

The Pandemic Reset: Implications for Sport Management and Sport Marketing

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The pandemic significantly disrupted society and several industries, including the sports industry. One of the areas most affected in the sports industry was the area of sponsorship. Sports organizations, especially those at the professional level, rely heavily on these resources to support their athletes, teams/leagues, facilities, and other sport properties. Sponsors have traditionally used sports sponsorship to heighten awareness and support for their brand, broaden their corporate exposure, and garner greater consumer loyalty. The pandemic and the commensurate economic hardship forced both sport administrators and corporate marketing leaders to rethink their sponsorship strategies and, in many cases, shift away from traditional targets to support emerging sporting events. While there is still room to grow, interest and commensurate sponsorship of women's sport are on the rise. Hopefully, greater support for other interest-deserving groups (e.g., LGBTQ, seniors) and other sports (e.g., e-sport, alternative games) will follow suit. In this review article, the authors analyze the sports sponsorship strategies and trends before, during, and after the pandemic and provide readers with a blueprint of what may lie ahead.

Keywords: sports sponsorship, pandemic, future directions, implications, recommendations

Introduction

Sponsorship can be defined as one business supporting another for various reasons, including enhancing its corporate image, adding value to its organizational communications, increasing morale amongst multiple stakeholders, or promoting brand awareness (Dolphin, 2003; Smolianov & Shilbury, 2005). Companies have long embraced the sponsorship of sport as a means to support their communities, build professional and personal relationships, increase brand awareness, generate positive public relations, and increase business opportunities (Bailey, 2009; Smolianov & Shilbury, 2005). Corporate decision makers appreciated the size, reach, attention, and the relative importance of sport to society as well as the power that sport has to connect brands with specific target audiences, create stronger emotional bonds, drive brand loyalty, and ultimately, increase sales (Smolianov & Shilbury, 2005; Williams, 2023).

Pre-pandemic sports sponsorships were used as efficacious tools to “alter and enhance a company’s image and reputation” (Amis et al., 1999, p. 251). Sport sponsorships were found to effectively increase brand awareness and 60-80% of overall sales (REC Media, n.d.). Many executives viewed sports sponsorship as an

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effective strategy to differentiate themselves from their competitors (Amis et al., 1999). Sports resonate strongly with people, and according to Schreiber (2023) sponsors can benefit from demonstrating that they also support leagues, teams, and athletes that consumers care about (REC Media, n.d.). Sport sponsorship helped corporations differentiate themselves, engage with their fans, and grow these businesses through fans' love of sports (REC Media, n.d.). Research has shown that fans buy more from companies affiliated with their favourite teams, with the most enthusiastic sports fans being three times more likely to emotionally bond with sponsors, visit the sponsor's website, and buy products from that advertised brand (Schreiber, 2023). However, technology and digitalization has significantly changed the way that sport is played, consumed, and promoted (Crabtree & Zhang, 2022). The expansion of social media platforms and the rise in digital communications now provide consumers instant access to sports-related content and create increased opportunities for sports sponsorships to evolve (University of Kansas, 2022). The sports technology market is rapidly growing, and consumers are interested in connecting more quickly and authentically with athletes and sports teams (University of Kansas, 2022). Unlike traditional sponsorship arrangements, sports sponsorships are unique as they provide fans with different ways to connect with various athletes, teams, and leagues, not just during in-person sporting events but also through digital avenues (University of Kansas, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted society in a number of areas. People were impacted socially given the mandated isolation (Banerjee & Rai, 2020), economically (So, et al., 2021), educationally (Tarkar, 2020) and in a variety of significant health areas (Shrestha et al., 2020). It also impacted sport participation and live sport spectatorship for a significant period of time. During this time, people adopted new interests and consumption preferences. The pandemic also imposed several challenges and barriers to sports sponsorships, which prompted significant change (Crabtree & Zhang, 2022; O'Reilly & Abeza, 2020; Su & Kennedy, 2023). The isolation mandated during the pandemic, coupled with advances in technology spawned a spiked interest in different activities like e-sports (Macaulay, 2020) and sports gambling (Lock, 2020). Time, and perhaps boredom exposed sports enthusiasts to different, previously underappreciated sports like women's sport, parasport, and LGBTQ sport (Bogina, et. al., 2022, Eltin, 2024; Macaulay, 2020; Smith & Skinner, 2021; Smith, 2024). All the while, the economic hardships brought on by the pandemic forced sponsors to become more discriminating and strategic with their sponsorship dollars. The disruption caused by the pandemic changed behavior, spawned new interests, and as a result, different consumption practices emerged. Some (Crabtree & Zhang, 2022; O'Reilly & Abeza, 2020; Su & Kennedy, 2023) suggest that these significant changes are here to stay.

For example, the rise of interest in women's sport has captured the attention of both fans and corporate sponsors. (Eltin, 2024). Women's sport has been traditionally marginalized, devalued, and underappreciated (Bowes et al., 2021) by spectators, television executives, and sponsors alike, but that has significantly changed (Labba, & Khodaparast, 2023). According to Eltin (2024), sponsorship of women's sport is on the rise, and it makes strategic sense for sponsors given this meteoric rise in popularity (e.g., for the first time, the 2024 NCAA Women's Basketball final game

outdrew the Men's NCAA Basketball Final game (e.g., TV audience) by a significant margin). Corporations like Budweiser, Heineken, Nike, Google, Coca-Cola, and Morgan Stanley have all pledged to increase their sponsorship of women's sport. AT & T and Amazon have recently become major sponsors of the WNBA. Ally Financial and Canadian Tire have signaled their intention of providing equal levels sponsorship support to women's and men's sport. These trends could be considered part of a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategy, but in our view, and the view of others, this shift is a strategic response to the fact that sponsoring women's sport is becoming increasingly beneficial to corporations (Eltin, 2024; Smith, 2024).

Qualities Evident in Successful Sports Partnerships

Smith et al. (2008) believed that the success of sports sponsorships is contingent on two key factors, namely: (a) fan passion and (b) a perception of sponsor integrity. They investigated how team support and perceptions of sponsor integrity impacted fan receptiveness to sponsorship and, ultimately, their behaviours to purchase a sponsor's products.

Smith et al. (2008) studied an Australian professional football club to determine purchase behaviours and intentions amongst consumers. The study was designed to explain and predict the relationship between team support, the perception of sponsors, and the purchase intentions of sports consumers. Questionnaires were mailed to club members, and the researchers realized an 8.5% response rate (N=19,295). Respondents were 67% male, well-educated, primarily middle-aged, and loyal to their respective clubs (average association of 13.6 years and regularly attended matches). The researchers concluded that purchase intention increased when respondents were passionate team supporters. Sponsor integrity was rated highly and, according to the researchers, predicted more excellent receptiveness to the sponsor's message and facilitated purchase intention. Sports sponsors must focus on engaging members and encouraging them to participate in club activities. They need to spark a passion and enthusiasm for the sports club. Furthermore, sponsors must focus on elevating their perceived integrity by stating and demonstrating their values and the fit with the sports club's values.

Koronios et al. (2022) extended this research by investigating the link between sports sponsorship and consumer purchasing decisions. They analyzed spectators of the FIBA Basketball World Cup in 2019 to determine if sports sponsorship influenced fans' beliefs about sponsorship, the sponsor's image, fans' attachment to the team, the team's performance, fans' sports involvement, and sponsor sincerity and the connection of these variables to potential consumer purchase intentions. They uncovered promising results that link sports sponsorship and heightened awareness and favorability. They also determined that sports sponsorship significantly impacted purchasing decisions beyond the intentions to buy, which research has previously uncovered (Koronios et al., 2022).

Bredikhina & Kunkel (2022) pursued a parallel but different line of inquiry by exploring the relationship between activation sponsorship, advertising-like sponsorship, sponsor-event fit, self-congruity with luxury brand sponsors, sponsorship authenticity,

and sponsor brand attitudes of fans before attending, and after attending a three-day international tennis event in Europe. One luxury brand implemented an experiential activation into its sponsorship strategy, featuring an interactive product display, games, entertainment, and activities. The other brand employed an advertising-like strategy through a logo display. Both brands were European-based, widely promoted domestically and internationally, and have been involved in sponsorship for relatively the same time. The researchers collaborated with the event organizer to recruit respondents via e-mail to participate in a two-wave longitudinal study with an added incentive for respondents to enter a prize draw. The pre-event survey was sent seven days before the event, and the post-event survey was sent seven days after the event concluded. The respondents were balanced on gender (47.9% were female and 52.1% were male), affluent, and well-educated (Bredikhina & Kunkel, 2022). Furthermore, 93.1% of the respondents attended all three days of the event, and 75.5% confirmed that tennis was a fundamental part of their lifestyle (Bredikhina & Kunkel, 2022). The results demonstrated that sports sponsorship activation was found to be more effective than advertising-like sports sponsorship in influencing event attendees' perceptions of sponsorship fit and authenticity, highlighting the effectiveness of activation in amplifying sponsorship outcomes.

Bredikhina & Kunkel (2022) conducted a descriptive research study confirming that sports sponsorship can influence brand attitudes on consumers' sponsor brand. However, no significant differences were uncovered between the employed activation and advertising-like strategies. The results further suggested that "when sponsorship is leveraged with activation rather than advertising-like messages, event-induced shifts in consumers' sponsorship perceptions are stronger predictors of changes in sponsor brand attitudes" (Bredikhina & Kunkel, 2022, p. 1460). Based on these findings, sports sponsors should look to integrate activation elements into their marketing strategies and implement tangible, in-person elements such as games, activities, and giveaways. Future sports sponsors should create appealing and entertaining campaigns that shift away from passive and traditional sponsorship forms to maximize their full brand potential and sponsorship investment.

Deloitte's inaugural research study conducted by Deloitte's Technology, Media & Telecommunications practice sought to uncover trends in the attitudes and behaviours of sports fans following the pandemic. This research focused more on the nature of fandom, sports streaming, the relationship between sports and mobile devices, in-person sporting experiences, social media, and other digital engagement channels that are currently emerging (Deloitte, 2023). The researchers included a critical demographic variable in their analysis (e.g., the Gen Z group born between 1997 and 2009; Millennials born between 1983 and 1996; Gen X group born between 1966 and 1982; Boomers born between 1947 and 1965, and Matures born in 1946 and earlier).

The findings supported the claim that Gen Z fans crave a social and sporting experience. Gen Z fans linked value, community, socialization, and connection as part of their sports consumption experiences. However, other findings address the changing sports consumption patterns and preferences due to the pandemic expertise.

For example, 88% of sports fans claimed to watch live sporting events at home every week because they indicated that: (a) it was more cost-friendly; (b) there were

fewer distractions, (c) they could multi-task while watching the events, and; (d) they had more control (e.g., replays, commentary, stopping the game and restarting it) over how they wished to view the game (Deloitte, 2023). Despite rising streaming costs, many Millennials claimed they would be willing to pay more for more streaming video services (Deloitte, 2023). Gen Z and Millennial fans enjoyed the highlights, documentaries, and other sports-related videos on social media. The researchers found that 61% of Gen Z fans claim to watch sporting events at home with other people compared to 53% of the Generation X cohort and 48% of Boomer fans (Deloitte, 2023), who are more likely to watch sports from home in isolation. Nearly 40% of Gen Z fans indicated they would be more likely to watch sporting events at home if accompanied by friends or family, speaking to the importance of having a communal experience (Deloitte, 2023).

Furthermore, Gen Z fans indicated that they were more likely to watch athlete interviews and view athlete-related posts. Eighty percent of Gen Z fans claimed to follow professional athletes on social media (Deloitte, 2023). Over 20% of Gen Z fans claimed to have purchased a sponsored product promoted by a professional athlete (Deloitte, 2023). Sports sponsors can capitalize on this by building a community with sports fans and promoting their brand in an inclusive and impactful way.

Younger fans reported accessing content through mobile devices (Deloitte, 2023). These findings highlight how technology and social media have transformed the landscape for the delivery and consumption of sports. Around 50% of Gen Z fans claimed to have used social media while watching live sporting events from home, whether reading comments on posts or interacting with others digitally (Deloitte, 2023). Gen Z fans are also increasingly interested in other new technology, such as co-viewing and live social feeds that further support the desire for more socialization experiences. Gen Z fans claimed they are more of a fan today than they were three years ago, mainly due to the explosive use of digital technologies. As the costs and inconvenience of attending live events continue to escalate, consumers, especially Gen Z consumers, are turning to mobile devices and remote delivery options. Viewing sports from home will continue to grow significantly if technological advances and more interactive content expand as predicted. Officials from sports and sports sponsorship communities would be well served in paying attention to this development.

The overarching findings revealed that the younger generation of sports fans is setting new trends in sports with a greater emphasis on the desire to consume sports content across a wider variety of channels, utilizing streaming services to enhance their viewing experience, engaging in multiple sports-related activities while viewing the game, and increasing socialization online. This new era of immersive sports has led fans to crave a more personalized sporting experience and sense of community, both in-person and virtually, at an affordable cost. These research findings are significant as these results can help sports sponsors better understand their target audience and the shifts in the type of content these fans find engaging and entertaining. Sports sponsors now have a clairvoyant path of what lies ahead, and if they can break from traditional thinking, they can capitalize on these developments.

Pre-Pandemic, Pandemic, and Post-Pandemic Sponsorship Trends

Sponsorship has been a popular area of study and practice for decades. Sports organizations need an incremental revenue stream, and corporations like the association and profile-building advantages of the arrangement. Sponsorship spending was expected to skyrocket before the onset of COVID-19. The Business Research Company (2019) predicted that sports sponsorship would grow from an estimated USD \$46B in 2018 to USD \$49B in 2023. Koronios (et al., 2022) chronicled the rapid growth of sports sponsorship and suggested that it had increased more than ten times over three decades before the onset of the pandemic. Sponsorship outpaced other marketing strategies, such as public relations, direct marketing, and promotions. Sponsorship was helping companies heighten their visibility and profile, driving increased revenue, and enhancing their firm's value (Koronios et al., 2022, p. 4).

According to the IEG Network, sponsorship was the "world's fastest-growing form of marketing," with \$24.6B spent worldwide over two decades ago within the following industries: sport, finance, education, broadcast media, and the arts (Dolphin, 2003). Within the sponsorship realm, sports sponsorship was "undoubtedly the most well-known category inside the general sponsorship field, getting 70% of the all-out sponsorship expenditure in 2016" (Koronios et al., 2022, p. 4). However, the pandemic negatively impacted this growth, as reflected in the 37% year-over-year decrease (i.e., \$46.1B in 2019 to \$28.9B in 2020). The pandemic significantly disrupted the marriage between sport and its sponsors. Nearly 20,000 sports and entertainment properties were cancelled or postponed events, and some sponsoring corporations permanently shuttered their operations. According to Koronios (et al., 2022), 120,000 active sponsorship agreements were lost. Officials with *The Sports Business Journal* estimated that after the first month of the nationwide shutdown, 5,300 events were cancelled, affecting 51M fans at a cost of \$3.4 billion (Pokrywczynski, 2020).

The pandemic significantly impacted the sports industry as well. Skinner and Smith (2021) suggested that the industry suffered severe losses (\$13B dollars in US sporting leagues, \$28.6B dollars in wages and earnings, and approximately 1.5M job losses in the United States alone). In Europe, revenue losses surpassed 1B Euros within several established European football clubs (Skinner & Smith, 2021). Around the world, major sporting events and competitions such as Wimbledon and the Tokyo Olympic Games were cancelled, postponed, or shortened (Skinner & Smith, 2021). The pandemic-related changes to sports, such as social distancing regulations and closures of large sporting arenas and facilities, created many implications for sponsorship relationships. Athletes/teams could sometimes compete, but spectators were barred from attending. Pokrywczynski (2020) noted that "the biggest impact is not having large gatherings of fans on-site for brands to interact with, see the sponsors' signage, experience the sponsored areas within the facility, partake in the food, drink and other hospitality options." Sponsors could not connect in person with consumers through on-site activations (Pokrywczynski, 2020). This led to brands, athletes, and sports properties relying less on physical signage and media within live sporting events and instead prioritizing fan engagement through community initiatives, digital campaigns, and social media. Significant and timely changes were required. The "business as usual" strategies of the past would not work as the

pandemic subsided and corporations contemplated how to maximize their precious sponsorship resources. Sports organizations also needed to react to a shifting environment.

Heightened Digitalization of Sport and Sponsorship

The shift from traditional media to digital and social media marketing strategies allowed many sports sponsorships to recoup lost value and set themselves up for long-term success. These new sponsorship strategies have proven resilient within the ever-changing economic climate as they are no longer contingent on the success of sponsorship advertising within live sporting events. Cutler (2020) predicted that the innovation and creative thinking used to effectively sponsor during the pandemic will continue in the post-pandemic period. For example, during the pandemic, the National Hockey League (NHL) secured a partnership deal with Amazon Webservices to elevate the fan experience (Skinner & Smith, 2021). Similar partnership deals emerged between the National Basketball Association (NBA) and Microsoft, the National Football League (NFL) and Cisco, and the Major League Baseball (MLB) and Google (Skinner & Smith, 2021). These major sport organizations partnered with these well-established and growing technology companies to integrate new digital strategies for consumers such as “player tracking, bespoke insights, super-connectivity, mobile-enhancement, platform interaction, social media, at-home experiences, AI and learning algorithms, and immersive technology” (Skinner & Smith, 2021, p. 325). Social media communication platforms became even more popular during this time. Sport leagues, teams, athletes and their sponsors experienced greater connectivity with their fans (Skinner & Smith, 2021). Many sports organizations created new opportunities to engage with their fan bases.

Research conducted by Sport and Development (2022) documented the profound changes to the sports sponsorship ecosystem. Researchers highlighted the trend towards more purposeful corporate partnerships. Sport and Development (2022) invited over 600 influential leaders within the sponsorship and sports marketing industry (e.g., drawn from five continents) to complete a survey to help both groups better understand how impactful and meaningful partnerships could be structured in the post-pandemic age. Ninety-three percent of the respondents agreed that the pandemic has had a significant impact, with the majority also agreeing that it created both challenges and new opportunities for corporate partners and sports organizations (Sport and Development, 2022). Four challenges were readily apparent for current and potential sponsors, namely: (a) uncertainty in planning, (b) reaching consumers via traditional and new means, (c) managing the ever-changing situation of sporting event cancellations, and (d) a lack of fan attendance. Four challenges were identified for sports leaders, namely: (a) uncertainty as an underlying stressor, (b) increasing fan engagement, (c) significant financial restraints due to a lack of or postponement of live and marquee events, and (d) challenges in breaking traditions and being flexible. However, 75% of the sport and sponsorship respondents agreed that the pandemic had created numerous new opportunities for new sports sponsorship opportunities (Sport and Development, 2022). Seventy percent of respondents felt that significant change was already underway, and 96% agreed that partnerships between various brands, athletes, and sports organizations were becoming more purposeful, innovative,

and fluid, partly due to advances in digital technology (Sport and Development, 2022). Over 64% of respondents have changed their sponsorship strategies, and almost 60% have explored alternative sports and events for future partnership opportunities (Sport and Development, 2022). Overall, this research highlighted the shifting sports sponsorship landscape and the fact that consumers identify more with brands that are empathetic, responsive, and adaptable (Sport and Development, 2022). Sports properties, brands, and athletes needed to be more intentional in their marketing strategies, and those that did not alter their strategies would not survive in the new environment.

Sports sponsorship is entering a transformative era, evolving from logo placements and brand affiliations to a more strategic partnership arrangement focusing on shared values, social impact, and long-term engagement (Williams, 2023). The sports sponsorship landscape is shifting as businesses become discerning and purposeful when determining what partnerships to implement for their companies.

Despite lost revenue and challenges with maintaining partnerships during the pandemic, the sports sponsorship realm is recovering. The global sports sponsorship market was estimated at \$77.69B in 2022 and is projected to reach \$116.17B by 2027 (Business Wire, 2022). This growing revenue within sports sponsorship can be primarily attributed to signage, which allows logos and various messaging to be displayed at multiple sporting events (Gough, 2023).

Rise in Social Media

Sports-related sponsorship spending increased by 12% within 2022, but the value of the sponsorship deals slightly decreased (KORE, 2023) during this period. Corporate sponsors have become increasingly more selective about who they would like to work with and have placed greater importance on quantifying the impact of those sponsorship deals (KORE, 2023). Social media has also impacted these trends. We have witnessed an exponential increase in the overall engagement of social media sponsorships, with a greater emphasis on the subject matter and quality of the posts than the number of posts (KORE, 2023). Brand and sports leaders must understand their target audience and how they can best connect with the group through digital channels (KORE, 2023).

Sponsors typically engage with fans through social media in two ways: (a) through league-wide team content or (b) through the team's social media platforms. Furthermore, sponsors can create content for the league or individual teams' social media platforms. Increased use of social media has resonated with Major League Baseball fans and according to Pokrywczynski (2020) led to increased ticket sales and merchandise purchases.

Shorter Sponsorship Agreement Lifespans and Built-in Protections

Another exciting development in sports sponsorship is the duration of sports partnerships, which has seen more short-term arrangements and more built-in protections (Lefton, 2022). In today's climate, more brands, athletes, and sports properties are considering one-year contracts with options to extend into two, three, four years, and so on (Lefton, 2022). According to Brian Napoli, vice president of

corporate partnerships with the Philadelphia Eagles of the NFL, there is great scrutiny around participating in long-term deals. Built-in protections have to be put in place. Sponsors will insist on opt-out clauses (Lefton, 2022). By creating greater flexibility around partnership durations and implementing built-in protections, those involved will have a greater sense of security and mutual understanding of the expectations. The researchers do not see this changing in the future.

More Performance-based Agreements

Another change coming out of the pandemic is greater attention to performance standards. Sport sponsorship investments are risky as teams may underperform, cars that display a sponsored logo may crash early on in a race, or inclement weather can disrupt live sporting events (Elevent, n.d.). Given these risks and lost sponsorship revenue during the pandemic, sponsors are increasingly seeking sponsorship valuations to counter these risks (Elevent, n.d.). Sports sponsors aim to mitigate such risks by lowering the initial rights fee with escalators or bonuses if specific criteria, such as making the playoffs, investing a pre-determined amount in advertising, or reaching an audience threshold, are met (Elevent, n.d.). Overall, sports sponsors are seeking sponsorship agreements that are less risky and offer more stability to gain a return on their investment. This will undoubtedly continue in the future.

Greater Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Partnerships

Consumers are putting more pressure on companies to address Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) issues. Companies that adopt CSR practices conduct business ethically, demonstrate respect for their employees, contribute to a cleaner environment, and make society a better place (Dahlsrud, 2008). Consumers like this and want to support companies that support these initiatives. This will remain the same in the years ahead. Al-Haddad et al. (2022) noted that customer engagement and purchase intentions increased by 15% and 35%, respectively, once consumers knew of a company's CSR practices. "A positive relationship was also found between consumer engagement with CSR activities on social media and purchase intention" (Al-Haddad et al., 2022, p. 14). Several sports companies are becoming aware of these consumer trends and have begun positioning themselves with new brand advocates related to humanitarian goals, environmental missions, or positive mental health messages (Team Brizi, 2023). We expect this trend to continue in the years ahead.

As noted above, increased sponsorship of women's sport in the post-pandemic environment is inevitable. Wasserman and its women-focused division, *The Collective*, collaborated with the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) to study the development. Their research uncovered a vast discrepancy between how brands and sponsors currently value partnerships with women versus men athletes (The Collective, 2023). Nearly 90% of partnership dollars are directed to male athletes who are paid significantly more than their female counterparts. The male sports sponsorship landscape is overcrowded, and there is significant room and consumer interest in sponsoring women's sports. There are clear strategic reasons to support women's sports. These researchers reported "mainstream interest in women's sports among a desirable

audience; 86% of general sports fans are interested in women's sports" (The Collective, 2023, p. 13).

Interestingly, women's sports fans are "a balanced mix of men and women," with the majority of these fans being "younger, more educated, and more affluent than men's sports fans" (The Collective, 2023, p. 13). Furthermore, 72% of women's sports fans are interested in athletes outside of their sport in lifestyle, fashion, and behind-the-scenes content, as opposed to 45% of men's sports fans. This speaks to professional women athletes' ability to leverage their social media to drive awareness and connect with their fandom more significantly than male athletes. Women athletes drive twice the engagement on social media compared to their male counterparts (The Collective, 2023).

Professional women athletes have also been an impetus for enacting positive social change as they advocate for social issues, challenge societal norms, and push the boundaries in sports and society (The Collective, 2023). Eighty-nine percent of women's sports fans are more likely to have been motivated by an athlete to take some form of social action, and 75% of women's sports fans believe that sports leagues, teams, and athletes have a responsibility to support social causes (The Collective, 2023). It should come as no surprise that fans of women's sports are "54% more aware of sponsors" and "45% more willing to consider or purchase from sponsor brands" compared to men's sports (The Collective, 2023, p. 16). Furthermore, these fans view women athletes as positive role models who are "trustworthy, exemplify excellence and are inspirational" (The Collective, 2023, p. 17).

Sponsors who work with professional women athletes report a "halo effect," where the sponsor "benefits from enhanced perception, reflecting the characteristics that consumers value most" (The Collective, 2023, p. 19). These findings demonstrate the unique benefits sports sponsors can gain when working with professional women athletes and the opportunity to create a meaningful impact by aligning with women athletes. Women's sport is undergoing explosive growth across the globe and is now an especially fertile area for future sport sponsorship opportunities (LeBel et al., 2021).

These research findings support the claim that sports sponsors can gain a more positive fan perception, more significant social media presence, and reach new younger fan bases when aligning themselves with professional women athletes (The Collective, 2023). This is an opportunity that strategic sports marketers will seize in the post-pandemic environment.

Recommendations for Sport Managers

Develop a Clearer Strategy

Successful sports sponsorships must "develop a clear strategy that aligns with their overall marketing objectives and resonates with their target audience" (Infront, 2022). It is essential for brands to understand what they stand for and communicate this position to the athletes, teams/leagues, or sporting events with whom they hope to work. This is crucial in transitioning from a one-dimensional transactional relationship

between those involved in the sponsorship agreement to a more dynamic and rewarding partnership model. Sports sponsors need to foster a positive working relationship where each party provides value to the other and is mutually successful (Andrews, 2021). Once sponsors develop a clear strategy, it is equally important to establish goals that may revolve around improving brand awareness, customer acquisition, or increasing sales (Yellowbrick, 2023). Sports sponsors should also have a clear vision and mission for what they hope to achieve with the partnership, and this message should also be apparent to the consumers when they buy a branded product or service (Infront, 2022). Sports sponsorships that develop clear and concise marketing strategies will succeed by strengthening and improving their strategy, and in turn, this will help grow their number of fans and supporters (Andrews, 2021).

Implement Meaningful Marketing Campaigns

Sports sponsors should “develop strategic marketing campaigns that differentiate the organization” and implement meaningful marketing strategies to reach their target audience (Andrews, 2021). This is developed by researching audience and stakeholder attitudes and analyzing fan and consumer behaviours (Andrews, 2021). Based on these analytics, sports sponsorships can continuously improve their campaigns, strengthening their bond with the consumers (Andrews, 2021). Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the content and advertising they view, meaning sports sponsors must create impactful campaigns that are captivating, thoughtful, and unique. Williams (2023) further validates this by explaining how the future of sponsorship goes beyond partnerships that help increase visibility but engages in authentic collaborations that connect with a brand’s values, philosophies, and commitment to making a positive difference. It is becoming less about associating with different companies and more about the journey between a brand, athlete, and sports entity toward achieving a common goal.

Create More One-of-a-Kind Consumer Experiences

Sports sponsorships that go above and beyond to create one-of-a-kind consumer experiences will be sure to set themselves apart from other sponsors. It is no longer sufficient for brands to associate themselves with a sporting event or property simply and hope that consumers will buy the branded product or service (Bailey, 2009). Instead, sports sponsors should incorporate engaging experiences that leave fans wanting to buy the branded product or service (Bailey, 2009). Sports sponsorships must consider how the consumer will “experience” the product or service in a fun and engaging way (Bailey, 2009). Sponsorship activations are becoming increasingly meaningful to engage consumers deeper with brand ambassadors, for example, who offer a “one-on-one experience designed to educate consumers and develop brand loyalty” (Bailey, 2009). Sports sponsors should look to create “multi-faceted programs designed to engage customers” and create “truly unique ‘experiences’” (Bailey, 2009). For example, many sports sponsorships allow fans to win contests that may give them VIP access to various sporting events, exclusive meet-and-greets with star players, or opportunities to purchase exclusive branded merchandise (Yellowbrick,

2023). Sports sponsors should also look to incorporate experiences that give fans insight into players' lives off the field through exclusive interviews, behind-the-scenes training sessions, charity activities, and "day in the life" vlogs (Podewils, 2023). These experiences and contests can help strengthen consumer relationships and generate brand advocates who will positively support the brand. Overall, one-of-a-kind consumer experiences keep fans engaged, which, in turn, can help increase brand loyalty and attract new consumers.

Invest More Sponsorship Resources in Women's Sports

As noted above, women's professional sports are exploding in terms of popularity, attendance, viewership and naturally, sports sponsorship potential (LeBel, 2021). Sports sponsors must recognize the importance of investing in and promoting women's sports. The Collective's (2023) research study highlighted the discrepancy between how brands and sponsors currently evaluate partnerships with women versus men athletes. The findings revealed that sponsors aligned with professional women athletes would benefit from enhanced fan perceptions and higher engagement rates through social media and will reach newer, younger fan bases interested in meaningful sports sponsorships. Fans are also more likely to engage on a deeper level with these brands and buy the branded products endorsed by professional women athletes as they view these athletes as positive and inspiring role models. Given the vast discrepancy between men's and women's athlete sponsorships, sports sponsors should look to close these gaps and maximize the opportunity to invest in professional women athletes. Also, sports sponsors should seek authentic relationships that resonate with a broader range of consumers.

Sponsors interested in investing in professional women athletes must challenge traditional sponsorship models and align with the unique attributes and value women offer on and off the field (The Collective, 2023). Sponsors must focus on designing measurement tools for women's sports, implementing a collaborative approach when working with professional women's athletes, and providing long-term opportunities to grow the partnership (The Collective, 2023). Furthermore, sponsors should "harness the power of the fan community" by building purposeful campaigns, providing a platform for the athletes to share their stories, and investing in broadcasting to increase the visibility of women athletes to new fan bases in untapped markets" (The Collective, 2023, p. 25). Storytelling is one of the three fundamental principles of creative effectiveness in sponsorship, according to Williams (2023) and has been scientifically proven to drive more significant brand impact.

Continue to Monitor Attention to the Post-Pandemic Realities

The pandemic significantly disrupted society on several social and economic levels. It also revealed significant inequities and environmental challenges that needed to be addressed. The grounding of people (and tourism, automobiles, airplanes, etc.) resulted in some environmental recovery, highlighting that long-term change was needed. Social inequality was both illuminated and accelerated by the pandemic. These impacts were also felt by sports organizations and sports sponsors, who both

need to demonstrate a commitment to CSR cultural competence and strive to positively support local communities, society, and the climate, as well as diversity and inclusion (Habitzeuter & Koenigstorfer, 2021; Infront, 2022). Including some or all of these components in their operations will help elevate sports sponsorships and set them apart from others (Infront, 2022; Sung & Lee, 2016). Research has shown that these values-based partnerships focusing on environmental and social issues are rising (Williams, 2023). These partnerships outperform traditional partnerships regarding strengthening fan engagement and earned media and can contribute quantitatively to partners' Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) targets (Plewa et al., 2016; Williams, 2023). Therefore, it is essential that sports sponsors make a conscious effort and commit to including these elements within their sponsorship strategies and make visible positive changes.

An example is "purpose marketing," which involves brands that publicly take a stance on social issues and incorporate them within their purpose and values (Infront, 2022). A research study conducted by Wunderman supports this, as 89% of consumers are loyal to brands who share their values, and 77% stated they want a brand to take a social stance (Infront, 2022). Sports organizations and partnering sports sponsors looking to heighten their brand awareness and societal acceptance in the years ahead must pay closer attention to these CSR realities and factors (Plewa et al., 2016; Sung & Lee, 2016).

Pay Greater Attention to Esports

The growth of esports over the past decade has been exponential, and sustained expansion is predicted to continue (Ströh, 2017). The pandemic did not disrupt the esports industry to the same degree as traditional sports. In fact, due to the rapid developments in technology and the take-up of technology, its popularity grew during this time. This exponential growth was not a loss of sponsors, especially luxury brand sponsors. Some diverted their sponsorship resources from traditional sports to esports (Su & Kennedy), and they see value in maintaining their relationship with the industry. Sports leaders must be mindful of this development and aware that new sports sponsorship competitors exist. These competitors have been successful in helping sponsors reach target audiences successfully. Traditional sports organizations and sports sponsorship teams must increase their creativity and sharpen their taking points to win back the support of these sponsors who have defected and are seeing the benefits of an association with esports.

Demonstrate Greater Cultural Awareness and Competency

Significant shifts in population migration patterns are taking place due to geopolitical conflicts across the globe. Demographic shifts will continue to transpire as migration practices increase, as predicted (Schwarz et al., 2015; Youngflesh et al., 2023). These shifts will bring about acute changes to how sports are embraced in society (i.e., interest and consumption patterns accelerated by technological changes), and sports organizations and their sponsors will undoubtedly be impacted. Sports leaders and their sponsors must remain acutely aware of these changes. They can

play a role in helping educate new citizens about traditional sporting activities, while also paying greater attention to understanding and supporting the sports and consumption preferences of new citizens (Schwarz et al., 2015; Youngflesh et al., 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, sports sponsorships have evolved because of the COVID-19 pandemic and are becoming more digitalized, personalized, and purposeful among consumers. Many companies faced setbacks, while others were innovative and prospered.

Economic and societal challenges brought on by the pandemic created profound impacts on the sport business world. Athletes, sports teams/leagues, and sports properties faced many challenges during this robust period. With a lack of in-person sporting events and social distancing regulations imposed, traditional forms of sports sponsorship were no longer feasible. The pandemic catalyzed the emergence of new sports sponsorship strategies as sports sponsors faced planning uncertainties. It was forced to find new ways to interact with consumers when in-person activations and experiences were impossible. Sports sponsors who turned to more meaningful partnerships that were fluid and flexible prospered during this period. Many sports sponsors leveraged social media as an essential tool to connect with sports fans by hosting Zoom viewing parties, conducting livestreams, and engaging with fans through various posts, videos, tweets, etc. Other trends, such as shorter and more flexible partnership agreements and the implementation of CSR initiatives, also emerged during the pandemic and have stayed relevant post-pandemic. Several research studies expanded on the integral components of successful sports sponsorships about consumer behaviours and trends. Smith et al. (2008) supported the belief that team support and perceived sponsor integrity impact fans' receptiveness to sponsorship and influence their purchase behaviours. Koronios et al. (2022) supported the claim that sponsor image, team attachment, and sponsor sincerity influenced attitude toward sponsor and sponsor awareness, significantly impacting the purchase behaviour of sponsored products and services amongst consumers rather than purchase intentions. Bredikhina & Kunkel's (2022) research findings revealed that sponsors implementing activation strategies will lead to more controllable, positive outcomes than traditional advertising-like strategies. Deloitte's inaugural study on sports fan behaviours highlighted that sports fans prioritize communal sporting experiences and engaging with fans through social media channels, increasing their willingness to purchase sponsored products. Furthermore, a research study by The Collective (2023) documented how women's sports are growing in popularity and as a result, becoming increasingly valuable for sponsorship investments. Furthermore, the female athletes are generally viewed as being more positive role models amongst fans (The Collective, 2023).

Based on these research findings, future sports sponsors are advised to implement the following recommendations: develop a clear strategy, implement meaningful marketing campaigns, create one-of-a-kind consumer experiences, invest in women's sports, and exhibit cultural competence. Sports sponsors must look to develop a clear and concise strategy by researching the sports landscape and consumer demographics and ensuring the right brand "fit." Sports sponsors should look to implement purposeful campaigns by creating authentic relationships with brands that share

similar values, ideologies, and commitment to making a positive change. Creating elevated consumer experiences can also help sports sponsors differentiate themselves and take their sponsorship strategy to the next level. For instance, sports sponsors can utilize brand ambassadors at in-person activations, provide consumers with product freebies, and implement contest giveaways to connect with their consumers on a deeper and more personal level. Sports sponsors should look for investment opportunities in women's sports as research has shown that sponsors aligned with professional women athletes will benefit from a more positive fan perception and higher social media engagement and will reach newer, younger fan bases. Lastly, sports sponsors should focus on purpose-marketing strategies that positively support local communities, society, the climate, and diversity and inclusion. Sports sponsors have made significant strides post-pandemic, and with the right tools and purposeful partnerships, these sponsors will continue to prosper, and new trends will evolve.

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