RESEARCH REPORT

SPORTSWOMEN AS BRAND AMBASSADORS
Executive Summary

Research has shown that sportswomen are not being given the same opportunities as sportsmen to earn sponsorships from brands to become brand ambassadors. Sportsmen appear to be more favoured by brands as they have higher profiles, can attract a larger audience and increase profit margins.

The challenges, opportunities and prospects for sportswomen to have equal opportunities to improve their commercial viability and boost their revenue with brand sponsorships are investigated in this study. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with 5 brand managers, 15 sportswomen and 10 consumers to explore attitudes and opinions.

Results revealed there are opportunities for women to become brand ambassadors, however, there are several key challenges facing the sportswomen including the physical restrictions of being a woman, the cycle of popularity, media coverage, being aware, having the look, a strong media team and a strong moral compass.

Opportunities for various stakeholders (including the sportswomen themselves, brand, the media, the government and the public) are discussed to give sportswomen sufficient opportunities to become brand ambassadors.
Introduction

With great pleasure, I share the findings of our research on challenges of sportswomen being a brand ambassador. It has been an inspiring journey and thanks to everyone who is involved. I appreciate the participants - the sportswomen who volunteered to talk to us, the Brand Managers who spared some time from their busy schedule and the Consumers who were interested and participate as well. I will also like to appreciate the funder of this project – the University of Greenwich and my research team – Dr Abi and Simone.

The Forbes list of top 100 athletes in the world which had no woman provided an additional justification to our research as we explored the challenges and prospect of sportswomen as brand ambassadors. We were able to identify key challenges, some of which the sportswomen have no control over; however, we offered recommendations on how these issues can be improved.

I acknowledge it is not a quick fix but a small step in the right directions and that is why we considered it is essential to focus on the sportswomen – not the brand or governing bodies. We want to see how best to help them to improve their chances. I recognise the contribution of different campaigns to raise awareness for women in sports - #Whatif by Women in Football, #thisgirlcan by Sport England and I see our initiative as a way of complementing these existing campaigns and not to compete.

Moving on, SWBA Project aims to be the conduit between the sportswomen and many opportunities that are out there for them. Not everyone is interested in being sports ambassadors but might be interested in charity activities or social marketing. We are here to complement and contribute towards the overall goal of equal opportunities and recognition for sportswomen.

Once again, thanks or being part of our journey and we look forward to opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.

Emmanuel Mogaji, PhD.
Lead, SWBA Project
Methodology

Qualitative Research Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between March 2018 and June 2018 across the United Kingdom with three groups of participants.

- **15 sportswomen** across nine different sports.

- **Five brand managers**: food and beverage (1), sportswear (2), fashion (1) and software development (1); 40% female and 60% male.

- **Ten adult members of the public**: the participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 47; 60% female and 40% male.

Measures were taken to ensure informed consent regarding participation in the study.

The recorded data were read several times before coding commenced and exported to NVivo software for further analysis, capturing the challenges of sportswomen in becoming brand ambassadors and attitudes towards brand sponsorship and brand ambassadors.
Sportswomen believe they face some inherent limitations because of their gender, physical strength, and societal expectations. They also acknowledge that motherhood takes its toll because they need to play the role of mothers, nurturing their children and sacrificing their careers. Sportswomen also feel they must always justify why they are good and often compare their success with that of sportsmen. They feel there is no equal opportunity and that they have to work extra hard just to be credited. Finally, they believe they put as much effort as men into their sports, but opportunities to showcase their success do not exist.

“I still think it is a society thing, women are expected to focus on their family and not think of sports. I had to sacrifice my career to have my baby and raise the family if it’s a guy that wouldn’t have happened.”

SW4, Athletics, 28
The lack of media coverage is also considered a challenge for sportswomen in becoming brand ambassadors. Sportswomen do not have control over this challenge because they acknowledge that they cannot control whether they are put in the limelight or not. Therefore, they have to take responsibility for their own publicity. This is taking a toll on their family members and friends. This was also confirmed by Brand Managers who believe that the lack of media coverage is often the justification for not using sportswomen as brand ambassadors.

“I think they are very male based, I don't think women get a half as much attention the men do. The men's event is a massive event and the women's events are severely overlooked.” SW11, Rugby, 34
Sportsmen get more exposure in the media (as they dominate the sporting landscape), resulting in them becoming more popular with the general public. Therefore, when presented with a product endorsed by popular sportsmen, consumers are more likely to buy into them as brand ambassadors. As a result of being brand ambassadors, sportsmen get more exposure in the media from brand campaigns, and so the cycle continues. This vicious cycle also becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy because the more opportunities that are given to sportsmen, the more sportswomen feel helpless and want to give up or retire from a lack of either support or money, reducing their chances of becoming brand ambassadors even further.

“You don’t really want to make a fuss, you sort of appreciate the little they give you, it like the crumbs from the table of sportsmen, this should not be so, there should be an equal opportunity” SW6, Football, 28
Sportswomen claim that commercial brands are more concerned with their brand ambassador 'looking pretty', 'soft', and 'feminine'. Therefore, women who appear strong believe that their appearance may work against them. Some sportswomen even claim that brands alter a sportswoman’s appearance to make them appear more feminine and appealing to the public. Because there appears to be less emphasis on the achievements of sportswomen and more emphasis on their aesthetics and physical appearance, if sportswomen do not have the 'looks', then their chances of becoming a brand ambassador are even lower. Some sportswomen feel they do not have the looks to become a brand ambassador, especially black and minority ethnic (BME) sportswomen compared to white British sportswomen.

“They are not investing in your capability as a runner — more in the beauty. Even though I’m way faster than her ... she just fits the look”
SW1, Athletics, 26
Sportswomen seem to have a strong moral compass about themselves and their future association with a commercial brand. They want to ensure the best possible outcome for themselves, which is why they prioritise the message communicated about the brand and themselves over money. This appears to be incongruent with the notion that brands’ primary concern is revenue; therefore, prioritising personal values may limit sportswomen’s brand endorsement opportunities. Sportswomen would instead commit their time to encourage young girls to consider sports as an act of social justice than partner with a brand primarily for the sake of money.

“I would have to agree with their philosophy and they would have to appreciate the fact that my sport is being strong”
SW1, Athletics, 26
Unlike in the case of traditional media coverage, which is beyond sportswomen’s control, sportswomen have the agency to overcome this challenge through social media. However, having a strong media team to promote their brand is an issue many sportswomen still face. Often, they feel they have to do it all alone while still dedicating time to their sports and other jobs to make ends meet. Some find this difficult because they believe the opportunities available to become brand ambassadors are few; consequently, sportswomen often have to tell their own stories using social media and sometimes approach brands themselves for endorsement opportunities.

“I mean you do extra work with my social media page to show the life of a player. I do it out of my own effort because I don’t want the next generation of kids to be unmotivated because there is no publicity about the sport.”

SW11, Rugby, 26
Sportswomen’s primary need is to fund their training, so they sometimes take on extra jobs to get the financial support they need to fund themselves. As such, seeking out brand endorsements takes a backseat to this primary need. While some sportswomen are aware of the expectations from brands when they become ambassadors, some focus more on their sport and are not aware of the opportunities to develop their professional brand. Brand Managers were of the opinions that sponsorship doesn’t necessarily have to be from a sports brand. They believe sportswomen seems to have sports brand as their own source of endorsement whereas there are other opportunities outside sports brand.

“I would like to be a brand ambassador but the issue now is even getting a grip on my game, I need to establish myself, do extra work to fund myself since I don’t get any funding so that is not a priority now.” SW10, Tennis, 20
Sportswomen
Sportswomen need to keep competing in and enjoying the sports they play; however, the importance of self-promotion cannot be overemphasised. Sportswomen need to take responsibility for their own media coverage and build their professional brand personality, especially through social media. They should be authentic, tell a story, and create an identity while simultaneously be appealing to consumers. Sportswomen also need to know when to work with a talent agency and what opportunities are available and achievable. Sportswomen should not be limited to sponsorship opportunities with sports brands; rather, sportswomen should also consider other brands in so far as these brands align with their personal values.

Brands
Brands see sponsorships and endorsement deals as business decisions that should make commercial sense in terms of yielding a return on investment. In this regard, brands want to sponsor a personality that resonates with their target audiences. However, brand managers should take more creative risks. Even if such risks do not make commercial sense, brand managers should see them as a part of their corporate social responsibility, particularly in the area of diversity and inclusion.
Recommendations

Moreover, given that consumers have demonstrated a positive attitude towards brands that sponsor a less conventionally popular sportsperson/team, there is an opportunity for more brands to sponsor sportswomen and their teams. Additionally, sportswomen offer brands an opportunity to reach new audiences, which, in turn, can lead to an increase in sales.

Governing bodies
Sportswomen have acknowledged that there are limited funding and few opportunities for them compared to sportsmen. They believe they are treated as second-class citizens because they do not bring in as much money as their male counterparts. Governing bodies should make an effort to provide resources for sportswomen to enable them to compete at elite levels. Governing bodies should also endeavour to provide an equal amount of support to both male and female sports, from grassroots support to leadership support. A level playing field should be offered to both genders to grow.

The public
We expect the public to be more open to diversity and to show an interest in female sports, either by participating in or going to watch a female sport. This will create more awareness about female sports and provide moral support to sportswomen. The public should be incentivised to explore other less known sports such as table tennis, shooting, or volleyball rather than always going for obvious choices. Social media can also play a crucial role in increasing awareness of female sports. The public should be encouraged to share pictures and videos of female sporting activities that they have attended or been involved in.
Acknowledgement

Thank you to:

All the research participants – The Sportswomen, Brand Managers
All the experts that gave their time and expertise
All the research team who supported us with the research.

This research was funded by the University of Greenwich, London.

To Cite: