towards the sponsorship. After establishing the direct relationship between identification and attitudes, this construct is examined through the lenses of fit and goodwill perceptions, which are proposed to partially mediate the relationship between identification and attitudes. Subsequently, the effects of fit and goodwill perceptions are also examined when controlled for identification and identification and fit, respectively. Some of the hypothesized relationships have been studied in literature, however, the path analytical approach to this research requires theoretical support in model development (Stage, Carter & Nora, 2004). As such, theories related to each of the proposed variables and relationships will be further discussed.

Identification

Identification refers to the degree in which consumers find an entity (i.e., SCO) to be personally relevant (Grau & Folse, 2007). Some research has sought to categorize sports fans along the spectrum from high to
low levels of identification (Hunt et al., 1999; Tapp & Clowes, 2002). As such, individuals with high identification towards an SCO reside within a fanatic category, which is reflected through fandom being a part of self and social concepts as well as enduring motivation to connect with the SCO (Hunt et al., 2009). Contrarily, individuals with low levels of SCO identification can be broadly defined as temporary fans with situational motivation because their interest in the SCO dissolves after the event ends (ibid). Extant research has revealed a correlation between the degree of fan identification and subsequent evaluations as well as attitudes towards SCOs and related entities, such as sponsors (Meenaghan, 2001; Howie, Yang, Vitell, Bush & Vorhies, 2015). There are a host of theoretical concepts that can be used to explain fandom and consumer identification towards an SCO.

**Social Identity Theory**

The social identity theory is very prevalent in sports fandom contexts and holds that part of an individual’s self-concept is derived from knowledge related being a member of a certain group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory can be best described through the lens of a highly identified fan because individuals can possess social identities that are formed on the basis of an attachment towards a certain SCO and related in-groups (Deitz, et al., 2009). Moreover, studies have shown that a higher level of fan identification has ultimately led to favorable attitudes and subsequent behaviors towards respective SCOs as well as associated entities (Madrigal, 2001). Indeed, the level of fan identification has an influence on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes used to evaluate SCO-related information, including sponsor stimuli.

Cognitive evaluations can encompass a consumer’s perceived belongingness to a social group, like being a member of an SCO’s fanbase (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In sports contexts, group membership of a fanbase is arguably constantly reinforced through both physical (i.e., attending live events) and digital channels. While live events forge tangible connections and foster strong emotional ties, technology provides boundless opportunities for sports fans to connect with each other and their favorite SCOs (Billings & Hardin, 2016). Thus, there are many channels that enable sports fans to feel a sense of belonging to a social group related to their favored SCO, regardless of geographical constraints. Secondly, affective evaluations refer to the level of emotional value that an individual derives from being part of a social group and through the social categorization process (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Sports are unique from other products and services partly because of the high level of emotion and passion attached to these contexts, which arise
from factors including competitiveness and uncertainty of outcomes in sports (Syzmanski & Wolfe, 2017). Thus, the affective aspects of being part of an SCO’s fanbase are inevitable because of, for example, the competition during sports seasons as well as uncertainty related to off-season moves (i.e., player trades). Lastly, an individual’s sense of belongingness to a social group can subsequently dictate their behaviors (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As such, when a consumer associates themselves as being part of a SCO fan base (i.e., social group), their evaluations, attitudes and behaviors will reflect some level of allegiance to the social group and allied members.

In-group favoritism is also tied to the social identity theory and refers to the tendency for individuals to have positive feelings towards other members (i.e., fans and sponsors) of their social group (Joo et al., 2016). This is evident, for example, through supportive signals (i.e., high-fives) that fans exchange upon realization they support the same SCO. Ultimately, SCO identification has also been shown to influence the cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes of sponsorships, which can all be related to the social identity theory (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). Hence, as a result of in-group membership, individuals that are part of a fan base generate favorable attitudes and behaviors towards respective SCOs, or associated entities, like sponsors. Importantly, classical conditioning and image transfer theories can further explain how evaluations and attitudes towards an SCO could transfer to a sponsoring brand.

**Classical Conditioning and Image Transfer Theories**

Classical conditioning can be tied to the phenomenon of identification (Joo et al., 2016; Speed & Thompson, 2000). This concept has been used in research to help understand how the relationship between two entities could dictate respective response outcomes (Speed & Thompson, 2000). Classical conditioning is a learning process that is initiated when two stimuli are continually paired together (Bagozzi, Gopinath & Nyer, 1999). Sponsorship strategies seek to display a strong connection between a sponsoring brand and SCO (Meenaghan, 2001). Thus, sponsorships leverage positive fan perceptions of an SCO to generate similar sentiments towards the sponsoring brand through a ‘halo effect’ (ibid). As such, classical conditioning could play an integral role in evaluations towards sponsoring brands. This is particularly true among highly identified fans because they are naturally exposed to more SCO-related stimuli (Hunt et al., 1999). As a result, these fans are more conditioned to generate favorable responses towards sponsoring entities compared to low-identified consumers because of their conditioned exposure to the sponsor-SCO relationship. Classical conditioning can help explain how frequency of exposure to the link between an
SCO and sponsor could generate positive attitudes among fans. Yet, the theory of image and/or meaning transfer can also provide a concrete explanation of this phenomenon.

Broadly, image and meaning transfer theories suggest that there is a bi-directional influence and potential benefit that arises from an association between two entities, and favorable perceptions of one entity are transferred towards another (Gwinner, 1997; McCracken, 1989). Image and meaning transfer are integral parts of sports sponsorship activities and seek to transmit positive perceptions of an SCO onto the sponsoring brand(s) to ultimately enhance brand image and awareness (Gwinner, 1997; Boshoff & Gerber, 2008). Individual SCOs encompass a host of unique representations and associations, which could then be transferred onto sponsoring entities (Dos Santos, Guardia, Campos, Calabuig-Moreno & Ko, 2018). When a brand becomes linked with an SCO via sponsorship, some of the associations connected to the SCO can also transfer over to the brand (Gwinner, 1997). As such, McCracken’s (1989) model is widely used to describe the theory of image transfer and is visually depicted in Figure 2.

*Figure 2: Meaning Transfer Model in Sponsorships (derived from McCracken, 1989)*

While McCracken’s (1989) model is based on celebrity endorsement situations, an SCO “assumes a role analogous to a celebrity endorser in this meaning transfer process” (Han et al., 2013, p. 303). As such, McCracken’s (1989) model is used as theoretical support, which involves three stages and suggests that the meanings consumers associate with an entity (i.e., SCO) can transfer over to brands (i.e., sponsors). The first stage posits that the combination of SCO-related stimuli (i.e., objects, persons, and contexts) present
within consumers’ culturally constituted world contributes to the holistic meaning that they attach to these entities (ibid). As such, this stage refers to all of the existing representations and associations that consumers hold in memory about an SCO, which can be both attitudinal and/or non-evaluative perceptions (Chien et al., 2005). It is argued that consumers with high identification towards SCOs are exposed to more SCO-related stimuli and in-turn could hold more associations compared to low-identified consumers.

The second step involves a pairing of the SCO and brand (via sponsorship activations), which transfers meanings from the SCO to the brand. McCracken (1989) argues for the importance of selecting and emphasizing SCO-related meanings that the sponsoring brand wishes to obtain from this relationship. Thus, within the contexts of women’s sports, it is argued when sponsors emphasize meanings that support gender equality, this could better facilitate the image transfer process wherein fans associate a brand with women empowerment. Activation and advertising strategies allow consumers to experience the interplay between two entities within their socially constituted world (Chien et al., 2005; McCracken, 1989). SCOs are deeply ingrained in highly identified consumers’ socially constituted world, which has a greater impact on their evaluations of associated brands compared to personally irrelevant entities. Hence, it is argued that consumer identification with SCOs play a role in the strength and ability for associated meanings to be transferred onto sponsoring brands.

The third and final step in this process occurs when consumers acquire meaning from consuming the sponsoring brands products or services. However, meaning transfer does not simply occur when an individual consumes a product. Instead, “the consumer must claim the meanings and work with them” (McCracken, 1989, p. 317). Thus, the third step requires individuals to take control of meanings. As such, it is argued that sponsor offerings with a clear connection to the respective SCO could help individuals assign stronger, SCO-related meaning to the brand. Moreover, it is argued that frequency of exposure to the sponsorship agreement (via physical and digital channels) could facilitate how individuals claim and subsequently transfer meaning from their favored SCO to a sponsoring brand. The abovementioned theories provide support for how different degrees of fan identification could influence cognitive process and subsequent attitudes towards the sponsorship. Thus:

**H1:** Fan identification has a positive direct effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship.
Extant research has shown that there are a host of factors that can be used to understand the attitude formation process for consumers (Meenaghan, 2001). As such, it is argued that solely measuring at fan identification in research is a poor way to understand the nature of attitudes towards a sponsorship. Rather, other variables could also indirectly explain the relationship between fan identification and attitudes towards a sponsorship. Thus, the following section incorporates the Elaboration Likelihood Model to explain the links between the degree of fan identification and perceptions of fit and goodwill as well as possible subsequent (indirect) attitudinal outcomes.

**Indirect Effect through Fit Perceptions**

As mentioned earlier, identification refers to the degree in which a consumer finds an SCO to be personally relevant and important (Grau & Folse, 2007). Higher degrees of fan identification have been linked to greater perceived fit between a sponsor and SCO, regardless of actual fit conditions (Smith, Pitts, Wang & Mack, 2015). Particularly highly identified consumers tend to find incongruence interesting, which can also result in recall and positive responses in low fit situations (Mazodier & Quester, 2014). This cognitive process can be explained through the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which holds that an individual’s degree of *motivation, ability, and opportunity* to elaborate about a situation will subsequently dictate how they form attitudes towards it (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). A basic illustration of the ELM is depicted in *Figure 3.*

*Figure 3: Elaboration Likelihood Model (derived from Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; EPM, 2019)*
It is argued that particularly highly identified (or fanatical fans) demonstrate vested interest in their respective SCO and represent an audience that is most motivated to process sponsorship situations. In addition, this group has greater ability and opportunity to process sponsorship information because they are naturally more exposed to SCO-related stimuli (including sponsors) as a result of their fandom in both physical and online channels (Fenton, Keegan & Parry, 2021). Ultimately, it is argued that highly identified fans exert greater cognitive effort into understanding the relationship between a sponsor and the respective SCO because of their greater motivation, ability, and opportunity to do so. Subsequently, the high level of elaboration that occurs within the minds of highly identified fans generates enduring attitudes towards sponsors, even in low-fit situations (Deitz et al., 2009). Thus, when highly identified fans draw conclusions about a sponsor of their favored SCO, regardless of fit condition, their overall attitudes could be enduring.

In contrast to highly identified fans, consumers with a low level of identification engage in slightly different cognitive and elaborative processes to make fit-related evaluations. It is argued that this is partly because of this group’s lack of motivation, ability, and opportunity related to processing sponsorship information. While highly identified fans use central routes to critically form evaluations and subsequent attitudes towards sponsors, consumers with minimal levels of identification engage peripheral routes of processing (Deitz et al., 2009; Demriel, 2019). As such, consumers with lower degrees of fan identification rely on heuristics and salient cues to process sponsorship information (Mazodier & Quester, 2014). This category of fans is not motivated to critically understand the relationship between an SCO and sponsors because they do not attribute the same level personal relevance, importance, or self-identification towards the SCO as highly identified fans. Thus, high fit sponsorships more easily facilitate information processing and subsequent recall among low identified fans because these situations provide salient cues about the relationship between a sponsor and SCO (ibid). As such, it is argued fan identification plays a role in fit perceptions and subsequent attitudes because the degree of identification influences the extent of elaboration and cognitive processing used to evaluate the situation. Thus:

**H2:** Fan identification has a positive effect on perceptions of fit (a), and a positive indirect effect on attitude towards the sponsorship through fit perceptions (b).
Indirect Effect through Goodwill Perceptions

While there is a theoretically supported link between identification and perceptions of fit, it is also hypothesized that perceptions of goodwill also play a role in attitude formation. The degree of fan identification has been shown to influence perceptions of goodwill related to a sponsor, and the attribution theory can be used to explain this phenomenon (Joo et al., 2016). Simply put, the attribution theory refers to consumer motivations to understand the underlying reasons behind events or situations (Woisetschläger et al., 2010). While attributions towards sponsor motives can be positive or negative, a negative attribution does not automatically imply that consumers will engage in harmful behaviors towards the sponsoring brands (Dean, 2002). Rather, if consumers believe that the sponsor’s primary motive to be for SCO exploitation (a negative attribution) but also perceive the sponsorship to provide a sense of goodwill or benefit to the SCO, the “ends justify the means” (ibid). As a result, commercial-related attributions (negative) could be rendered through perceptions that a sponsor is actually helping a SCO (positive). Thus, it is argued that consumer identification could influence the valance of such outcomes. A higher level of identification is associated with greater personal relevance attributed to the SCO, which leads to the SCO being a greater part of the individual’s self-concept (Fritz, Schoenmueller & Bruhn, 2017). Therefore, self-concept theories can help further explain how different degrees of identification could influence perceptions of goodwill attributed to a sponsor.

From a theoretical perspective, self-concept phenomena have been shown to influence perceptions of goodwill and authenticity attributed to a sponsor. Shared values and norms between consumers and brands facilitate the formation of positive perceptions and subsequent attitudes (Fritz et al., 2017). This can be partly explained through the concept of self-image congruity, which refers to a cognitive match that occurs between a consumer’s self-concept and a brand’s image (Sirgy, 1982). An object that enacts behaviors that are consistent with a specific cultural script will be regarded as authentic by the corresponding societal group (Goffman, 1959). Therefore, it is argued that consumers who are part of social groups (i.e., women’s SCO fanbases) may view a sponsoring brand as eliciting consistent values and thus behaving in altruistic ways. Thus, fan identification could play a role in goodwill perceptions in that higher identification represents a greater level of perceived shared values with a sponsor that are related to the women’s SCO. Moreover, when fans (especially those who are highly identified) evaluate a sponsor as being driven beyond commercial goals, they will perceive the brand as being part of the SCO in-group, and thus develop a level of favoritism towards the sponsor (Joo et al., 2016). In addition, sponsoring brands that reflect a
degree of belongness towards an SCO, will facilitate fan perceptions towards viewing the brand as part of their in-group (Woisetschläger et al., 2010). Contrarily, sponsors that are evaluated as being motivated by commercial gains tend to be perceived as ‘free riders’ and thus will not be accepted as part of the fans’ in-group (Speed & Thompson, 2000; Woisetschläger et al., 2010). A perception of shared values and norms between fans and SCO sponsors represent an ideal landscape to drive the formation of positive evaluations and subsequent attitudes.

Brand sponsors that convey values and norms consistent with the relevant others will generate a higher perceived cultural fit, and subsequently impact preferences (Fritz et al., 2017). This is very relevant because perceived cultural fit between consumers and brands has a very strong impact on (positive) perceptions and subsequent attitudes (ibid). In addition, authentic and/or altruistic brands help fulfill self-concepts, which increases the connection that individuals feel towards sponsoring firms (Oh, Prado, Korelo & Frizzo, 2019). Genuine brands help satisfy consumer self-congruence by supporting their identity (ibid). Ultimately, self-congruence addresses the innate human need for self-enhancement and further supports individual self-esteem through the feeling of belongingness (Fritz et al., 2017). Since being a fan of a SCO is such an integral part of highly identified fans’ self-concepts, sponsoring brands that support and reflect consistent values related to the SCO can further generate more positive evaluations and subsequent attitudes towards the sponsorship.

Self-concept theories help explain how fans, particularly those with higher degrees of identification will assign corresponding levels of goodwill to the sponsors of their favored SCO. However, since being a fan of an SCO is not a large part of low identified consumers self-concepts, their perceptions of goodwill are argued to be weaker. Moreover, fans that reflect a minimal attachment towards an SCO assign lower levels of goodwill towards sponsors (Dees, Hall, Tsuji & Bennett, 2010). This is partly because goodwill perceptions are largely based on the degree to which fans perceive a sponsor to be helping the SCO (Woisetschläger et al., 2010). As mentioned earlier, low identified fans reside within the temporary fan category, which is characterized by time-constricted and minimal affection towards the SCO (Hunt et al., 1999). As such, low identified fans are not as receptive to sponsorship activities that could support or benefit the SCO because their involvement is restricted by temporal aspects of the event. Nevertheless, regardless of fan identification level, the prevalence of gender equality in sports combined with an innate
human desire to act pro-socially could drive positively skewed perceptions of goodwill towards a sponsor (Costantini, Scalco, Sartori, Tur & Ceschi, 2019). Thus:

**H3:** _Fan identification has a positive effect on perceptions of goodwill (a) and a positive indirect effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship through goodwill perceptions (b)._ 

**Perceived Fit**

Fit refers to the extent in which consumers perceive a logical connection between entities in a sponsorship (Olson & Thjømøe, 2011). This concept is very prevalent in both sports and non-sport situations because both of these contexts seek to emphasize a salient partnership between at least two constituents in a sponsorship. There is an abundance of research on fit in sponsorships, and Bergkvist (2012) categorizes the concept along functional and image-related dimensions. As a reminder, functional fit refers to a relationship where the sponsor’s product(s) could be used by the SCO and image fit refers to when certain image aspects of both entities overlap, thus contributing to a less tangible connection. Nevertheless, both functional and image-based fit has been shown to facilitate the image transfer process in different situations (Bergkvist, 2012). Ultimately, consumers form fit perceptions by assessing host of attributes and associations that are shared between entities (Mazodier & Quester, 2014). Regardless of type of attribute category, fit between sponsorship constituents has been shown to be important because stronger fit is correlated to positive brand perceptions and subsequent attitudes (Ryan & Fahy, 2012; Woisetschläger et al., 2010). Further, a high degree of fit is widely considered to be beneficial because it upholds some level of balance and cognitive consistency that consumers seek (Wakefield et al., 2020; Woisetschläger et al., 2010). As such, cognitive theories and concepts can help explain the formation of fit perceptions from an individual perspective.

**Cognitive Consistency**

Conditions of fit between sponsoring brands and SCOs continue to dictate integral sponsorship effects including improving recall and enhancing brand attitudes (Meenaghan, 2001; Olson & Thjømøe, 2011). From a neuroscientific perspective, this is partly explained by the process of spreading activation within schematic memory (Olson & Thjømøe, 2011). When consumers are presented with stimuli that connect sponsorship constituents together, associative links are created via spreading activation (Smith, 2017). The strength of these links lead to a greater likelihood that consumers will be able to recall information and also
form positive attitudes towards the sponsoring brands (Olson & Thjømøe, 2011). In addition, the mere exposure effect is connected to the process of spreading activation in that the (greater) number of times a fan is presented with sponsor and sponsee-linked stimuli influences their ability to recall information (Mazodier & Quester, 2014). Hence, a higher fit generally reduces cognitive processing and facilitates the formation of associative links in memory. As a result, consumers tend to be better at processing and recalling sponsors in higher fit situations, and consumer responses towards sponsorships are largely based on cognitive congruity theories (Morgan, 2019).

Consumer perceptions of low fit situations equate to incongruence and cause cognitive tensions (Woisetschläger et al., 2010). These situations tend to prompt individuals to return to congruency through generating negative evaluations towards either the sponsee or sponsor. The strength of attitudes towards the SCO versus that of the sponsor dictate the entity that will garner the negative associations (ibid). Similarly, cognitive dissonance refers to an uncomfortable feeling that arises when consumers encounter contradicting propositions (Chang & Ko, 2016). Thus, it is argued that when consumers perceive a low fit situation in that entities have dissimilar functional or image-related attributes, they will experience some level of cognitive dissonance and have potentially negative evaluations of the sponsorship. Contrarily, when consumers perceive a salient connection on the basis functional or image-related attributes, cognitive dissonance will be avoided, thus leading to the formation of more positive perceptions and subsequent attitudes. Therefore:

**H4**: **When controlling for identification, perceptions of fit have a positive effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship.**

**Indirect Effect Through Goodwill**

Cognitive consistency theories can broadly explain how higher degrees of perceived fit between a sponsor and SCO can lead to higher recall and the formation of positive attitudes towards the sponsoring brand. However, perceptions of goodwill are also hypothesized to influence the relationship between perceived fit and attitudes towards the sponsorship. As a reminder, goodwill refers to perceived advantages that a sponsor provides to the SCO as a result of the relationship, which can take both monetary and non-financial forms (Morgan, 2019). However, research has shown that, regardless of fan identification, high fit conditions have caused consumers to rank sponsors as more socially responsible and altruistically driven
compared to low fit sponsorships (Demirel, 2019). Similarly, other research found that when perceptions of
fit are high, other evaluations of the sponsorship (including altruism perceptions) are correspondingly
strong (Pradhan, Malhotra, Moharana, 2019). Both of these phenomena can be explained through the
congruity theory and sponsor articulations.

The congruity theory posits that a higher level of congruence between stimuli will lead to cognitive balance
and thus more favorable evaluations, including those related to goodwill (Dean, 2002). Articulation refers
to sponsor efforts to emphasize the relationship or link between the brand and SCO, which usually take
form as either commercially- or non-commercially driven messages (Kang & Matsuoka, 2020). Per the
congruity theory, these sponsor articulations can trigger associative links in consumer memories, which
ultimately enhances perceptions of fit between a sponsor and SCO (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006).
When consumers understand or accept the linkage between a sponsor and SCO, attitudes tend to be more
positive, particularly when sponsor articulation is represented by non-commercial messages (Kang &
Matsuoka, 2020). Ultimately, existing research and theoretical support suggests that that there is a relevant
relationship between perceptions of fit and goodwill. Thus:

**H5:** When controlling for identification, perceptions of fit have a positive effect on perceptions of goodwill
(a) and an indirect effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship through goodwill perceptions (b).

**Perceived Goodwill**

The generation of goodwill is a prevalent driver of sponsorship investment that has transcended throughout
time (Ryan & Fahy, 2012). This concept refers to consumer perceptions regarding the benefit provided by
the sponsor in terms of enhancing and promoting the event as well as assisting the sport community and
SCO (Meenaghan, 2001; Morgan, 2019). Research in sponsorships has found that consumers elicit more
positive emotions towards sponsors that “bestow benefit on the consumer’s favored activity” (Meenaghan,
2001, p. 106). This is particularly relevant among highly identified fans because they tend to appreciate the
support of sponsors in improving their favored SCOs compared to fans that are part of a low identified
category. Goodwill has been connected the concept of altruism, which refers to the degree in which a
sponsor is genuine in their support of a sponsee (Joo et al., 2016). Thus, sponsorship strategies partly seek
to generate a ‘halo of goodwill’ through reflecting a degree of concern for the SCO and are driven by
altruistic motives. Yet despite the subtleness of sponsorships, consumers are becoming more aware of
marketing initiatives that are driven predominantly by profits (Le Ferle et al., 2013). As such, many consumers have developed defense mechanisms towards commercialized campaigns and are more skeptical towards these tactics (ibid). In general, fans seek to understand whether a brand is driven to support or exploit an entity through sponsorship (Meenaghan, 2001; Howie et al., 2015). Judgement of brand motivations are important because research suggests that consumers’ reactions to sponsorship activities are partly dictated by their perceptions of why a brand is sponsoring an SCO (Yuksel, McDonald & Joo, 2016; Le Ferle et al., 2013). This mechanism can be broadly explained through the attribution theory, which helps predict a correlation between consumer perceptions and subsequent attitudes towards a sponsoring brand.

The Attribution Theory

The attribution theory posits that consumers are naturally driven to identify or justify the underlying reasons of situations or events (Woisetschläger et al., 2010; Joo et al., 2016). While sponsors do not publicly reveal reasons behind engaging in such activities, consumers still tend to make inferences about brand motives (Han et al., 2013). When individuals perceive a brand to be driven by goodwill and/or altruistic-related motives, their reactions tend to be positive (ibid). Contrarily, consumers that perceive a brand to be driven by commercial or self-serving motives typically cite more negative evaluations towards the sponsorship. This partly because humans have an innate desire to behave in a prosocial manner and will thus evaluate brands’ ability to help them accomplish such aspirations (Costantini et al., 2019). Consumers are more informed and demand authenticity from brands, which has led to a general neglect towards brands that engage in insincere behavior, like sponsoring a SCO strictly to achieve self-fulfilling and/or commercial objectives (Holt, 2002). Thus, individuals’ causal analysis of a certain situation can dictate their subsequent attitudes (Deitz, et al., 2009). While attributions can be influenced by a host of factors related to the individual and context, this process allows for people to feel a greater sense of control over the environment (ibid).

Most fans understand the commercial intent behind sponsorship strategies, but they also value sponsors that display a motivation to achieve social goals (Woisetschläger et al., 2010; Demriel, 2019). Therefore, it is valuable for sponsoring brands to utilize articulation messaging to reflect a desire to accomplish both social/SCO-related goals in addition to the commercial gains that are an integral component of sponsorship strategies (Kang & Matsuoka, 2020). Ultimately, consumers make attributions about sponsor motives, and such attributions serve as a key determinant of sponsorship reciprocity. As such, sponsors that are
perceived as sincere, altruistic, and providing a sense of goodwill towards the sponsored entity have been shown to achieve more positive sponsorship outcomes compared to sponsors that are viewed as being driven strictly by commercial motives. Thus:

**H6:** When controlling for identification and perceived fit, perceptions of goodwill have a positive effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship.

**Gender**

Since this research is focused on women’s professional sports, gender of respondents could play an interesting role in evaluations and subsequent attitudes towards the sponsorship agreement. Although men’s and women’s sports have similar rules, the stereotypical distinction lies in the biological strength and value that is associated with male versus female sports (Ridinger & Funk, 2006). Many stakeholders in women’s sports agree that the lack of aggression compared to men’s sports is rendered through the stylistic, skillful, and virtuous aspects of female counterparts (Allison & Pope, 2021). As such, research has found that motivations to attend women’s sports include aesthetic quality, social aspects, wholesome environments, viewing positive role models and affordability (Ridinger & Funk, 2006). However, perhaps the most prominent and recurring motivation to consume women’s sports is because it lends individuals the opportunity to support women in sports and gender equality (Ridinger & Funk, 2006; Trail & Kim, 2011; Funk et al., 2002; Farrell et al., 2011; Heere & Newland, 2013; Guest & Luijten, 2017). Spectatorship motives have shifted from hedonic to utilitarian perspectives because rather than attending women’s sporting events solely for the purpose of personal pleasure or fulfillment, more fans are intentionally watching to support equality and opportunities for women in sports (Armstrong, 1999). While women’s sports attract a relatively equal ratio of male and female fans, research suggests that women rank the gender equality aspect of spectatorship much higher (Morning Consult, 2021; Ridinger & Funk, 2006). This can be further explained through fundamental social identity theories and related concepts.

**Social Identity Theory**

The social identity theory posits that individuals experience collective identity as a result of their membership to a particular group, like on the basis of gender (Stets & Burke, 2000). As such, group members tend to engage in self-categorization and subsequently develop an “us versus them” mentality related to the in-group and out-group, respectively (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In an effort to maintain a
positive social identity, individuals will make intergroup comparisons to reflect a favorable bias towards their respective in-group (Joo et al., 2016). Thus, the motivation among female fans to watch and support women’s sports could be partly explained through the social identity theory. Fans that identify as female perceive women athletes (and SCOs by extension) as part of their in-group on the basis of gender category, which also justifies the finding that female fans are more motivated to support gender equality in sports compared to male counterparts (Ridinger & Funk, 2006). More specifically, female fans could perceive their support for women’s SCOs as an avenue to show gender solidarity because “they can empathize with the disenfranchisement of women in other areas of society” (Ridinger & Funk, 2006, p. 163). This motive is broadly related to the feminist theory, which posits that subordination of certain societal groups (i.e., women) can be used to understand the difference between life experiences and related evaluations among men and women (Hirudayaraj & Shields, 2019).

The social identity and feminist theories collectively explain how the broad social category of females has been strengthened through a mutual understanding that all members of this group share salient characteristics, values, and personal life experiences related to gender inequalities. As such, women could evaluate female-oriented sponsors as being part of their in-group due to shared characteristics, values, and gendered experiences, which in-turn leads to favoritism and more positive attitudes. Thus, organizations that demonstrate some allegiance to the broad female social category could generate more positive attitudes among members of this group. Ultimately, female fans could assign greater levels of personal relevance and in-group favoritism towards the women’s SCO sponsor, leading to the formation of more positive attitudes towards compared to male respondents. Thus:

**H7:** *Women respondents will cite more positive attitudes towards the sponsorship, regardless of sponsor condition.*

**Sponsor Category**

While it has been hypothesized that there are some relationships between fan identification, perceived fit and perceived goodwill, it is also important to consider the position of the sponsor categories that are presented in this study. Sponsorship category was selected on the basis of gendered position to better understand how strategic alignment can impact the effectiveness of sponsorships in women’s professional
sports. As such, a women-oriented and gender-neutral category were selected and it is argued that the former category will generate more positive perceptions and attitudes compared to the latter.

**Cognitive Consistency**

Returning to cognitive consistency theory, the salient connection between a *women*-oriented category and a *women’s* SCO provides a greater level of consistency or fit compared to the gender-neutral condition. In addition, since both a women-positioned entity and women’s SCO are within the same gender-related social category, it is argued that perceptions of altruism and goodwill will be higher. Ultimately the consistency in terms of strategic alignment and shared values between a women-oriented sponsor and a women’s SCO could subsequently lead to more favorable evaluations and attitudes compared to a gender-neutral category. Thus:

**H8:** *The women-owned business category will cite higher evaluations and attitudes compared to the large national bank category.*

**Research Hypothesis Models**

*Figure 4* illustrates the proposed hypothesis model for H1-H6, which will be used for the path analysis. In addition, *Figure 5* is a basic model for the hypotheses excluded from the path analyses, which address H7 and H8.

*Figure 4: Research Hypothesis Model*
Research Methodology

Research Philosophy

Research philosophy contributes conventions of theoretical thinking and broadly refers to a set of beliefs and assumptions about the generation of knowledge (Moon & Blackman, 2014). As such, there are three types of assumptions (ontological, epistemological, and axiological) that “constitute a credible research philosophy, which will underpin methodological choice, research strategy and data collection techniques and analysis procedures” (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016, p.124). The nature of these assumptions falls on a spectrum between objectivism and subjectivism. While objectivism accepts the notion of a single reality, subjectivism posits that multiple realities exist, and knowledge acquisition is an iterative process (ibid).

Ontological Assumptions

Ontological assumptions refer to those about the realities encountered in research and dictate the way research objects are viewed and studied (Saunders et al., 2016). These types of assumptions influence how the world of business and management is viewed and thus the subsequent research choice for a project (ibid). As such, based on the aforementioned information, the ontological assumptions in this research are more aligned with an objectivist perspective where a universal reality exists. This is because the research is guided by the assumption that a sponsor’s distinct degree of strategic alignment with the SCO either does or does not impact evaluations and subsequent attitudes towards the sponsor.

Epistemological Assumptions

Epistemological assumptions refer to those about human knowledge and specifically “what constitutes acceptable, valid, and legitimate knowledge” and how it can be communicated to others (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 127). Within business and management practices, situations and contexts tend to be multifaceted. As a result, this leads to the generation of various types of knowledge, which can range from numerical and
factual to more visual and interpretive forms (ibid). Since all types of knowledge can be considered legitimate, different business and management academics embrace various epistemological assumptions in research. Yet the perspective in this research posits that the incorporation numerical data is best suited for measuring the evaluative and attitudinal differences between individuals conditioned with one of two sponsorship categories. Thus, both ontological and epistemological assumptions are better aligned with an objectivist point of view.

**Axiological Assumptions**

Lastly, axiological assumptions are important to consider because they refer to the extent and ways in which a researcher’s personal values can influence the research process (Saunders et al., 2016). While biases are practically inevitable in research, it is important to mention my personal values as a researcher could influence approaches, structures, and outcomes of the research. However, the objectivist nature of assumptions holds that the role of personal values is partially detached from research approaches (ibid). Based on the abovementioned assumptions, research philosophies will be subsequently discussed.

**Philosophical Approach(es)**

While there are five main philosophical approaches in business and management practices, two distinct philosophies will be discussed to provide a basis of argumentation for the ultimate selection of method. As shown in Figure 6, two common research philosophies that represent distinct approaches to understanding the social world are interpretivism and positivism. **Interpretivism** emphasizes meanings and how humans of various cultural backgrounds experience different social realities, which represents a degree of fluidity in research (Saunders et al., 2016). As such, research approaches aligned with an interpretivist perspective seek to develop richer understandings of social worlds and contexts. Thus, methods and data collection techniques are more qualitative in nature and tend to rely on researcher interpretation to form adequate contributions (ibid). An interpretivist approach to research would be interesting for deeply investigating the meanings that individuals attach to sponsorship situations. However, the comparative lack of general knowledge about women’s sports necessitates research that can draw more generalizable conclusions before analyzing detailed meanings within the minds of consumers. Thus, a positivist and quantitative approach is argued to be better suited for this research.
Figure 6: Research Onion, derived from Saunders et al. (2016)

Positivism refers to an approach of working with causal relationships in data to contribute unambiguous knowledge that can typically be generalized (Saunders et al., 2016). Consistent to the ontological and epistemological assumptions put forth, this approach entails universalism that seeks to generate accurate knowledge through the use of quantitative data approaches (ibid). Moreover, it relies on scientific method to yield systematic and factual data that is minimally influenced by researcher interpretation or bias (ibid). Yet it is important to note that positivism depends on experience as an accurate source of knowledge and lacks insight into complex issues (Dudovskiy, 2022). Nevertheless, positivist researchers use existing theory and deductive reasoning to develop hypotheses, which are tested then confirmed or denied (Williamson, Burstein & McKemmish, 2002). Thus, this research takes on a positivist approach and uses deduction to generate theoretically supported hypotheses, which will be subsequently tested through a quantitative approach.

Quantitative research is advantageous because it provides a structured way to collect ‘hard,’ reliable data, which can be generalized (Rahman, 2016). As such, this research incorporates quantitative methods and collects data via surveys. Surveys were used because they offer a higher representation of the entire population and also constitute a low-cost approach to data collection (Queirós, Faria, Almeida, 2017).
However, it is important to mention that dependability on results is largely reliant on the survey structure and respondent interpretations of the questions (ibid). While qualitative approaches focus on deep meanings, they tend to exclude contextual sensitivities, and results are less generalizable, yet generalizability is important to this research (Rahman, 2016). As such, a positivist perspective and quantitative methods guide this research to address how the degree of strategic alignment could influence evaluations and subsequent attitudes towards sponsors in women’s sports contexts.

Research Design

The research design was administered in two parts. First, a pilot study was conducted to determine which sponsor categories to be used in the main survey and also gain feedback on schematics and survey structure. Next, the main study was distributed to ultimately help answer hypotheses presented in Figures 4 and 5, and the overarching research question(s).

Pilot Survey

Before distributing the main survey for this research, a pilot study was conducted to determine product categories to be compared as well as to gain input on the structure, language, and survey completion time. Since it was very challenging to pick a gender-neutral product category with no evidential support, it was necessary to distribute a preliminary survey that would lend a foundation for category selection. Thus, the pilot study was primarily administered to provide a basis for systematically selecting the two product categories to be compared in the main study, and the results from this survey can be found in Appendix 4. The pilot study respondents were conditioned with one of three product categories: a prominent beer brand, a large national bank, and a women-owned business (henceforth “WOB”). The former two categories were selected because they comprise of some of the most prominent sponsors within women’s professional sports in the United States today, which are beer brands and financial services. The WOB was included to represent a women-positioned category because a comparison of gender neutral (i.e., large national bank) and arguably male-skewed (i.e., prominent beer brand) sponsors would not have adequately addressed the research question(s). Moreover, a “women-owned business” was intentionally selected instead of a female-oriented product category (i.e., cosmetics or shapewear), because such categories could isolate some of women’s sports most avid fans. Since women’s sports have a large LGBT+ following, the inclusion of a highly feminine product category in the study would assume that all women’s sports fans are (1) female and/or (2) identify as stereotypically feminine individuals (Guest & Luijten, 2017). The pilot survey
collected responses from 18 individuals who consist of a network of family and friends, which enabled the assurance of even ratios of genders and ages.

Aside from being conditioned with one of three product categories, the survey had the same structure and questions for all respondents. After answering basic demographic questions (i.e., age and identified gender), respondents were presented with the same fictitious media story about a sponsorship agreement between one of the three product categories and the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) in the United States. The NWSL was selected as the SCO for both the pilot and main study because professional women’s soccer has gained the most traction and attention in the United States. As such, it is assumed that American respondents would be most familiar with the gender equality-related issues surrounding women’s professional soccer. After reading the fictitious media story, respondents were asked to answer a series of questions that sought to gauge their perceptions of fit and goodwill between their respective sponsor condition and the NWSL. Subsequently, the survey provided a rational indication of the product categories that cited the most variance related to perceptions of fit and goodwill towards sponsors among respondents.

The results from the pilot survey (Appendix 4) confirmed the conjecture that the WOB product category would generate the most favorable responses. These results provided validity to comparing product categories on the basis of (gendered) strategic alignment rather than category personality or specific offerings. The pilot survey results also indicated that the large national bank provided the most variance in responses because most attitudes towards the prominent beer brand category were quite similar. One possible explanation for this is the arguably stronger connection between beer and soccer compared to that of banks and soccer. Generally, beer brands are prominent sponsors of SCOs and there is a greater functional fit between beer and soccer because drinking beer and watching soccer go hand-in-hand. Of the two relatively gender-neutral categories, the large national bank cited the most variance in responses and was thus selected as the category to compare to the WOB.

It is important to mention that since the primary purpose of the pilot study was to determine two product categories to be compared in the main study, respondents were not asked about their identification towards women’s SCOs. While identification is a very prominent variable in sports contexts, the pilot study did not seek to understand antecedents that could have caused respondents to perceive more or less fit, goodwill
and attitudes towards one of three product categories. Thus, identification-related questions were saved for the main study.

Main Survey

The main survey (Appendix 5) for this research used Qualtrics Software provided by Copenhagen Business School and expanded on the pilot study. As such, the main survey included questions about fan identification and conditioned respondents with one of two categories, namely the large national bank or women-owned business (“WOB”). Based on feedback from the pilot study, some of the language was simplified for clarification and the main survey was designed to last around five minutes to boost completion. The survey landing page informed respondents about the purpose of the research and also confirmed that their information and data would be stored safely and kept confidential. Individuals were initially asked about basic demographic characteristics (i.e., age and identified gender) followed by questions that sought to gauge respondent identification towards women’s SCOs in general.

Fan identification was measured through investigating the level of importance and personal relevance that respondents felt towards women’s SCOs. The questions were derived from existing and validated scales (Figure 7), and some of the scale items were slightly modified to suit the research. Rather than asking about identification towards a specific women’s team or athlete, the questions intended to reveal respondents’ general attachment and identification towards women’s SCOs. Since the overall perspective of this research is not bound to a specific sport but rather focuses on the marginalization women’s professional sports in general, the inclusions of team- or athlete-specifics could have limited actual identification towards women’s professional sports. Moreover, with the exception of a few sports, female professional leagues, teams, and athletes face similar challenges of gender and pay equality. After answering identification-related questions, individuals were presented with the following fictional media story about a sponsorship agreement between the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) and either a large national bank or WOB:

“On average, male professional athletes in Major League Soccer (MLS) earn salaries of almost $400,000 per year. Yet 75% of female professional athletes in the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) earn less than $31,000 per year, which forces these women into working additional jobs to cover basic living costs.”
In response to this, a [large national bank / women-owned business] recently signed a long-term deal in conjunction with the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) to address the salary pay gap between men’s and women’s professional soccer in the United States. Ultimately, this partnership seeks to increase advertising and endorsement opportunities for women in the NWSL and implement promotions where a percentage of business profits go towards financially supporting the most marginalized athletes in the NWSL.”

The sponsor category was assigned to individuals randomly (via a Qualtrics algorithm) and respondents were required to indicate an understanding that the agreement was fictious. The NWSL in the United States was used as an SCO in the media story because women’s soccer has gained the most traction with regards to gender equality in the United States and thus seemed most suitable for the demographic of respondents. In addition, while it is recognized that gaining formal permission from the NWSL would have been better-practice for a larger-scale study, the main focus is on sponsor category-related attitudes, so this was not deemed a vital priority to the research. After the media story, respondents answered a series of questions about the fictitious agreement between the NWSL and the sponsor they were conditioned with. As a reminder, these evaluative factors are perceived fit, perceived goodwill, as well as attitudes towards the sponsorship, and survey questions were derived from preexisting and validated scales used in other, related research (Figure 7). To remain consistent and accurate, all items (except for demographic questions) were measured by a 7-point Likert scale. As such, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the associated statements or phrases. A table with all survey questions (besides gender) and associated pre-validated/reliable scale studies is depicted in Figure 7.

The main survey pursued a convenience sampling technique and was distributed entirely online to American citizens or residents over the age of 18 years old. The relatively small time-window and budget for data collection provided grounds for convenience sampling, but it is recognized that this approach could fail to represent the entire population (Jager, Putnick & Bornstein, 2017). In addition, while gender inequalities in sport exist all around the world, American respondents were selected because it was assumed this group has the most exposure and knowledge about the on-going fight for gender equality in women’s professional soccer in the United States. In addition, gender equality is viewed differently across countries, so including non-Americans in the study could have offered incomplete perceptions of inequalities that exist specifically in the US (Poushter & Fetterolf, 2019). Moreover, it is argued that there
is less psychological distance and perceived inequalities between women’s and men’s soccer in some other countries due to the structural differences in the way the sports are governed. For example, some women’s professional soccer (‘football’) teams in Sweden share club names, facilities, and some of the same sponsors as male counterparts (Smith, 2021). As such, many individuals in Sweden are football fans of clubs regardless of team gender, which is just one example of how the sport structure in some countries promotes equality rather than diminishes it. Ultimately, to reduce culture bias and generate responses from individuals with some personal awareness of issues relating to women’s professional soccer in the United States, American respondents were chosen for this study.

Social media platforms, including Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram served as the main avenue for survey distribution. LinkedIn and Instagram surveys were posted to my personal accounts and thus mostly reached people in my immediate network on these platforms. Facebook provides more digital affordances, which made it possible to share the survey to people beyond my personal network (Vaast, Safadi, Lapointe & Negoita, 2017). As such, in addition to posting the survey to my personal Facebook account, I also shared the survey in specific Facebook groups that I assumed would be most receptive to responding to the survey. These groups consisted of “Fans of US Women’s Soccer” and “Adult Women Soccer Players” (in the United States). Yet distributing the survey to these groups represents some level of bias because I was targeting respondents with an assumed higher level of identification towards the SCO in question (i.e., NWSL). As such, sharing surveys with these soccer-driven individuals could have increased the average indicated level of identification among respondents. Nevertheless, it is argued that a greater number of highly identified fan respondents allows for an understanding of how a sponsorship in women’s sports could affect this particularly devoted fan group.

Figure 7: Survey Items and Associated Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Women's professional sports is a domain that interests me</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Being a fan of women's professional sports is important to me</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I often acknowledge that I am a fan of women's professional sports</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Others would describe me as a typical fan of women's professional sports</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. I feel a strong attachment towards at least one women's professional sport and/or team

6. I would experience a loss if I had to stop being a fan of my preferred women's professional sports team

Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa & Biscaia (2014)

7. When I talk about my preferred women's professional sports team, I usually say "we" rather than "they"

Heere & James (2007); Gwinner & Swanson (2003)

8. Women’s sports are: Important, relevant, useful, valuable, beneficial, interesting, significant, appealing, essential, wanted

Zaichkowsky (1985)

### Perceived Fit

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>There is a logical connection between the NWSL and a large national bank/WOB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speed &amp; Thompson (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The NWSL and a large national bank/WOB sponsor fit well together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>The NWSL and a large national bank/WOB stand for similar things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>It makes sense to me that a large national bank/WOB would sponsor the NWSL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>The image of the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) and the image of a large national bank/WOB are similar, consistent, typical, representative, complementary, high fit, makes sense</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Perceived Goodwill

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>The NWSL would benefit from this sponsorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speed &amp; Thompson (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Commercial motives are NOT the main reason why a large national bank/WOB undertook this sponsorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alay (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>The large national bank/WOB is involved with the NWSL because they believe women's professional soccer deserves support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speed &amp; Thompson (2000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. The large national bank/WOB likely has the best interests of the NWSL at heart
5. The large national bank/WOB is sincere in their support of the NWSL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude towards Sponsorship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Overall, my attitudes towards a large national bank/WOB sponsoring the NWSL is positive, favorable, good, likeable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ultimately, the main survey sought to better understand how the strategic alignment between a sponsor and SCO could drive sponsorship outcomes in a women’s professional sports contexts. As such, individuals were asked questions about demographic characteristics, fan identification, perceived fit and goodwill as well as attitudes towards the sponsorship. As shown in Figure 7, all of the items in the questionnaire were derived from pre-existing, valid and reliable scales. Lastly, to boost response rate, a $40 reward was given to one individual upon survey completion. The data analysis approach will be discussed next.

Data Analysis

The main survey was available for slightly over a week and generated 185 total responses. However, 130 people completed the survey, two of which identified within the non-binary gender category. As such, the data analysis excluded incomplete survey data and responses from non-binary folks to avoid assumptions and ensure accuracy of gender-related results. Ultimately, the research garnered useable responses from 128 individuals, and sample sizes for both sponsor conditions (n=64) were equal. Survey data from Qualtrics was then exported to a software program, which ran structural equation modeling to examine the relationships between variables.

Structural Equation Modeling

This research utilized structural equation modeling (SEM) to analyze data and address the presented hypothesis model (Figure 4). Multiple regression analysis is another statistical technique but is best suited for investigating observed variables and predominantly deals with analyzing direct effects between independent and dependent variables (Mahfuz, 2020). This approach fails to capture potential indirect effects and relationships between independent or mediating variables (ibid). Thus, a multiple regression
analysis was not deployed in this research because it is less flexible and measures individual co-efficient values between independent and dependent variables rather than testing overall models, like SEM (Sudano & Perzynski, 2013). Simply put, SEM draws on many different disciplines and comprises of statistical techniques that aid in measuring and analyzing relationships between variables.

SEM is well-suited for testing direct and indirect effects between multi-faceted variables that are presumed to have causal relationships, like those presented in this research (Crockett, 2012; Fan, Chen, Shirkey, Jogn, Wu, Park & Shao 2016). Identification, perceived fit and goodwill, as well as attitudes are complex and cannot be directly measured, particularly using only one questionnaire item. Thus, all four components are considered latent variables that require observable indicators for measurement (Fan et al., 2016). SEM addresses the immeasurability of latent constructs though the incorporation of observed variables, which come in the form of items on a questionnaire in this research (Sturgis, 2016). While there are many flavors of SEM, this research model will be represented via a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) followed by a Path Analysis. CFA helps with understanding how well questionnaire items measure each latent construct whereas the path analysis lends a way to visually depict direct, indirect, as well as total effects within research hypothesis models (Sturgis, 2016). Performing SEM efficiently requires software, which was also provided by Copenhagen Business School.

There are a host of statistical programs that can be used for SEM including AMOS (an extension of SPSS), Lavaan (an extension of R), STATA, and others (Sturgis, 2016). While SPSS software provides an intuitive way to analyze data, logistical issues with the AMOS package forced me to consider other options. Lavaan is capable of running complex SEM analyses but established skills within the parent program, R, are very advantageous for using this software (Rosseel, 2012). As such, STATA was the statistical software selected for the data analysis, which is capable of running both CFA and path analyses, which will be further discussed.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis
A CFA is a part of SEM that examines whether relationships between a set of observed variables (also called “indicators”) and associated latent constructs exist (Jackson, Gillaspy & Purc-Stephenson, 2009). Observed variables can be directly measured and thus serve as a way to represent the latent variables (Fan et al., 2016). For this research, observed variables are the individual questionnaire items that are associated
with each of the overarching latent constructs (*Appendix 6*). Although this research pulled questionnaire items from existing studies with pre-validated and reliable scales, a CFA was conducted to further ensure that the selected observed variables for this research represent the latent variables well.

After developing a model that depicts each of the latent constructs and associated observed variables (i.e., individual items from the questionnaire), one factor loading representing the link between the sets of observed variables and respective latent constructs was constrained to a value of 1. Within CFA analyses, this constraint is necessary because it provides variables with a scale, which enables for the subsequent comparison of latent variables (Schweizer, Troche & DiStefano, 2019; Sturgis, 2016). After the constraints were placed on the model, a data estimation was performed in Stata, and results for the bank and WOB conditions can be found in *Figures 8 and 9*, respectively.

*Figure 8: CFA Results (Bank Condition)*

The output of the CFA estimation in Stata included factor loadings between latent constructs and respective observed variables as well as the associated error terms. The factor loadings in CFA represent the relationship between a specific indicator and the associated latent construct (Brown & Moore, 2012). As
such, an initial glance at the factor loadings suggests that most of the variance in responses can be explained by latent factors because most values exceed a given threshold of 0.5 (Arifin & Yusoff, 2016). Since not all variance of an indicator is shared, the remaining variance is represented by the value of the residual or error terms depicted in the small circles by each observed variable (Meyer, 2020). This associated variance does not aid in the measurement of the respective latent construct and is referred to as measurement error related to questionnaire items (ibid). Lastly, the CFA estimation output includes the (standardized) relationships between latent constructs and associated residuals (or “disturbance”) terms, which will be further analyzed in the path analysis section.

**Figure 9: CFA Results (WOB Condition)**

The results indicate that the observed variables have a statistically significant (p<0.05) relationship to the all of the respective latent constructs, with the exception of one goodwill-related item (see Appendix 6 for all specific p values). Nevertheless, preliminary results indicate that the goodwill items are predictive of the outcome variable (attitudes), but one questionnaire item is not strongly related to the other four. Although the items associated with goodwill were derived from existing scales, there is a lack of quantitative approaches that measures goodwill and altruism in sports settings, which warrants future research in this
domain. Nevertheless, results from the CFA confirm the validity of other research scales and demonstrate that the observed variables (i.e., questionnaire items) accurately measure respective latent constructs.

Path Analyses
Path analyses, which are a specific analytical approach within SEM, for both sponsor category conditions were subsequently analyzed to better understand the relationships between the latent variables. The path models were developed through drawing hypothesized relationships between the specified variables in this research. There is only one hypothesis model for this research because hypothesized relationships between variables in the two path analyses were identical. Following the development of the path model(s) in Stata, an estimation analysis was performed for each sponsor category condition. The estimation includes standardized coefficients because these values allow for a comparison of the relative importance between variables in a single model (Lefcheck, 2021).

Path analyses are advantageous for a host of reasons, including the ability to visually represent relationships and test both direct and indirect effects between multiple independent and dependent variables (Stage et al., 2004; Sturgis, 2016). However, hypotheses within a path diagram require theoretical support from the researcher because it typically cannot distinguish if the correlation between variables represents a causal effect of variable A on variable B or vice versa (Stage et al., 2004). Path analyses are most appropriate in situations that involve testing of hypotheses based on theory and where there is a relatively limited number of hypotheses to test (ibid). Since this research used deductive reasoning to develop theoretically supported hypotheses, a path analysis approach seemed appropriate. Ultimately, a path analysis was selected over other methods because such models represent visual ways to understand the data and quantify the relationships between variables, which are represented by path coefficient values (Fan et al., 2016).

Path coefficients (located along paths between variables) indicate the direct effect of one variable on another variable (Stage et al., 2004). There are two types of values that can be used in path analyses, namely standardized and unstandardized. The former refers to values that are estimated from correlations, and thus can be used to compare the relative importance of different variables in relationships (Stage et al., 2004). Since this research seeks to understand relationships between variables, standardized coefficients are used in both path analyses.
Lastly, the error terms in the path analyses are depicted in small circles by latent constructs and represent variance that cannot be explained by the relationship between two variables (Crowson, 2020a). There are different reasons for why error values emerge in data analysis and research. Some of the unexplained error could be due to the survey itself (i.e., the questionnaire wording or length) or other factors including the temperature of the room where respondents took the survey or the device in which they completed the survey (Sturgis, 2016). Nevertheless, the path analyses for both sponsor categories will predominantly focus on the direction and strength of co-efficient values. The results from the path analyses for both sponsor category conditions will be thoroughly analyzed following a short discussion on the data reliability and validity.

Reliability and Validity

A discussion on the reliability and validity of the data is important to determine the degree in which the results are replicable and serve as an accurate representation of the entire population (Kimberlin & Winterstein, 2008). As such, a discussion on the overall models’ goodness of fit will help establish how closely the observed data match what was expected, as depicted through the research model in Figure 4. Subsequently, the data analysis will include a detailed discussion on results from the path analyses as well as general findings, both of which help answer the presented research question(s).

Goodness of Fit

Within data analysis, the p value is a popular proxy used to measure statistical significance regarding the relationship between variables. However, since this research used a convenience rather than randomized sampling approach, it is not confidently argued (or assumed) that the sample is representative of the entire population (Hirschauer, Grüner, Mußhoff, Becker & Jantsch, 2020). As such, the p values that exceed an “acceptable” threshold (i.e., p>0.05) should be taken with a grain of salt because of the convenience-based approach to data collection. Nevertheless, only three relationships across both models cited p values exceeding the given threshold for this research. In addition, chi squared and other related tests that measure goodness of fit were not pursued in the analysis because such proxies are best suited for larger sample sizes (Crowson, 2020b). Thus, the coefficient of determination (R²) value, which helps explain the variability in one variable that can be explained by others, will be used to assess the models’ goodness of fit (Cornell & Berger, 1986; Frost, 2019).
A crucial step in SEM analyses is to investigate the model’s goodness of fit, which is how well the proposed model fits the data (Fan et al., 2016). A preliminary goodness of fit analysis revealed that the model had a relatively poor degree of fit. However, this initial examination relied on p value significance and chi squared tests, which have drawbacks for convenience samples (Crowson, 2020b; Hirschauer et al., 2020). In addition, since this research has a small sample size (particularly for SEM), it is important to look at other indices that help gauge goodness of fit. As such, the overall R² output was examined to measure goodness of fit because it can be used to explain variation in the data in regression models (Frost, 2019). More specifically, R² values indicate the degree of variance in the dependent variable that can be collectively explained through the independent variable(s) (ibid).

**Figure 10: R² values for bank condition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bank</th>
<th>Fitted</th>
<th>Var. predicted</th>
<th>Residual</th>
<th>R-squared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goodwill</td>
<td>0.8275199</td>
<td>0.2690066</td>
<td>0.5585133</td>
<td>0.3250757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fit</td>
<td>1.65477</td>
<td>0.1614311</td>
<td>1.493339</td>
<td>0.097555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>1.44018</td>
<td>1.006102</td>
<td>0.434078</td>
<td>0.6985945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.9696026</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 11: R² values for WOB condition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WOB</th>
<th>Fitted</th>
<th>Var. predicted</th>
<th>Residual</th>
<th>R-squared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goodwill</td>
<td>0.597331</td>
<td>0.2625656</td>
<td>0.3347654</td>
<td>0.4395646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fit</td>
<td>0.4787582</td>
<td>0.1192399</td>
<td>0.3595183</td>
<td>0.2490608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>0.789284</td>
<td>0.4350066</td>
<td>0.3542874</td>
<td>0.5511338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.9718775</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A full table of individual R² values can be found in *Appendix 7 and 8*, but the overall R² output for the bank and WOB model are 0.97 (R²=0.9796) and 0.97 (R²= 0.9719), respectively (*Figures 10 and 11*). Thus, the R² values for these models show that 97% of the variance in attitudes towards the sponsorship can be explained through the other variables. This indicates that the proposed models fit the actual data well by comparing the estimated to actual observed values (Frost, 2019). Ultimately, the overall co-efficient of determination values indicate a satisfactory goodness of fit for both sponsor conditions, and thus a more specific analysis of the results will be discussed.
Results

The following data analysis will explore both direct and indirect relationships between variables in an effort to better understand the main research question(s). As a reminder, p values help measure statistical significance, but since this research used convenience sampling, it is not confidently assumed that the sample is representative of the entire population (Hirschauer et al., 2020). The specific p values associated with each relationship are located below the path co-efficient, but values that exceed an “acceptable” (p>0.05) threshold are taken with a grain of salt because of the selected sampling approach to data collection. As a reminder, the research hypothesis model is located in Figure 12.

Figure 12: Research Hypothesis Model

Hypothesis 1: Both Sponsor Conditions

H1 posited that identification would have a positive effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship, implying that a one unit change in identification would lead to a relative positive change in attitudes towards the sponsorship. The results indicate only a slight positive effect between identification and attitudes for the bank (β=0.15; p>0.05) and WOB (β=0.09; p>0.05) conditions. While this offers support for H1, findings demonstrate that other variables can help better directly explain attitude formation towards sponsors.

Figure 13: Path Analysis Output (Bank Condition)
Hypothesis 2a&b: Bank Condition

H2 posited that identification would have a positive effect on perceptions of fit (a) and indirect effect on attitudes, through perceived fit (b). Results suggest that identification has a positive effect on fit ($\beta=0.31; p<0.05$), which offers support for H2a. Moreover, the positive relationship between identification and fit suggests that identification has an indirect effect on attitudes, via fit perceptions. This is because the relationship between fit perceptions and attitudes is stronger ($\beta=0.51; p<0.05$), indicating that greater perceptions of fit lead to respectively higher attitudes. While identification has as a weak (direct) effect on attitudes, it is a stronger predictor of fit perceptions, which in-turn have a positive effect on attitudes. Thus, perceptions of fit partially mediate the relationship between identification and attitudes towards the sponsorship, which offers support for H2b. This sequence is similar for low identified fans, in that they would also have respectively lower (but still positive) attitudes towards the sponsor, however fit perceptions more strongly dictate sponsorship attitudes. As such, their positive attitudes could be because (1) they perceive a high fit and thus form respectively positive attitudes towards the sponsor or (2) a direct result of their respectively higher perceptions of goodwill, which will be discussed later.

Figure 14: Path Analysis Output (WOB Condition)
Hypothesis 2a&b: WOB Condition

Similar to the bank condition, results from the WOB condition suggest that identification serves as a weak predictor of attitudes towards the sponsorship ($\beta=0.09; p>0.05$). As such, this indicates that fan identification alone does not adequately explain attitude formation towards the sponsorship. However, identification has a strong and significant effect on perceptions of fit towards the WOB sponsor, which indicates that a one unit increase in identification leads to a respective increase ($\beta=0.50; p<0.05$) in perceived fit, and this finding supports H2a. Further, when accounting for identification, perceived fit has a positive (direct) effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship ($\beta=0.35; p<0.05$). This suggests that identification indirectly effects attitudes, via fit perceptions because the relationship between fit and attitudes is stronger than that of identification. Ultimately, results indicate that perceptions of fit serve as a partial mediator in the relationship between identification and attitudes, which supports H2b.

Hypothesis 3a&b: Bank Condition

H3 posits that identification has a positive direct effect on goodwill (a) and an indirect effect on attitudes, via goodwill (b), but this relationship is not very straight-forward. The negative path co-efficient between identification and goodwill indicates that higher degrees of identification lead to comparatively lower
perceptions of goodwill (β=−0.31; p<0.05) unless perceived fit is high. As such, H3a (for the bank condition) is not supported but results suggest that fit is a partial mediator between identification and goodwill, which should not be overlooked. There is not necessarily a positive direct or indirect relationship between identification, goodwill, and attitudes, respectively. However, fit perceptions strongly predict perceived goodwill (β=0.59; p<0.05), which suggests that goodwill could partially mediate the relationship between identification and attitudes when accounting for (higher) fit perceptions. This somewhat complex sequence made possible by the path analysis offers some support for H3b.

Hypothesis 3a&b: WOB Condition
As a reminder, H3 posits that identification would have a positive effect on goodwill (a) and an indirect effect on attitudes, via goodwill (b). The results indicate that identification has a positive effect on both attitudes (β=0.09; p>0.05) and perceptions of goodwill (β=0.16; p>0.05), but both of these relationships are relatively weak. Nevertheless, the positive link between identification and goodwill offers support for H3a (for the WOB sponsor) and suggests that a one unit increase in identification leads to a small increase in perceptions of goodwill. Subsequently, high perceptions of goodwill serve as a strong predictor of attitudes towards the sponsorship (β=0.45; p<0.05). As such, goodwill partially mediates the relationship between identification and attitudes because the sequence through goodwill is stronger than the direct effect of identification on attitudes, which offers support for H3b. While this partial mediation effect is interesting, identification is clearly a stronger predictor of fit perceptions (β=0.50; p<0.05) than goodwill (β=0.16; p>0.05). Thus, exploration on the relationship between fit and goodwill when accounting for identification could further explain attitude formation towards the WOB sponsor, which is arguably more strategically aligned with the SCO.

Hypothesis 4: Both Sponsor Conditions
The previous section help reveal the direct and indirect effects regarding the relationship between identification and attitudes towards the sponsorship, however there are also interesting implications regarding the perceived fit variable. H4 posits that perceptions of fit have a positive effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship. Figures 13 and 14 indicate that perceptions of fit serve as a positive predictor of attitudes towards the bank (β=0.51; p<0.05) and WOB (β=0.35; p<0.05) sponsorship conditions, when controlling for identification. Thus, greater perceptions of fit lead to respectively higher attitudes towards both sponsors, which offers support for H4.
**Hypothesis 5a\&b: Bank Condition**

As a reminder H5 posits that perceptions of fit positively effect perceived goodwill (a) and that fit indirectly effects attitudes, via goodwill perceptions (b). When accounting for identification, fit is a positive predictor of attitudes towards the sponsorship. As shown in the path diagram, with every one unit increase in perceived fit, attitudes towards the sponsorship respectively increase \((\beta=0.51; p<0.05)\), which offers support for H5a. As such, high perceptions of fit are directly linked to attitudes, but the model also shows that goodwill could be a partial mediator in this relationship. For example, if someone perceives a high degree of fit between the bank and the women’s SCO then this could predict higher attitudes, but fit is also a strong predictor of goodwill perceptions. As such, if an individual has high fit perceptions, then this could cultivate higher perceptions of goodwill towards the sponsor \((\beta=0.59; p<0.05)\), which in-turn generates respectively positive \((\beta=0.42; p<0.05)\) attitudes towards the sponsorship. There is a strong direct effect between perceived fit and attitudes, but perceptions of goodwill also partially mediate this relationship, which offers support for H5b.

**Hypothesis 5a\&b: WOB Condition**

The strongest link represented in the WOB condition path model is that between perceptions of fit and goodwill \((\beta=0.54; p<0.05)\). As such, high fit perceptions lead to greater perceived goodwill towards the WOB sponsor, which offers support for H5a. Moreover, goodwill perceptions serve as a positive predictor of attitudes towards the sponsorship. This indicates that an individual with high perceptions of fit could form relatively positive attitudes towards the sponsor \((\beta=0.35; p<0.05)\). However, when perceptions of goodwill are also high, this leads to a stronger (and more positive) effect on attitudes \((\beta=0.45; p<0.05)\) compared to when examining the sponsorship solely based on fit perceptions. Ultimately, perceived fit has a positive effect on goodwill perceptions, and goodwill positively predicts attitudes. Thus, goodwill partially mediates the relationship between fit and attitudes, which offers support for H5b.

**Hypothesis 6: Both Conditions**

Lastly, H6 posits that when controlling for identification and fit perceptions, goodwill has a positive effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship. Results demonstrate that such perceptions of goodwill serve as a
positive predictor of attitudes for both the bank ($\beta=0.42; p<0.05$) and WOB ($\beta=0.45; p>0.05$) sponsor conditions. Thus, the results indicate that **H6 is supported.**

**Results Excluded from Path Analysis**

The path analyses helped quantify relationships between latent constructs as well as direct and indirect effects between variables. Gender and sponsor category-related hypotheses were excluded from the path analysis because it was possible to generally explore such constructs by examining the data in Microsoft Excel. As such, the results (i.e., graphs) are derived from basic Excel calculations based on the data.

**Hypothesis 7**

Before discussing the data findings, it is important to mention that the ratio of consumers who identified as female versus male was not equal (96:32). However, since this thesis is not primarily concerned with fan demographics, this unequal ratio was not deemed detrimental to the results of the research. Nevertheless, on average, female respondents cited higher levels of fan identification towards women’s SCOs compared to men but which could be explained by the unequal ratio of male to female respondents (*Figure 15*).

*Figure 15: Identification Towards Women’s SCOs (based on Gender)*

Moreover, H7 posits that females would cite higher evaluations and attitudes towards the sponsorship, regardless of sponsor condition. The results indicate that women cited higher and lower evaluations towards the WOB and bank conditions, respectively, compared to men (*Figures 16 & 17*). Thus, **H7 is only partly supported** because it was hypothesized that both sponsors would garner more positive perceptions from women. Nevertheless, perhaps the most important finding is that both genders had higher overall
evaluations and attitudes towards the WOB sponsor. This demonstrates the significant value that both men and women assign to gender equality initiatives in sports.

**Figure 16: Sponsor Category Results (Female Respondents)**

The values depicted in **Figure 17** represent means for each associated variable. H8 posits that a women-oriented sponsor would cite more positive evaluations and attitudes compared to a gender-neutral sponsor. As hypothesized, the WOB ranked higher on perceptions of fit and goodwill as well as overall attitudes.
towards the sponsorship (Figure 18). The path analyses revealed more specific information about the relationships between these variables by specifying predictive roles of variables on each other as well as the outcome (attitudes towards the sponsorship). Ultimately, Figure 18 depicts that the WOB condition garnered higher evaluations and attitudes compared to the bank condition, thus offering support for H8.

Figure 18: Comparison of Evaluations & Attitudes towards Sponsors

![Comparison of Evaluations & Attitudes towards Sponsors](image)

The data analysis revealed confirmatory factor, path, and Excel analyses results, which helped address the presented hypotheses for this research. Ultimately, the results offered at least some support for most of the hypotheses, which will be specified in detail in the following discussion chapter.

Discussion

The following section includes a discussion of the results from both path analyses followed by general findings. As a reminder, this research took a convenience sampling approach, and thus the p values associated with each path are included for statistical reporting purposes but should be taken with a grain of salt. In addition, a full table of the hypothesis outcomes for both sponsor conditions (i.e., supported or not supported) can be found in Figure 19.
**Figure 19: Overview of Hypotheses Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Bank Condition</th>
<th>WOB Condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>H1:</strong> Fan identification has a positive direct effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H2:</strong> Fan identification has a positive effect on perceptions of fit (a) and a positive indirect effect on attitude towards the sponsorship through fit perceptions (b).</td>
<td></td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H3:</strong> Fan identification has a positive effect on perceptions of goodwill (a) and a positive indirect effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship through goodwill perceptions (b).</td>
<td>Not supported</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative effect between identification and goodwill</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H4:</strong> When controlling for identification, perceptions of fit have a positive effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H5:</strong> When controlling for identification, perceptions of fit have a positive effect on perceptions of goodwill (a) and an indirect effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship through goodwill perceptions (b).</td>
<td></td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H6:</strong> When controlling for identification and perceived fit, perceptions of goodwill have a positive effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H7:</strong> Women respondents will cite more positive attitudes towards the sponsorship, regardless of sponsor condition.</td>
<td>Not supported</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H8:</strong> The women-owned business category will cite higher evaluations and attitudes compared to the large national bank category.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Identification**

**H1** posited that identification would have a positive effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship, implying that a one unit change in identification would lead to a relative positive change in attitudes towards the sponsorship. The results imply only a slight positive between identification and attitudes for the bank (β=0.15; p>0.05) and WOB (β=0.09; p>0.05) conditions. It was postulated that identification would have a much stronger direct effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship. **H1** was developed based on findings from previous research as well as social identity, classical conditioning and meaning transfer theories. It was argued that the level of fan identification would influence the degree to which individuals consider the
sponsor part of their SCO-related in-group. Subsequently, this would cultivate higher degrees of favoritism towards the sponsor, specifically in the form of positive attitudes (Joo et al., 2016). Classical conditioning and image transfer theories were used to collectively argue how more exposure to the SCO-sponsor pairing could lead to a greater likelihood the (positive) image of the SCO would be transferred onto the sponsor (Speed & Thompson, 2000; McCracken, 1989). The weak relationship between identification and attitudes could be attributed to the lack of sponsorship exposure in this study. Since respondents considered the sponsorship strictly for the duration of the survey (between 5 and 10 minutes), perhaps this temporal limitation did not supply the right conditions for an image transfer process to occur. In regular sports contexts, fans are presented with sponsorship stimuli consistently and are arguably more attentive at SCO-related events. As such, these physical contexts could provide much better grounds for facilitating the image transfer process.

**H2** held that identification would have a positive effect on perceptions of fit (a) and indirect effect on attitudes, via perceived fit (b). Results imply that a one unit increase in fan identification leads to increases in fit perceptions for both the bank ($\beta=0.31; p<0.05$) and WOB ($\beta=0.50; p<0.05$) conditions. Per the ELM, higher identified respondents are more motivated to process the sponsorship information and could thus perceive a higher fit following these critical evaluations (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Demriel, 2019; Deitz et al., 2009). In addition, this finding could be attributed to the countless examples of financial service sponsors (i.e., banks) in sports contexts. As a result, this group could be more aware of the dominant presence of financial sponsors in sports and perceive a higher fit because of repeated exposure to the pairing of financial services and sports. The positive effect between identification and perceived fit represents one of the strongest relationships for the WOB condition ($\beta=0.50; p<0.05$). Theoretical support for this finding can be connected to the self and social identity theories, which hold that perceptions of shared values between an individual and object (i.e., sponsor) could eventually drive positive evaluations (Fritz et al., 2016). As such, exposure to a sponsorship with greater strategic alignment between the SCO and sponsor could cultivate respectively higher fit perceptions with each unit increase in fan identification. In addition, with regards to lower-identified fans, the congruity between a WOB and a women’s SCO provides cognitive consistency and salient cues for individuals in this group to make more favorable evaluations.
The strong relationships between identification and fit as well as fit and attitudes suggest that perceptions of fit partially mediate the relationship between identification and attitudes, regardless of sponsor condition. As such, higher identification leads to greater perceived fit, which in-turn cultivates respectively higher attitudes towards the sponsorship. This indirect link is important because findings from H1 demonstrate that identification alone serves as a relatively poor direct predictor of attitudes.

H3 posits that identification has a positive effect on goodwill (a) and an indirect effect on attitudes, via goodwill (b). All of the effects between variables were directionally similar (i.e., positive) for both sponsor conditions, with the exception of the relationship between identification and goodwill perceptions for the bank sponsor. Since the bank condition yielded a negative effect between these variables, H3 for sponsor conditions will be discussed separately.

**Bank Condition**

The direct effect that identification had on goodwill was negative ($\beta=-0.31; p<0.05$), which implies that for each one unit increase in identification, perceptions of goodwill *decrease*. However, there is a strong (and positive) relationship between identification and fit ($\beta=0.31; p<0.05$) as well as fit and goodwill ($\beta=0.59; p<0.05$). As such, the negative relationship between identification and goodwill, “requires” higher perceptions of fit in order to render respectively positive attitudes towards the sponsorship. In other words, someone who is a highly identified as sport fan, would not automatically assign respectively high levels of goodwill to the bank sponsor. In retrospect, this is logical considering higher identified fans are likely aware of the ubiquitous presence of financial services sponsors in sports, and thus deem this sponsorship strategy as more commercially driven. However, if they perceive a fit between a bank and women’s SCO, this could garner higher perceptions of goodwill, through fit. Since the model primarily suggests that identification is a positive predictor of fit ($\beta=0.31; p<0.05$), a high-identified fan could perceive greater fit and thus respectively higher perceptions of goodwill ($\beta=0.59; p<0.05$). These results are consistent with some existing research and indicate that fit partially mediates the relationship between identification and goodwill, which was an overlooked possibility during the hypothesis formation process for this research (Yuksel et al., 2016). This inverse relationship also suggests that low-identified fans have respectively higher perceptions of goodwill towards the bank sponsor. As such, this group could assign greater levels of goodwill to the bank sponsor compared to highly identified fans and cultivate attitudes through either perceived goodwill or perceptions of fit.
**WOB Condition**

While there was a negative relationship between identification and goodwill for the bank condition, this relationship was positive for the WOB sponsor (β=0.16; p>0.05), which is logical per self and social phenomena. In women’s sports contexts, fandom can be partly based on the motivation to support women’s opportunities in sport. Some sponsors support fans’ self-congruence though conveying that they share gender equality-related values with fans and are part of the SCO-related in-group (Morgan, 2019). Consistent motivations and values to support women’s sports bring highly identified fans closer to sponsoring brands, and these shared values were also hypothesized to enhance perceptions of goodwill towards the sponsor (ibid). Results support this theoretical explanation for the WOB condition. Low- and high-identified fans could have perceived a stronger connection to the WOB sponsor on the basis of strategic alignment and shared values, respectively, and thus evaluated the sponsor as providing a sense of goodwill to the SCO. Moreover, goodwill perceptions serve a partial mediator in the relationship between identification and attitudes because the effect between identification and goodwill (β=0.16; p>0.05) is stronger than that between identification and attitudes (β=0.09; p>0.05). While this partial mediation is interesting, attitude formation is arguably better explained through the role that fit perceptions play in this sequence.

**Perceived Fit**

**H4** posits that when accounting for identification, perceptions of fit have a direct and positive effect on attitudes towards the sponsor, and the path analyses offer hypothesis support for the bank (β=0.5; p<0.05) and WOB (β=0.35; p<0.05) conditions. Spreading activation and cognitive consistency theories collectively formed H4 and explain that when individuals perceive a congruence between two stimuli, they tend to generate more favorable attitudes partly because of the minimal cognitive effort required during the process of evaluation (Olson & Thjømøe, 2011; Woisetschläger et al., 2010). Interestingly, the relationship between perceived fit and attitudes for the bank and WOB conditions represent one of the strongest and weakest direct links in the models, respectively. This suggests that perceptions of fit for the bank condition can somewhat directly explain the outcome of attitudes towards the sponsorship (when controlling for identification) such that individuals who perceived a high fit in the sponsorship also cite respectively high attitudes towards the bank sponsor. The comparatively weak link direct link between fit perceptions and attitudes for the WOB sponsor suggests that other predictors, like goodwill, serve as better proxies for understanding attitudes towards the sponsorship in this condition.
**H5** posits that when controlling for identification, perceptions of fit have a positive effect on goodwill perceptions (a) and an indirect effect on attitudes via perceived goodwill (b). Results for the bank (β=0.59; p<0.05) and WOB (β=0.54; p<0.05) sponsor conditions show that perceptions of fit serve as a positive predictor of perceived goodwill. The direct link between these variables represents the strongest relationship for both sponsor conditions in that every one unit increase in perceptions of fit, leads to the highest respective increase in perceived goodwill. This positive effect could be partly attributed to the lack of cognitive effort required to understand the relationship between the SCO and sponsor, which in-turn generates more favorable evaluations, including that of goodwill (Dean, 2002). With this strong and significant finding, sponsor articulation strategies (which emphasize the fit between sponsorship constituents) could be very important in generating perceptions of goodwill, which also help cultivate respectively positive attitudes towards sponsors of women’s SCOs (Kang & Matsuoka, 2020). Ultimately, individuals with high perceptions of fit can directly generate positive attitudes towards the bank (β=0.51; p<0.05) and WOB (0.35; p<0.05) sponsors, but the stronger link to goodwill for both conditions demonstrates that perceptions of goodwill partially mediate the relationship between fit and attitudes.

**Perceived Goodwill**

The final variable and related hypothesis represented in the path analyses is perceived goodwill, and **H6** posits that goodwill perceptions have a positive effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship. The results offer support for this hypothesis for both the bank (β=0.42; p<0.05) and WOB (β=0.45; p<0.05) sponsor conditions. The attribution theory was utilized in the generation of this hypothesis in that when individuals attribute positive motives towards a sponsor, their subsequent evaluations and attitudes will also represent some degree of positivity (Woisetschläger et al., 2010; Joo et al., 2016; Yuksel et al., 2016; Dean, 2002).

Aside from the attribution theory, the positive relationship between perceived goodwill and attitudes could be explained through the nature of respondents selected for this research. Gender equality within women’s sports has been an enduring topic covered by the media in the United States, particularly with the United States Women’s National [soccer] Team (USWNT) leading the fight for equality. As such, it is assumed that Americans have been pre-exposed to issues of gender equality within sports and could be more likely to understand the value and importance of a long-term sponsorship agreement between a brand and a women’s professional SCO. Thus, it is logical that H6 is supported (for both sponsor conditions) because gender equality in sports is prevalent in the US, so positive information/news about the sponsorship of a
women’s SCO likely led individuals to generate correspondingly positive attitudes. However, it would be useful to implement an identical research study in other countries where gender differences in sports is narrower. This would be interesting because people from other countries (i.e., Sweden), could be desensitized or less receptive to gender equality-driven sponsorships. Ultimately, the findings indicate that when controlling for identification and perceived fit, goodwill perceptions positively predict attitudes towards the sponsorship.

Discussion of General Findings

As a reminder, H7 and H8 were excluded from the path analyses because an examination of general survey findings in Excel sufficiently addressed these hypotheses. Results from Figure 15 indicate that female respondents identified more strongly as fans of women’s SCOs compared to male respondents. However, there was an unequal ratio (96:32) of female to male respondents in this study, which could have skewed these results. Nevertheless, based on social identity and self-categorization theories, it is logical that women would identify more strongly as fans of women’s professional sports because they perceive similarities on the basis of gender between themselves and women’s SCOs.

Gender

A discussion on H7, which posits that female respondents would cite higher attitudes towards both sponsorship conditions, is based on findings from Figures 16 & 17. As such, H7 is only partly supported because female respondents cited higher attitudes towards the WOB condition but lower attitudes towards the bank condition, compared to men. This finding could suggest that women did not perceive a bank sponsor as sharing characteristics or values related to femininity in a similar manner as the WOB sponsor (Joo et al., 2016). Moreover, male respondents cited much higher perceptions of fit for the bank condition compared to women, which could be because exposure to the WOB condition did not prompt the self-categorization processes (on the basis of gender) for men (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The discrepancies in these fit findings could have contributed to the respective cited attitudes towards sponsors among genders. Nevertheless, both men and women respondents had more positive attitudes towards the WOB condition.

Regardless of gender, individuals recognize and favor the value that a strategically aligned sponsor can provide SCOs. This also implies that brand communications about gender equality need not be restricted to women’s sports, which care commonly associated with having mostly female fans. Currently, brands
arguably engage in cyclical campaigns to show support for gender equality where communications are most frequent during prevalent women-related time periods (i.e., Women’s World Cup, NCAA women’s basketball tournament, National Women’s Day, etc.). Rather, sponsors should extend such strategic communications by implementing longer-term and continuous campaigns that also reside outside women’s sports contexts to adequately address gender equality issues. While the findings about the differences between male and female evaluations as well as attitudes are interesting, they should be taken with a grain of salt because the sample size for this study was relatively small (n=128) and there was also an unequal ratio of women compared to men who completed the survey.

Sponsor Condition
The results in Figure 18 support H8 and indicate that, overall, the WOB sponsor generated more positive evaluations compared to the bank condition. This finding is represented through higher (average) perceptions of fit and goodwill as well as attitudes towards the WOB sponsorship. Even though fan identification among respondents with the WOB condition was lower, the path analyses revealed that fan identification has a minimal effect on attitudes towards the sponsorship. Thus, the slightly lower level of fan identification among respondents conditioned with the WOB sponsor is argued to not significantly impact the product category results. Since there is arguably a more salient connection between a women’s SCO and women-owned business, individuals perceive the sponsorship constituents as more aligned compared to a gender-neutral condition. Even though this research supports the notion that a women-skewed sponsor could generate more favorable attitudes, the current sponsorship landscape for women’s professional sports is seemingly dominated by male-skewed or gender-neutral sponsor categories, at best. Thus, the addition of brands that reflect a genuine position to support gender equality could stand out from the generic sponsorship clutter and garner more positive attitudes in women’s sports.

Managerial Implications
Based on the collection of findings related to all of the hypotheses for this research, there are some major implications that are important for sponsorship managers and/or practitioners. Primarily, positive attitudes towards sponsorships are not largely based on the degree to which individuals identify as fans of women’s sports. Highly identified fans are partly characterized by the frequency in which they attend games or other SCO-related events (Hunt et al., 2009). As such, sponsorship activations within these settings are
undoubtedly beneficial, but such an approach limits a brand’s ability to reach a wider audience that could also attach positive meanings and attitudes to the sponsor. Thus, sponsorship activations in women’s sports need not be bound to event-related situations. Instead, managers should engage in communications about the sponsorship outside of these contexts, which would allow brands to reach a wider range of consumers that could evaluate the sponsor positively, regardless of SCO identification. Thus, brand managers could:

1. Use demographic and psychographic segmentation to reach audiences outside of sports contexts that identify as women (demographic) and/or have a vested interest in gender equality (psychographic). Subsequently, sponsoring brands should target these segments with communications that emphasize the sponsorship agreement.

This could help generate favorable evaluations and attitudes towards the sponsor on the basis of gender equality. While not all individuals share the same level of passion for women’s sports, results suggest that they have positive attitudes towards strategies that seek to support women and gender equality in these contexts. As such, sponsoring women’s professional sports provide a coherent avenue for brands to reflect a dedication to supporting gender equality as a whole. Ultimately, sponsoring brands should expand reach by targeting different levels of identified fans with sponsorship-related information through communication strategies that reside outside of traditional sports contexts.

The second major implication addresses the negative effect between identification and goodwill perceptions as well as the mediating role of perceived fit in this relationship for the bank (i.e., gender neutral) sponsor. Highly identified individuals cited respectively lower perceptions goodwill towards the bank sponsor unless perceptions of fit were high. This implies that higher degrees of identification do not ‘automatically’ lead to high perceptions of goodwill, but greater fit perceptions positively predict perceived goodwill. High perceptions of fit lead to greater perceived goodwill, which ultimately cultivates higher attitudes towards the sponsorship. As such:

2. In the absence of a salient connection between the sponsor and SCO, managers should use articulation, activation, and leveraging strategies to emphasize fit in order to drive goodwill perceptions and subsequent attitudes.
For example, bank sponsors could emphasize their competencies and dedication to helping individuals with money management and investments, which could also provide value to athletes of women’s SCOs. Results demonstrate that gender-consistent rather than gender-neutral sponsors cite more favorable perceptions of goodwill, which in-turn positively influence attitudes towards a sponsorship in women’s sports. However, gender-neutral sponsors can render goodwill perceptions through articulation strategies that emphasize fit between constituents.

Interestingly, to the extent of my knowledge, there is seldom detailed research surrounding the important relationship between perceived fit and goodwill perceptions in sports contexts. This could be because most research utilizes men’s SCOs to understand sponsorship effects. While sponsors can still provide men’s SCOs with a sense of goodwill, the absence of gender equality-related issues in these contexts provide less fruitful opportunities for sponsors to cultivate goodwill perceptions, beyond financial support. As such, goodwill within women’s sports could have important implications because sponsors can help drive gender equality initiatives within these contexts in addition to providing monetary support. Thus:

3. **Sponsorship managers should leverage the additional goodwill opportunities in women’s sports and break through the clutter by communicating an altruistic position to (particularly highly identified) fans.**

Higher degrees of identification led to negative and relatively weak perceptions of goodwill towards gender-neutral and women-oriented sponsors, respectively. Since highly identified fans represent a passionate and involved audience, it is important for sponsors to demonstrate value alignment to help fans make in-group inferences about sponsoring brands. Conveniently, in-person sporting environments attract a highly identified fan category, so tangible and sensorial activations could help render the negative and weak goodwill perceptions and further enhance attitudes. Since lower identified fans have respectively higher perceptions of goodwill towards gender-neutral sponsor categories, it would be more beneficial to enhance other predictors of attitude formation, like perceived fit, for this audience.

Lastly, there is seldom research on specific differences between fan genders in the contexts of women’s sports. The largest contrast in evaluations among genders was perceived fit between the SCO and bank sponsor. So, gender-neutral sponsors should emphasize fit in strategies to render more positive brand
attitudes. Nevertheless, both men and women cited higher evaluations and attitudes towards the WOB sponsor. Thus:

4. **Brands should leverage sponsorships in women’s sports to implement longer-term and routine strategies that help address gender equality.**

While some brands have engaged in short-term advertising efforts to communicate an allegiance to women’s sports, they are cyclical and bound to time periods where women are particularly prevalent (i.e., Women’s [soccer] World Cup and NCAA basketball tournament). Conveying gender equality should not be a cyclical brand strategy bound to women’s sports contexts. Fan gender does not play a large role in attitudinal outcomes of a sponsorship because evidently both men and women had more positive attitudes towards the WOB sponsor. Therefore, marketing budgets should allocate more spending on creating long-term strategies that genuinely seek to address the tremendous gender inequalities that still exist in professional sports.

**Conclusion**

As a reminder, the purpose of this research was to address and attempt to answer the following questions:

**RQ(s): How does the degree of strategic alignment between a sponsor and a women’s professional sport in the United States influence consumer evaluations and attitudes towards the sponsorship?**

1. How does the gendered position of a sponsor influence evaluations and attitudes towards a sponsorship in women’s professional sports in the US?
2. What are the effects of fan identification, perceptions of fit, and goodwill perceptions on attitudes towards a sponsorship within women’s professional sports in the US?
3. How does consumer gender play a role in attitudes towards a sponsorship within women’s professional sports in the US?

The degree of strategic alignment between a sponsor and women’s SCO influences evaluations and subsequent attitudes towards the sponsorship. More specifically, the gendered position of a sponsor within women’s professional sports has been shown to positively impact sponsorship outcomes. The WOB sponsor, on average, cited higher evaluations and attitudes compared to the bank condition. Thus, brands
with women-oriented positions are already better suited for a sponsorship within women’s sports. Moreover, identification as well as perceived fit and goodwill perceptions are all predictors of attitudes towards a sponsor, to varying degrees.

The link between fan identification and attitudes is weak, which suggests that fan identification does a relatively poor job at explaining attitudinal outcomes towards a sponsorship. Rather, perceptions of fit and goodwill serve as partial mediators in this relationship because both of these variables have more positive and significant direct effects on attitudes. As such, while fan identification alone fails to sufficiently predict attitudinal outcomes of a sponsorship, other evaluative criteria, like perceptions of fit and goodwill, play a more influential role in this process. Furthermore, perceptions of fit constitute a very important evaluative construct with regards to sponsorship in women’s sports. When accounting for identification, high levels of fit can in-part directly predict attitudes towards the sponsorship. In addition, fit perceptions (more) strongly effect perceived goodwill, which in-turn also influences attitudes. Thus, communication strategies that emphasize the fit of a sponsorship are essential because such perceptions can positively influence other important evaluations and attitudes.

Fan gender also influences attitudes towards the sponsorship in that female fans have higher evaluations and attitudes towards women-oriented sponsors compared to males. Nevertheless, both men and women cited higher overall attitudes towards the WOB condition, which suggests that most individuals recognize the value of supporting gender equality in sports. As such, brands should allocate more resources into crafting long-term strategies that sufficiently address the gender disparities in professional sports today.

The current corporate sponsorship landscape within women’s professional sports in the United States is arguably dominated by brands that represent gender-neutral positions at best (Appendix 1). Yet sponsors that hold a position more aligned with women empowerment and gender equality generate more favorable evaluations and subsequent attitudes among fans. Thus, the strategic alignment of a sponsor on the basis of gender is a relevant predictor of sponsorship effectiveness and attitudinal outcomes within women’s professional sports in the US.
Limitations and Future Research

While this research proposes interesting findings for sponsorships within women’s professional sports, it has limitations, which conveniently provide avenues for future research. Primarily, selecting product categories rather than specific brands made it impossible to study traditional effects of sponsorships, like brand equity. This is because brand equity is partly measured by all of the associations and images that consumers have about a specific brand in memory (Keller, 1993). Thus, a future study that gains approval from measuring the effects specific of gender-neutral and women-oriented brands could provide sponsorship implications for building brand equity.

The data collection methods also present some limitations. Convenience sampling was used to collect data, which implies that the results from this research may not be representative of the entire population. While I worked tirelessly to collect as many survey responses as possible, the sample size (n=128) for this research served as a major limitation. As such, future research within this domain should seek to collect more data by incorporating other approaches to sampling. Relatedly, there was a notable unequal ratio of female to male respondents, which could have further skewed the data and future research should attempt to control or equalize responses based on gender. In addition, the data only included responses from residents or citizens of the United States, so evaluations and subsequent attitudes are based off of individuals’ experiences of living in the US. Thus, conducting a similar study in other countries would be of interest to understand how cultural views impact evaluations and attitudes towards sponsorships within women’s sports. While gender inequalities in sports exist all around the world, some countries could cite higher and lower sponsorship attitudes depending on their cultural experiences.

Lastly, this research accounted for only three predictors of attitudes towards the sponsorship but there are a host of other factors that could influence attitude formation. As such, a study including more specific fan demographics or factors, like sponsor ubiquity, could better explain the sequence through which attitudes are formed. Ultimately, this thesis comes with limitations but the lack of research regarding women’s professional sports offers plenty of other opportunities for research within this domain.

------------------------ END ------------------------
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Appendix

Appendix 1: Current Corporate Sponsors of the National Women’s Soccer League


Appendix 3: Customer-Based Brand Equity Model (derived from Keller (1993))
Appendix 4: Pilot Survey Results

*Pilot Survey: Product Category*

**Large National Bank Condition**

**Fit 1** - Based on the aforementioned sponsorship information, I believe:

1. There is a logical connection between the NWSL and a large national bank
2. The NWSL and a large national bank sponsor fit well together
3. The NWSL and a large national bank stand for similar things
4. It makes sense to me that a large national bank would sponsor the NWSL

**Fit 2** - In my opinion, the NWSL and a large national bank are:
Altruism - Based on my current knowledge, I believe that:
Beer Brand Condition
Fit 1 - Based on the aforementioned sponsorship information, I believe:
Fit 2 - In my opinion, the NWSL and a prominent beer brand are:

- There is a logical connection between the NWSL and a prominent beer brand
- The NWSL and a prominent beer brand sponsor fit well together
- The NWSL and a prominent beer brand stand for similar things
- It makes sense to me that a prominent beer brand would sponsor the NWSL
Altruism - Based on my current knowledge, I believe that:

Women-Owned Business Condition
Fit 1 - Based on the aforementioned sponsorship information, I believe:
There is a logical connection between the NWSL and a women-owned business
The NWSL and a women-owned business sponsor fit well together
The NWSL and a women-owned business stand for similar things
It makes sense to me that a women-owned business would sponsor the NWSL

Fit 2 - In my opinion, the NWSL and a women-owned business are:

Altruism - Based on my current knowledge, I believe that:
Appendix 5: Pilot and Main survey content and structure

(NB: identification questions were excluded from the pilot survey and the sponsor could have been one of two or three conditions for the main and pilot survey, respectively.)
Hello!

As I am writing my Master Thesis on the sponsorship of women's professional sports, it would be much appreciated if you have time to participate in this survey.

The survey will take approximately 5 minutes, and upon completion, you will have the option to enter for a chance to win $40!

All of your answers will be kept anonymous, and responses will only be used for analytical purposes. If you have any questions or concerns about the research and/or survey, please feel free to reach out to me (reha20ad@student.cbs.dk).

Thank you,

Rebecca
Please rate the extent to which you disagree/agree with the following statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women's professional sports is a domain that interests me</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a fan of women's professional sports is important to me</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I often acknowledge that I am a fan of women's professional sports</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others would describe me as a typical fan of women's professional sports</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel a strong attachment towards at least one women's professional sport and/or team</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would experience a loss if I had to stop being a fan of my preferred women's professional sports team</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I talk about my preferred women's professional sports team, I usually say &quot;we&quot; rather than &quot;they&quot;</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I believe that women's professional sports are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuable</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficial</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appealing</td>
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<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essential</td>
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<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanted</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Large National Bank

Case Introduction

On average, male professional athletes in Major League Soccer (MLS) earn salaries of almost $400,000 per year. Yet 75% of female professional athletes in the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) earn less than $31,000 per year, which forces these women into working additional jobs to cover basic living costs.

In response to this, a large national bank recently signed a long-term deal in conjunction with the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) to address the salary pay gap between men's and women's professional soccer in the United States. Ultimately, this partnership seeks to increase advertising and endorsement opportunities for women in the NWSL and implement promotions where a percentage of business profits go towards financially supporting the most marginalized athletes in the NWSL.
Approval

Skip to

End of Survey if No, end survey is selected

Please demonstrate an understanding that the preceding sponsorship agreement is fictitious.

☐ I understand
☐ No, end survey

---

Fit 1

Based on the aforementioned sponsorship between the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) and a large national bank, I believe:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is a logical connection between the NWSL and a large national bank</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The NWSL and a large national bank sponsor fit well together</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The NWSL and a large national bank stand for similar things</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It makes sense to me that a large national bank would sponsor the NWSL</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fit 2

In my opinion, the image of the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) and the image of a large national bank are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Similar</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative</td>
<td>○</td>
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<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complementary</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Fit</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes sense</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Goodwill | Please rate the degree to which you disagree / agree with the following:

Please rate the extent to which you disagree/agree with the following statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The NWSL would benefit from this sponsorship</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial motives are NOT the main reason why a large national bank undertook this sponsorship (disagree= bank is motivated by profit; agree= bank motivated by other factors)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The large national bank is involved with the NWSL because they believe women’s professional soccer deserves support</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The large national bank likely has the best interests of the NWSL at heart</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The large national bank is sincere in their support of the NWSL</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Page Break

Q27

Overall, my attitude towards a large national bank sponsoring the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Favorable</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likable</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix 6: Observed Variables from CFA with Associated Survey Questionnaire Items and respective p values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification (ID)</th>
<th>P value (Bank)</th>
<th>P value (WOB)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID_Bank/WOB1</strong> Women's professional sports is a domain that interests me</td>
<td>4.10e-13</td>
<td>5.6e-299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID_Bank/WOB2</strong> Being a fan of women's professional sports is important to me</td>
<td>8.00e-14</td>
<td>6.3e-21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID_Bank/WOB3</strong> I often acknowledge that I am a fan of women's professional sports</td>
<td>1.40e-7</td>
<td>7.83e-56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID_Bank/WOB4</strong> Others would describe me as a typical fan of women's professional sports</td>
<td>2.22e-6</td>
<td>8.05e-31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID_Bank/WOB5</strong> I feel a strong attachment towards at least one women's professional sport and/or team</td>
<td>1.63e-7</td>
<td>1.95e-32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID_Bank/WOB6</strong> I would experience a loss if I had to stop being a fan of my preferred women's professional sports team</td>
<td>46.93e-6</td>
<td>2.45e-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID_Bank/WOB7</strong> When I talk about my preferred women's professional sports team, I usually say &quot;we&quot; rather than &quot;they&quot;</td>
<td>0.0047</td>
<td>6.93e-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID_Bank/WOB8</strong> Women’s sports are important</td>
<td>1.6e-127</td>
<td>8.51e-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID_Bank/WOB9</strong> Women’s sports are relevant</td>
<td>5.6e-212</td>
<td>7.03e-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID_Bank/WOB10</strong> Women’s sports are useful</td>
<td>4.53e-25</td>
<td>9.06e-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID_Bank/WOB11</strong> Women’s sports are valuable</td>
<td>1.7e-275</td>
<td>5.68e-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID_Bank/WOB12</strong> Women’s sports are beneficial</td>
<td>4.7e-114</td>
<td>5.21e-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID_Bank/WOB13</strong> Women’s sports are interesting</td>
<td>4.4e-237</td>
<td>2.18e-22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID_Bank/WOB14</strong> Women’s sports are significant</td>
<td>4.19e-51</td>
<td>4.04e-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID_Bank/WOB15</strong> Women’s sports are appealing</td>
<td>5.3e-187</td>
<td>6.28e-22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID_Bank/WOB16</strong> Women’s sports are essential</td>
<td>9.6e-171</td>
<td>2.33e-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID_Bank/WOB17</strong> Women’s sports are wanted</td>
<td>4.21e-66</td>
<td>0.0059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Fit (PF)</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>PF_Bank/WOB1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PF_Bank/WOB1</td>
<td>There is a logical connection between the NWSL and a large national Bank/WOB</td>
<td>6.64e-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PF_Bank/WOB2</td>
<td>The NWSL and a large national Bank/WOB sponsor fit well together</td>
<td>6.24e-36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PF_Bank/WOB3</td>
<td>The NWSL and a large national Bank/WOB stand for similar things</td>
<td>1.00e-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PF_Bank/WOB4</td>
<td>It makes sense to me that a large national Bank/WOB would sponsor the NWSL</td>
<td>8.03e-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PF_Bank/WOB5</td>
<td>The image of the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) and the image of a large national Bank/WOB are similar</td>
<td>1.96e-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PF_Bank/WOB6</td>
<td>The image of the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) and the image of a large national Bank/WOB are consistent</td>
<td>5.37e-42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PF_Bank/WOB7</td>
<td>The image of the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) and the image of a large national Bank/WOB are typical</td>
<td>9.08e-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PF_Bank/WOB8</td>
<td>The image of the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) and the image of a large national Bank/WOB are representative</td>
<td>2.14e-36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PF_Bank/WOB9</td>
<td>The image of the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) and the image of a large national Bank/WOB are complementary</td>
<td>1.4e-138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PF_Bank/WOB10</td>
<td>The image of the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) and the image of a large national Bank/WOB are high fit</td>
<td>1.0e-263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PF_Bank/WOB1</td>
<td>The image of the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) and the image of a large national Bank/WOB are makes sense</td>
<td>$1.1 \times 10^{-18}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Perceived Goodwill (GW)**

| GW_Bank/WOB1 | The NWSL would benefit from this sponsorship | 0.019 | 0.0097 |
| GW_Bank/WOB2 | Commercial motives are NOT the main reason why a large national Bank/WOB undertook this sponsorship | $0.096^*$ | $4.73 \times 10^{-11}$ |
| GW_Bank/WOB3 | The large national Bank/WOB is involved with the NWSL because they believe women's professional soccer deserves support | $5.15 \times 10^{-59}$ | $1.0 \times 10^{-108}$ |
| GW_Bank/WOB4 | The large national Bank/WOB likely has the best interests of the NWSL at heart | $5.60 \times 10^{-47}$ | $1.563 \times 10^{-34}$ |
| GW_Bank/WOB5 | The large national Bank/WOB is sincere in their support of the NWSL | $5.3 \times 10^{-132}$ | $1.32 \times 10^{-61}$ |

**Attitude Towards Sponsorship (ATS)**

| ATS_Bank/WOB1 | Overall, my attitudes towards a large national Bank/WOB sponsoring the NWSL is positive | $1.1 \times 10^{-15}$ | $1.1 \times 10^{-18}$ |
| ATS_Bank/WOB2 | Overall, my attitudes towards a large national Bank/WOB sponsoring the NWSL is favorable | $2.1 \times 10^{-28}$ | $2.10 \times 10^{-87}$ |
| ATS_Bank/WOB3 | Overall, my attitudes towards a large national Bank/WOB sponsoring the NWSL is good | $1.5 \times 10^{-20}$ | $7.5 \times 10^{-187}$ |
| ATS_Bank/WOB4 | Overall, my attitudes towards a large national Bank/WOB sponsoring the NWSL is likeable | $1.5 \times 10^{-28}$ | $1.9 \times 10^{-127}$ |
Appendix 7 and 8: \( R^2 \) values associated with the bank and WOB conditions

Equation-level goodness of fit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Fitted</th>
<th>Predicted</th>
<th>Residual</th>
<th>R-squared</th>
<th>mc</th>
<th>mc2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID_1</td>
<td>3.0625</td>
<td>1.107362</td>
<td>1.955138</td>
<td>0.361587</td>
<td>0.601325</td>
<td>0.361587</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID_2</td>
<td>3.517334</td>
<td>1.307748</td>
<td>2.200586</td>
<td>0.371009</td>
<td>0.609754</td>
<td>0.371009</td>
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<tr>
<td>ID_3</td>
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<td>1.064387</td>
<td>2.929207</td>
<td>0.255335</td>
<td>0.505207</td>
<td>0.255335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID_4</td>
<td>3.569336</td>
<td>0.905761</td>
<td>2.6636</td>
<td>0.253750</td>
<td>0.503740</td>
<td>0.253750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID_5</td>
<td>1.014209</td>
<td>1.312524</td>
<td>0.501605</td>
<td>0.723469</td>
<td>0.505698</td>
<td>0.723469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID_6</td>
<td>2.031252</td>
<td>1.637423</td>
<td>0.393873</td>
<td>0.806115</td>
<td>0.897839</td>
<td>0.806115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID_7</td>
<td>0.827733</td>
<td>0.857125</td>
<td>2.985561</td>
<td>0.223071</td>
<td>0.472304</td>
<td>0.223071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID_8</td>
<td>2.327881</td>
<td>1.487182</td>
<td>0.926998</td>
<td>0.684495</td>
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\[ mc = \text{Correlation between dependent variable and its prediction,} \]
\[ mc^2 = \text{is the Benton-Rayke squared multiple correlation coefficient.} \]
### Equation-level goodness of fit

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mc = Correlation between dependent variable and its prediction.
mc2 = mc\(^2\) is the Bentler-Raykov squared multiple correlation coefficient.