

# Media Representation and Sponsorship of Women's Sports in Azerbaijan: Challenges and Opportunities

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Keywords	Abstract
Sponsorship Media exposure Gender equality Cultural factors Women's sports.	This study investigates the factors influencing the sponsorship of female athletes, examining the role of athlete-related, media-related, consumer-related, and external factors. Through a survey of participants within the sports industry, the research highlights the key challenges and opportunities for female athletes in securing sponsorships. The findings emphasize the importance of performance perception, media exposure, fan engagement, and societal attitudes towards gender equality in sports. While performance and media coverage are identified as crucial elements in attracting sponsorship, the research also reveals the challenges posed by cultural stereotypes and consumer perceptions. Recommendations are made for increasing media visibility, fostering greater fan engagement, and addressing gender biases to create a more equitable environment for female athletes. The study contributes to the existing literature on sports sponsorship and gender equality, offering insights for sponsors, sports organizations, and policymakers in promoting female sports.

## Introduction

In recent years, women's sports have gained more global visibility due to increased media attention and growing sponsorship investments. According to Forbes, women's sports received 15% of media share in 2022—a notable rise compared to previous years. Similarly, Sponsor United reported a 22% increase in sponsorship for women's professional sports from 2023 to 2024 (Forbes, 2023). These shifts signal a broader trend toward the recognition of female athletes worldwide.

Despite this progress, challenges remain, particularly in countries like Azerbaijan. While the country has developed significant sports infrastructure and hosted major international events

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(e.g., European Games 2015, Islamic Solidarity Games 2017), media representation and sponsorship for women's sports remain limited. Traditional gender norms and sociopolitical factors continue to affect how female athletes are portrayed.

Although the Azerbaijani government has taken steps to promote women's participation—such as building modern facilities and encouraging international competition—the media coverage of female athletes is fragmented and sporadic. Campaigns like the International Judo Federation's "White Suits Girls" and Azercell's partnerships with female Olympians have been positive but remain isolated rather than systemic.

According to the Council of Europe's "Azerbaijan Gender Equality in Sport Leaflet" (2019), only 28% of sports federations in Azerbaijan use gender-sensitive communication strategies, and just 8% have set targets for gender representation in the media (Council of Europe. 2019). The underrepresentation is further deepened by the low number of women in leadership roles within sports organizations.

Sponsorship of women's sports in Azerbaijan also faces hurdles. While companies such as Pasha Holding (volleyball team Azerrail) and Tripsome (Baku Juniors Women's Football Team) offer some support, these cases are exceptions. Most sponsors favor events or teams over individual female athletes, partly due to their limited media visibility.

This study explores how media representation in Azerbaijan impacts sponsorship opportunities for female athletes. It analyzes the cultural and societal factors that shape their visibility and support, aiming to provide actionable insights. The goal is to offer recommendations for policymakers, media, and sports institutions to foster gender equity in Azerbaijani sports and contribute to broader global discussions on this issue.

## Literature Review

The literature on sponsorship in women's sports has seen increasing interest, with studies highlighting various factors influencing sponsorship drivers and effectiveness. In particular, the role of societal shifts toward gender equality, the rise of digital media, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) has garnered attention. This section examines the literature on the evolving sponsorship landscape, the drivers of sponsorship in women's sports, and the impact of media portrayals and athlete marketability.

### Sponsorship drivers in women's sports

Sponsorship in women's sports has grown alongside increasing societal awareness of gender equality. As visibility and fan interest rise, sponsors are more inclined to invest. Hazari (2018) notes that this trend is largely driven by the recognition of equality within the sports industry (Hazari, S. 2018). Increased media coverage and audience engagement have created a cycle that attracts further sponsorship.



According to the Women's Sport Trust (2023), 24.5 million people in the UK are aware of sponsorships in women's sports, highlighting their impact. Cultural movements like #MeToo and "This Girl Can" have influenced brand strategies, encouraging companies to support women's participation in male-dominated sectors. Cooky and LaVoi (2012) argue that such movements push brands toward socially responsible sponsorships aligned with progressive values (Cooky, C., LaVoi, N. M. 2012).

Social media has become a vital tool in sponsorship dynamics. Ferreira et al. (2021) found that athletes who engage with fans online enhance brand recognition (Ferreira 2021). Female athletes, in particular, build strong connections with audiences, and women's sports fans are nearly twice as likely to remember sponsoring brands (The Space Between, 2021).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) also plays a major role. Brands promoting gender equality through sports sponsorships improve both their image and community impact. Morgan's (2019) research shows that CSR and financial interests often align in women's sports sponsorship (Morgan, 2019). According to Babiak and Wolfe (2013), CSR-based partnerships generate shared value and ensure more stable, long-term support for athletes (Babiak, Wolfe, 2013), (Sanders, Winter, 2016).

### **Media representation and its influence on sponsorship**

Media representation plays a key role in shaping public perceptions of female athletes and directly influences their sponsorship potential. McDonald et al. (2022) argue that media portrayal significantly affects athletes' marketability (McDonald, et al. 2022). As media visibility increases, so do sponsorship opportunities—particularly when coverage highlights athletic talent. In contrast, Lough and Geurin (2019) warn that the sexualization of female athletes, though it may attract media attention, can distort perceptions of their professionalism (Lough, Geurin, 2019).

Kane, LaVoi, and Fink (2013) emphasize that while such portrayals may boost short-term engagement, they are less effective for long-term brand partnerships based on athletic merit (Kane, et al. 2013). The pressure to post sexualized content on social media to gain sponsors and fans remains a problematic trend (Pocock, Skey, 2022), potentially undermining athletes' credibility and stability in sponsorship deals.

Social media is a powerful branding tool. Smith and Sanderson (2015) note that female athletes who share personal, emotional content build stronger connections with fans and sponsors (Smith, Sanderson, 2015). Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) highlight the value of combining personal and promotional content, which allows brands to engage authentically with audiences (Geurin-Eagleman, Burch 2016).



However, maintaining an active online presence can be demanding. Howell et al. (2021) point out that the pressure to constantly post may affect performance and lead to burnout (Howell et al. 2021). Additionally, Thompson et al. (2014) warn that missteps or negative feedback online can harm an athlete's image and sponsorship appeal (Thompson, et al. (2014).

### **Conceptualizing sponsorship effectiveness in women's sports**

Kim et al. (2015) propose a conceptual model of sponsorship effectiveness that outlines key antecedents and outcomes in women's sports sponsorship (Kim, et al. 2015). These antecedents fall into three categories: sponsor-related factors, athlete-related factors, and dyadic fit between the sponsor and the athlete.

Sponsor-related factors include brand visibility, audience perception of sponsor motives, media presence, and clarity of brand messaging. Effective sponsorship requires alignment between the sponsor's image and the athlete's public persona.

Athlete-related factors involve marketability, including social media engagement, public image, and involvement in CSR initiatives. Athletes who maintain a positive presence and connect with audiences are more likely to attract sponsors.

Dyadic fit refers to the alignment of values and image between the sponsor and the athlete. A strong fit enhances credibility and deepens the brand-athlete association.

Sponsorship effectiveness is ultimately measured through cognitive outcomes (e.g., brand awareness) and affective outcomes (e.g., favorable attitudes and increased brand preference) (Bennett, 1999).

### **Methodology**

This study followed Saunders et al.'s (2019) "Research Onion" model to structure its methodological design (Saunders, et al. 2019). The model offers a layered framework, from philosophical stance to data collection methods, ensuring rigor and clarity.

An interpretivist philosophy was adopted, aligning with qualitative research aimed at exploring subjective experiences (Saunders, et al. 2019). This perspective emphasizes understanding how individuals make sense of their social realities, making it appropriate for investigating how Azerbaijani female athletes perceive sponsorship and media portrayal (Bryman, 2016), (Grix, J. (2010).

The study used an inductive approach, suitable for exploratory research without predefined hypotheses (Bryman, A., & Bell, E. (2015). This allowed for flexible inquiry and theory generation based on participants' insights into media and sponsorship in women's sports.



Given the study's aim to explore perceptions and lived experiences, a qualitative research design was chosen (Creswell, Poth, 2018). This approach enabled in-depth examination of the nuanced and context-specific ways participants interpret sponsorship and media representation.

### **Data Collection & Analysis**

Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data came from a survey with open-ended questions, enabling rich, detailed responses (Patton, 2015). Secondary data included academic publications and industry reports, offering theoretical and contextual background.

Thematic analysis was used to examine qualitative data, helping identify recurring themes in participants' sponsorship and media portrayal accounts (Braun, Clarke 2006). (Guest, et al. 2012). Emerging patterns were compared with existing literature to draw deeper conclusions.

### **Reliability and validity**

To ensure reliability, consistent procedures were followed throughout data collection and analysis (Roberts, et al. 2006). Content and construct validity were supported by grounding survey design in relevant literature and aligning it with the study's theoretical framework (Kane, 1992), (Yin, 2018).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Participants gave informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage (Orb, et al. 2001). Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, and data were securely stored for research purposes only (Appendix 1).

### **Findings**

The findings of the survey that Azerbaijani female athletes participated in regarding media coverage and sponsorship of women's sports are shown in this section. An online survey disseminated via personal networks and social media platforms was used to collect the data.

### **General findings**

The investigation sheds light on how the athletes view media attention, how it affects sponsorship prospects, and how it may affect female athletes' careers in general.



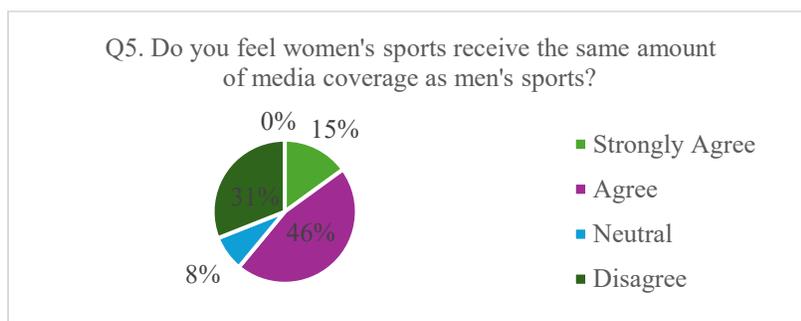
**Table 1.** Demographics and Sports Participation

	<b>Demographics</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Gender	Male	0	0%
	Female	13	100%
Age	18 - 24	7	54%
	25 - 34	3	23%
	35 - 44	2	16%
	45 - 54	1	7%
	55+	0	0%
Years of Experience	1 - 5 years	4	31%
	6 - 10 years	5	38%
	10 - 15 years	2	15%
	16 - 20 years	1	8%
	20 + years	1	8%

The survey had a total of 13 respondents and the participants ranged in age from 18 to 47 years old. The wide age range makes it possible to fully comprehend the experiences that athletes have at various phases of their careers. The survey targeted a diverse group of female athletes engaged in various sports, including fencing, athletics, wrestling, basketball, and swimming. The years that each person had been involved in their chosen sport varied greatly. In particular, 31% of the respondents had been involved in their sports for 1-5 years, 38% for 6-10 years, 15% for 10-15 years, 8% for 16-20 years, and another 8% for more than 20 years. The distribution shows that the athletes that were surveyed had a wide range of experience levels.

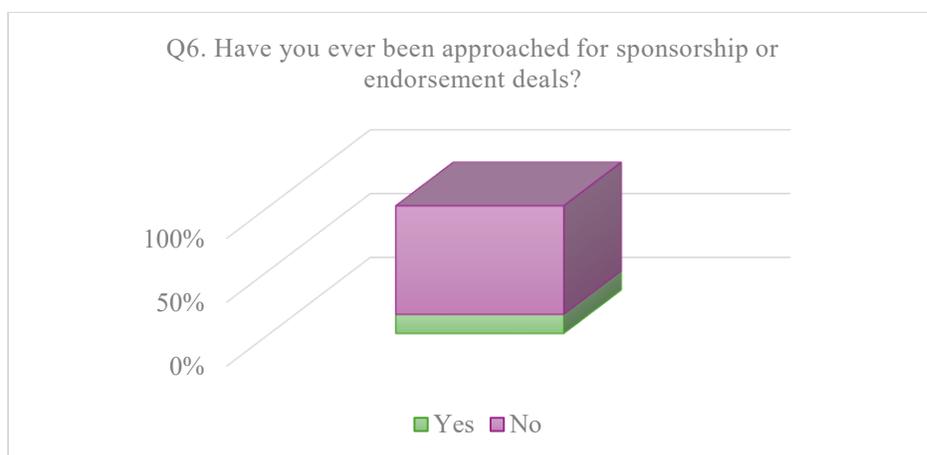


Figure 1. Media Coverage and Perception (Survey Question 5 Answers)



The survey investigated how athletes felt about the equal coverage of men's and women's sports in the media. The responses revealed a mixed perception. While 15% of the respondents strongly agreed and 46% agreed that women's sports receive the same amount of media coverage as men's sports, 31% disagreed, and 8% remained neutral. Notably, none of the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement.

Figure 2. Sponsorship and Media Exposure (Survey Question 6 Answers)



### Sponsorship and media representation: key findings

Survey results revealed that only 15% of respondents had ever been approached for sponsorship or endorsement deals, while 85% had not.

Regarding media representation, 85% reported no sponsorship offers even after appearing in media coverage. Only 15% received sponsorship approaches following media exposure.

Among those few who were approached post-media exposure, 8% reported being contacted within 1 week to 1 month, and another 8% within 3–6 months. Still, 85% had not received any sponsorship interest at all.

A vast majority (92%) believed that media exposure is vital in securing sponsorships for women athletes. No respondent ranked other factors higher, though 8% were uncertain about its impact.

On the value and frequency of sponsorships, 77% agreed that increased media visibility results in more deals, whereas 15% saw no effect, and 8% were unsure.

Respondents cited several reasons for limited sponsor interest: low media coverage, gender bias, perceptions of women's sports as less engaging, and declining audience interest—all contributing to the challenge of attracting sponsorships.

**Table 2.** Perception of Media's Role in Sponsorship

Question	What do you think is the reason(s) why sponsors show less interest in women's sports?
A1	I don't know.
A2	There is little coverage in the media
A3	Lower fan engagement and fewer viewers
A4	There are fewer female athletes.
A5	Given that throughout history men have been allowed to play sports while women have been banned, that is, sports have been a male-only activity, and over time the bans for women have been removed, yet today, male athletes receive more general attention than female athletes, and this is the reason why sponsors are more interested in men's sports than women's sports.
A6	I'm not sure why, but I think it's not about being man or women. I personally think that there needs to be more media representation on a professional level.
A7	I think that the majority favors men because they think that they will show better results than women in sports.
A8	Women's sports are considered uninteresting.
A9	I think they have the same interests, both women and men, I don't see any difference.
A10	Less demand for women's sports.
A11	The small number of women engaged in sports and the culture of different countries are obstacles to this.
A12	Less media coverage and less popularity.
A13	Less audience than men's sports.



## Activity levels

The survey revealed diverse social media engagement among respondents: 8% very actively, 38% actively, 31% occasionally, 15% rarely, and 8% never use social platforms.

A strong majority (77%) believed social media is key to attracting sponsorship in women's sports. Among them, 31% rated it as extremely important, 46% very important, and 23% moderately important. No respondent considered it unimportant.

Regarding career impact, 31% of respondents felt media representation had positively influenced their careers through increased recognition and opportunities. However, 23% reported no impact, and 46% were unsure.

When asked about sponsors' priorities, 92% identified athletic performance and achievements as most important. This was followed by digital/social media presence (77%), media recognition (76%), sport popularity (76%), past sponsorship success (54%), and brand fit (38%).

**Table 3.** Suggestions for Better Support

Question	How can sports organizations and sponsors better support female athletes in their media campaigns and sponsorship initiatives? (Choose the answer that is most important to you)	
Options	Count	Percentage
Option 1. Increase funding and resources for media campaigns featuring female athletes.	8	62%
Option 2. Provide equal sponsorship opportunities and investment for female athletes.	4	31%
Option 3. Partner with media outlets to promote women's sports and athletes.	1	8%
Option 4. Offer mentorship and support programs to help female athletes navigate media exposure.	0	0%
Option 5. I don't know.	0	0%

To better support female athletes, 62% of respondents emphasized the need for increased funding and resources for media campaigns. 31% highlighted the importance of equal sponsorship opportunities, while 8% suggested stronger collaboration with media outlets to promote women's sports.

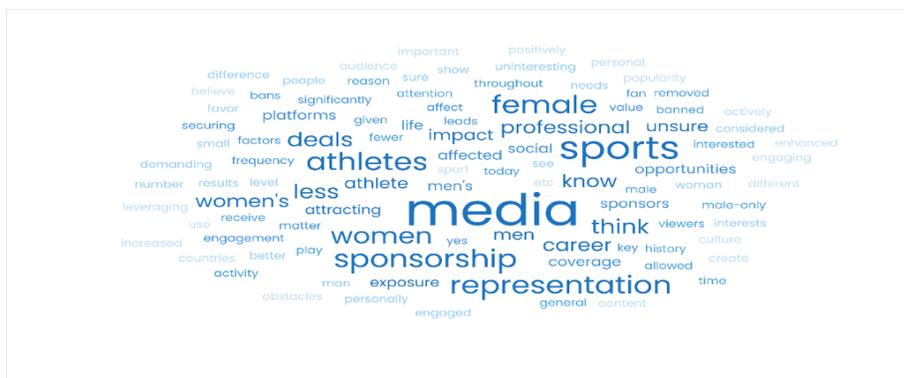
## Related Findings

Word clouds serve as effective visual tools for representing textual data. They display frequently used terms, with size indicating frequency or emphasis, thus offering a quick grasp of central ideas (Liu, et al. 2014). As shown in **Figure 3**, a word cloud was generated from the survey



responses to highlight commonly mentioned words, aiding in the identification of key themes and sub-themes.

**Figure 3.** Word clouds of participants' answers



The analysis is organized around four core themes: athlete-related factors, media-related factors, consumer-related factors, and external factors. Table 4 outlines these themes and sub-themes, along with brief descriptions and illustrative participant quotes. Each theme reflects crucial elements influencing the perception and practice of sponsorship in women's sports.

Respondents shared diverse insights into how media coverage influences sponsorship in women's sports, revealing several recurring themes:

**Uncertainty:** Many participants expressed confusion about the low sponsor interest, citing limited understanding of industry dynamics: “I don't know the reason(s) why sponsors show less interest in women's sports.”

**Performance Perceptions:** Some noted that female athletes are often seen as less capable, reducing their marketability: “Majority ... think that men show better results than women in sports.”

**Media Exposure:** While media visibility was seen as vital for sponsorship—“media exposure plays a crucial role in securing sponsorship”—participants highlighted the lack of coverage: “There is little coverage in the media.” Social media was suggested as a way to bridge this gap.



**Table 4.** Thematic Analysis of Questionnaires' Content

Theme	Sub-themes	Theme Description	Key Quotes
Athlete-Related Factors	Uncertainty	Limited knowledge of athletes.	<i>"I don't know the reason(s) why sponsors show less interest in women's sports."</i> <i>"I'm not sure why, but I think it's not about being man or woman..."</i>
	Perception of Performance	Views of athletes' abilities, affecting their appeal.	<i>"Majority ... think that men show better results than women in sports."</i> <i>"athletes' ... accomplishments and performance were the most significant element"</i>
Media-Related Factors	Exposure	The extent and quality of media coverage.	<i>"... media exposure plays a crucial role in securing sponsorship"</i> <i>"There is little coverage in the media"</i>
	Perceived Importance	The belief placed on women's sport media coverage	<i>"Leveraging social media platforms is important..."</i>
Consumer-Related Factors	Audience Engagement	The level of interaction between fans and athletes.	<i>"Lower fan engagement and fewer viewers"</i> <i>"... male athletes receive more general attention than female athletes ..."</i>
	Perception of Demand	Believed market interest.	<i>"Women's sports are considered uninteresting."</i> <i>"Less demand for women's sports"</i>
External Factors	Perception of Equality	Views on the fairness between genders.	<i>"I think that the majority favors men..."</i> <i>"Provide equal sponsorship opportunities and investment for female athletes is important"</i>
	Cultural Factors	Societal norms and stereotypes.	<i>"Given that throughout history men have been allowed to play sports while women have been banned..."</i>

Audience Engagement: Low fan interaction and viewership were viewed as obstacles: "Lower fan engagement and fewer viewers"; "... male athletes receive more general attention than female athletes ..."



**Demand Perception:** The belief that women’s sports are less appealing persists: “Women's sports are considered uninteresting,” creating a cycle of low interest and limited investment.

**Gender Inequality:** Many voiced concerns over systemic bias in media and sponsorship: “Provide equal sponsorship opportunities and investment for female athletes.”

**Cultural Norms:** Historical gender roles continue to influence current attitudes: “Throughout history men have been allowed to play sports while women have been banned...” This legacy contributes to ongoing inequalities in support and recognition.

## Discussion

Uncertainty in the sponsorship of female athletes stems from a lack of transparency in sponsor decision-making. Without clear criteria, athletes struggle to understand how to market themselves, leading to frustration and missed opportunities (Caple et al. 2011), McDonald, et al. 2022). This ambiguity discourages women from pursuing sponsorships, contributing to persistent underrepresentation (Duncan, Messner 1998). (Cooky, et al. 2015), (Jones, et al. 2008).

Perceptions of performance also influence sponsorship appeal. Despite 92% of surveyed respondents citing performance as a key factor, a bias persists that male athletes outperform females, undermining recognition of women's achievements (Billings et al. 2010). Skewed media portrayals reinforce this belief, affecting both audience and sponsor perceptions (Sato, et al. 2019), (Kim, et al. 2015).

Media exposure is critical. While 92% of respondents acknowledged its importance, and 77% linked it to better sponsorship prospects, female athletes often receive limited coverage. This “invisibility cycle” hampers recognition and funding. Sponsors tend to favor athletes with greater media presence (Kim, et al. 2015), (Lough, Geurin 2019).

Audience engagement is another key factor. Lower fan interaction with female athletes leads to reduced viewership and fewer sponsorships (Dai, et al. 2023). (Ferreira, 2021). Enhancing engagement through targeted campaigns, events, and storytelling is essential to building a stronger fan base.

Perceived demand also impacts investment. The notion that women’s sports attract less interest discourages support, creating a cycle of low visibility and diminished investment (Braunstein et al. 2008). Similarly, perceptions of inequality—endorsed by 31% of survey participants—reflect deep-seated biases in media representation (Duncan, Messner 1998).

Cultural narratives around gender roles further suppress the growth of women’s sports. Traditional stereotypes portray female athletes as less capable, limiting their visibility and support (Bruce, 2016), (Fink, 2015), (Kane, 2013). Challenging these norms is vital to fostering equity and transforming the sponsorship landscape.



## Conclusions and Recommendations

This study identifies key barriers female athletes face in securing sponsorships, including limited media coverage, audience engagement gaps, and cultural perceptions. A major challenge is the lack of transparency in sponsorship decision-making, which creates uncertainty and limits athletes' ability to position themselves effectively.

Perceptions of performance, shaped largely by biased media portrayals, continue to favor male athletes, reducing recognition of women's achievements. Media coverage remains a crucial factor—yet female athletes often face a cycle of invisibility, limiting their appeal to sponsors. This imbalance reinforces the view that women's sports are less competitive and marketable.

Lower audience engagement further impacts sponsorship, as reduced fan interaction results in fewer commercial opportunities. Strengthening fan engagement through storytelling, campaigns, and community outreach is vital. Additionally, the perception of low demand for women's sports discourages investment and perpetuates underrepresentation.

Cultural attitudes and gender norms continue to shape these dynamics. Stereotypes and inequality in treatment hinder progress toward equity. Addressing these systemic issues requires collective effort.

In conclusion, improving sponsorship for female athletes demands greater transparency, expanded media exposure, and deeper audience engagement. Stakeholders—including sponsors, media, and sports organizations—must collaborate to promote gender equity. Continued research is essential to develop targeted strategies that enhance visibility, challenge stereotypes, and ensure female athletes receive the support they deserve.

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