

When Women Athletes Speak: How Activism Shapes Brand Attitudes and Purchase Intent

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Abstract: Sport shapes everyday routines and identities while serving as a stage for community-building and political expression. As the sector expands and social media amplifies campaigns, brands like Nike, Adidas, Puma, and New Balance command vast cultural reach and face intensified scrutiny of their value-driven messaging. Athlete activism is now a visible feature of this landscape, yet reactions are polarized. Gender magnifies this divide. Female athletes who advocate for pay equity, bodily autonomy, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and protection from abuse often face disproportionate skepticism and gendered backlash, even when celebrated in marquee campaigns (e.g., Serena Williams). These double standards pose strategic and ethical questions for sponsors: Does endorsing female athlete activism strengthen or jeopardize brand attitudes and purchase intentions across consumer groups? Despite rising commentary, rigorous evidence on consumer responses to female-led activism remains limited, which is an important gap for marketers engaging digitally savvy, values-oriented audiences. This study examines how female athlete activism shapes consumer responses to sponsoring brands. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior, Elaboration Likelihood Model and Social Identity Theory, it was hypothesized that featuring activist female athletes in brand communications would enhance brand attitudes and purchase intentions. A cross-sectional online survey of a culturally diverse sample (n = 112) assessed consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions in the context of campaigns featuring female athletes engaged in activism. Results indicate that female athlete activism positively influences both outcomes. Contrary to common assumptions, moderation tests show that respondent gender and purchase-decision involvement do not significantly condition these effects. The findings extend research on activism in sport marketing by centering consumer responses to female athletes—a group that has historically faced gendered scrutiny—and by demonstrating that activism can generate favorable evaluations across consumer segments. Practically, the results suggest that brands can integrate female athlete activism into campaigns to strengthen brand evaluations and purchase intentions without differential risk across genders or involvement levels, while also contributing to more inclusive social narratives around women in sport.

Keywords: Female athlete activism, Gender bias, Sport marketing, Brand, Social identity Theory, Elaboration likelihood model (ELM)

1. Introduction

Sport plays a pivotal role in contemporary society, shaping daily routines and identities while providing a platform for community-building and political expression. Beyond athletic performance, sport increasingly serves as a cultural arena where social values are debated and contested. Global sports brands such as Nike and Adidas frequently endorse social causes to enhance brand image and drive purchase intent (Grönroos, 1989; Westwood, 2022). As the industry expands and digital media amplifies brand messaging, these brands command significant cultural influence by spotlighting issues such as gender equality, environmental sustainability, and racial justice (Agyemang et al., 2020; Seo et al., 2024).

Athlete activism has become a defining feature of this evolving landscape, with figures such as Colin Kaepernick and LeBron James leveraging their platforms to challenge systemic inequities (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020). Yet, public responses to athlete activism remain deeply polarized (Agyemang et al., 2020). While activist athletes are celebrated by many fans, they also face backlash and harsh criticism, including negative chants during competitions (Kaufmann, 2008). For sponsoring brands, the stakes are considerable as well (Kim, 2024; Mudrick et al., 2019; Sappington et al., 2019; Seo et al., 2024). On one hand, activism can signal authenticity and resonate with values-oriented consumers; on the other, it may provoke resistance among audiences who perceive such messaging as politicized or divisive.

Gender further amplifies these divisions, introducing unique challenges for women athletes. Despite growing scholarly interest in athlete activism, much of the existing research has concentrated on male athletes and their influence on consumer perceptions (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020). Male-centric sports media and entrenched gender norms have contributed to the limited visibility of female athlete activism, both in public discourse and scholarly research. Women athletes who champion causes such as pay equity, bodily autonomy, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and protection from abuse frequently contend with disproportionate skepticism and gendered backlash, even when featured in high-profile campaigns, as illustrated by Serena Williams

(Kaufmann, 2008). These double standards, rooted in sexist media narratives and persistent societal expectations, mean that women's contributions to social movements often fail to receive the recognition they deserve.

This narrow focus leaves important questions unanswered about how activism by women athletes is received and whether gendered dynamics shape consumer responses to sponsoring brands. Empirical evidence on consumer reactions, particularly to female-led advocacy, remains scarce. This gap is especially salient for marketers seeking to engage digitally connected audiences who increasingly expect brands to reflect social commitments. Against this backdrop, a critical question arises: Does featuring female athlete activism in brand communications enhance or undermine brand attitudes and purchase intentions across diverse consumer segments? Addressing this question is essential for understanding how gender intersects with activism in sport marketing and for guiding brands that aim to balance commercial objectives with inclusive social narratives. In doing so, this study contributes to the ongoing debate surrounding the representation of women in sport.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Sports Marketing, Brand Activism and Gender

Despite the vast size of the global sports industry and its significant economic, social, and cultural impact, sports marketing remains a dynamic field without a universally agreed-upon definition (Fullerton & Merz, 2008). Broadly, scholars distinguish between marketing *of* sports and marketing *through* sports. The former refers to promoting sport-related products or services such as shoes, apparel, and equipment while the latter encompasses marketing activities that leverage the brand equity of sports entities to promote non-sport products. This study focuses on traditional product marketing strategies employed by sports brands, which exert considerable influence on consumer perceptions and purchase decisions (Felbert & Breuer, 2020; Kim, 2024).

Within this context, athlete endorsement represents a cornerstone strategy, defined as "a product endorsement in which a sports celebrity promotes a company's product or service" (Felbert & Breuer, 2020, p. 590). As a form of celebrity endorsement, its purpose is to transfer positive associations and perceived qualities from the athlete to the advertised product (Veda & Sathish, 2024; Kim, 2024). Partnerships with well-known athletes are strategically deployed to enhance brand equity, increase visibility, and drive sales (Felbert & Breuer, 2020). Endorsement effects typically draw on three dimensions: (1) athletic performance, (2) physical attractiveness, and (3) off-field attributes of the athlete (Arai et al., 2014). The latter has gained particular importance amid the rise of authenticity and value-driven consumption (Kim, 2024; Lee & Koo, 2015; Lou et al., 2024).

This shift brings athlete activism into sharper focus. Activism is defined as "the behavior of advocating some political cause [...] via any of a large array of possible means, ranging, for example, from institutionalized acts such as starting a petition to unconventional acts such as civil disobedience" (Klar & Kasser, 2009, p. 757). Sport has long served as a political platform, and athletes today advocate for causes such as gender equality, equal pay, racial justice, mental health awareness, LGBTQ+ rights, and environmental sustainability (Agyemang et al., 2020). While athlete activism is distinct from brand activism, the two often intersect when brands publicly support athletes and their causes. Leveraging an athlete's brand equity and activism can offer advantages: activist messages from athletes are perceived as more impactful than similar messages from brands (Dunn & Nisbett, 2023), and consumers often associate the endorsed product with the athlete's positive attributes (Kim, 2024). However, these benefits are not without risk. Consumers frequently link an athlete's political stance to the sponsoring brand, which can backfire when activist athletes face backlash or criticism (Brown et al., 2022; Dunn & Nisbett, 2023; Sappington et al., 2019).

Female athlete activism, referring to women athletes engaging in advocacy, introduces additional complexity. While activist athletes of all genders may encounter resistance, women often face heightened scrutiny when they speak out (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020; Kaufmann, 2008; Seo et al., 2024). Persistent double standards shape how female athletes' emotions and behaviors are judged in the media (Kessel, 2018). These challenges are deeply rooted in societal norms and reinforced by stereotypes and long-standing gender biases. In sport, women remain a minority, and many domains, including media coverage, sponsorships, and endorsements, are still male-dominated. This structural imbalance places female athletes at a disadvantage and intensifies scrutiny when they engage in activism (Sappington et al., 2019). While these realities underscore the importance of brands supporting female activist athletes by amplifying their visibility and providing platforms,

brands must also weigh potential consequences, particularly the backlash that women athletes frequently experience.

2.2 Hypothesis Development: Female Athlete Activism and Consumer Behavior

Having established the relevance of female athlete activism within sports marketing, the next step is to examine its impact on consumer behavior, namely the formation of brand evaluations and purchase intent. Attitude toward the brand (ATB), first conceptualized by Mitchell and Olson (1981), refers to an individual's internal evaluation of a brand and is widely recognized as a strong predictor of consumer behavior (Mitchell & Olson, 1981; Spears & Singh, 2004). Although attitude formation is theoretically multidimensional (encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioral components), the construct is often operationalized as a unidimensional summary measure in marketing research (Spears & Singh, 2004). Recent studies indicate that ATB is highly responsive to social and cultural influences, including athlete activism. While several studies report that activism tends to enhance brand attitudes (Lou et al., 2024; Kim, 2024), others suggest a potential negative association (Cho et al., 2025). Overall, the findings underscore the complex and dynamic interplay between activism and brand evaluations. Given these insights, and considering the historical underrepresentation of female athlete activism in scholarly research, it is essential to examine whether featuring female athletes engaged in activism affects consumer perceptions of sponsoring brands. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The attitude towards female athlete activism in sports marketing influences consumer attitudes toward the brand endorsing them.

While attitude formation is important, marketing success is ultimately measured in sales. Thus, marketing professionals must understand what drives consumers to purchase their products or services. Purchase intent is widely regarded as one of the strongest predictors of actual sales (Grönroos, 1989; Westwood, 2022). It describes an individual's tendency to buy from a specific brand or the likelihood of purchasing a product after evaluation (Spears & Singh, 2004; Yoo et al., 2021). While attitudes represent a summary evaluation of a brand, purchase intent reflects a concrete behavioral intention (Spears & Singh, 2004). The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 2011) offers a useful framework for understanding purchase intent, suggesting that behavioral intention is shaped by attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In this context, consumers who view activism positively are more likely to intend to purchase from brands endorsing activist athletes (Lou et al., 2024; Mudrick et al., 2019), whereas misalignment between consumer values and activist messaging can reduce purchase intent (Kim, 2024). Drawing on these insights, this study posits that featuring female athlete activism in brand campaigns will affect consumers' purchase intentions. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: The attitude towards female athlete activism in sports marketing influences purchase intent of the brand endorsing them.

Besides understanding how behavioral intentions are formed, it is equally important to examine how consumers engage with and process marketing messages. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), introduced by Petty and Cacioppo in the 1980s, offers a comprehensive framework for explaining how individuals process persuasive information (Kitchen et al., 2014). ELM posits two distinct routes to persuasion: the central route, which involves careful and systematic evaluation of message content, and the peripheral route, which relies on superficial cues such as attractiveness, emotional appeal, or brand familiarity. Attitudes formed via the central route tend to be more enduring, whereas those formed through the peripheral route are typically temporary and less resistant to change (Kitchen et al., 2014). The activation of a persuasion route depends on multiple factors, most notably the consumer's level of involvement in the purchase decision process (PDI). Mittal (1989) defines PDI as "the extent of interest and concern that a consumer brings to bear upon a purchase-decision task" (p. 150). Consumers with high PDI are motivated to process brand messages critically, making them more likely to engage with value-driven content such as activism. For these consumers, a brand's support of female athlete activism may add perceived value to the purchase, reinforcing positive attitudes and increasing purchase intent (Lou et al., 2024). Conversely, consumers with low PDI are less inclined to evaluate activist messaging and instead rely on peripheral cues such as design or celebrity appeal (Kim & Sung, 2009). For this group, activist content may have little impact or even go unnoticed, resulting in weaker effects on purchase intent. Based on these insights, this study proposes:

H3: Purchase involvement (high vs. low) moderates the impact of female athlete activism in sports marketing on purchase intent.

Gender introduces another layer of complexity. Female athletes who engage in activism often challenge entrenched stereotypes of women as passive or apolitical, which can evoke polarized reactions (Kaufmann, 2008). These dynamics are illuminated by Social Identity Theory (SIT), which posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group memberships and tend to favor in-group members over out-group members (Lange et al., 2012). In sports marketing, consumers who identify with an athlete’s social values or demographic characteristics are more likely to form positive attitudes toward the athlete and the endorsing brand (Mudrick et al., 2019; Kim, 2024). For female consumers, campaigns featuring female athlete activism may foster feelings of representation and solidarity, strengthening brand evaluations and purchase intentions. Male consumers, however, may experience more ambivalent responses, particularly when activist messages challenge traditional gender norms or social hierarchies. These considerations suggest that gender may moderate the relationship between female athlete activism and consumer responses. Specifically, women may exhibit stronger positive reactions to activist campaigns than men, though individual differences remain likely. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: Gender moderates the impact of female athlete activism in sports marketing on attitudes toward the brand endorsing them.

H5: Gender moderates the impact of female athlete activism in sports marketing on consumers’ purchase intention.

3. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design using an online survey as the primary data collection instrument. Data were collected in early 2025 over a period of a few weeks. Participants accessed the survey via a secure link and provided informed consent before proceeding. After that, they were prompted to read a short and neutral explanation of the concept of female athlete activism, offering contextual background and ensuring that all respondents understood the key concepts of the study. All responses were anonymous, and no personally identifiable information was collected.

The online survey was created using the Tivian platform and consisted of 11 questions (some with multiple items) organized into thematic sections. The measurement of the main variables relied heavily on existing, pre-tested scales to improve reliability and validity (see table 1).

Table 1: Operationalization of variables

Variable	Example Question and Scale	Cronbach’s Alpha	Source
Attitude toward Female Athlete Activism (AtFAA)	It bothers me when female athletes speak out on political or social issues. Strongly Disagree - Strongly Agree with neutral option (1-5)	10 items; $\alpha = .89$	Attitudes Toward Athlete Activism Questionnaire (ATAAQ), Sappington et al. (2019) (Adapted to focus solely on female activism, individual sports, shortened)
Attitude toward Brand (ATB)	What’s your general impression of brands that support female athletes who speak out on social or political issues in their marketing? Unlikable - Likeable with neutral option (1-5)	5 items; $\alpha = .97$	Spears & Singh (2004) (Adapted for more general application without a stimulus)
Purchase Intent (PI)	Think about brands that support female athletes [...] How likely are you to purchase a product from such brands? Probably not – Probably buy it with neutral option (1-5)	3 items; $\alpha = .93$	Spears & Singh (2004) (Shortened)

Variable	Example Question and Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Source
Purchase Decision Involvement (PDI)	Imagine you purchase a product from a sports brand. How important would it be for you to make the right choice for this product? Not at all important – Extremely important with neutral option (1-5)	3 items; $\alpha = .79$	Kim & Morris (2007) Mittal (1989)

The instrument was pre-tested with 12 respondents to ensure clarity and validity, resulting in small changes regarding wording and structure. A combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling was utilized, drawing on the personal and professional networks of the principal researcher. The survey link was distributed through publicly accessible online platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Eligibility criteria required participants to be adults aged 18 and above and agreeing to the consent form.

A total of 112 respondents completed the survey; incomplete responses were excluded automatically from the analysis. Data were exported to SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize demographic characteristics. Composite variables were created for the variables presented in table 1, using their respective items. All underlying statistical assumptions (normality of continuous variables, linearity, homoscedasticity, and absence of multicollinearity) were checked. Inferential tests (linear regression and hierarchical regression analysis) were conducted to examine relationships between variables. Significance was assessed at a stringent alpha level of 0.01.

4. Findings

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

The final sample comprised 112 respondents. Gender distribution was 65.2% female ($n = 73$), 32.1% male ($n = 36$), and 1.8% non-binary ($n = 2$). Participants were predominantly young adults (range: 18–69 years; $M = 28.94$, $SD = 8.10$). Nationality was diverse (28 countries represented), though most respondents were from Germany (33.9%), Australia (25.0%), and the Netherlands (13.4%). Sports engagement was generally high: 74.1% reported participating in or watching sports at least once a week. This suggests a sport-interested sample, which is coherent with the study context. A majority perceived gendered differences in public approval of activism: 52.7% ($n = 59$) indicated male athletes receive more approval; 36.6% ($n = 41$) were unsure; 8.9% ($n = 10$) perceived equal approval; and 1.8% ($n = 2$) believed female athletes receive more approval. All focal constructs showed acceptable central tendencies consistent with a values-oriented sample. On average, respondents reported favorable attitudes toward female athlete activism ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.69$) and supportive brand evaluations ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.88$). Purchase intent was moderately high ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.87$), and purchase decision involvement was high ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.8$).

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

A simple linear regression tested whether attitudes toward female athlete activism predict attitudes toward brands supporting such activism. Results indicated a strong, positive relationship: $B = 0.94$, $\beta = 0.73$, $t(110) = 11.11$, $p < .001$, explaining 52.9% of variance in brand attitude ($R^2 = .53$, $F(1,110) = 123.37$, $p < .001$). More favorable attitudes toward activism were associated with more positive brand evaluations. The effect was both statistically significant and practically meaningful, supporting H1.

A second regression examined whether attitudes toward female athlete activism predict purchase intent. Findings showed a significant positive effect: $B = 0.81$, $\beta = 0.64$, $t(110) = 8.76$, $p < .001$, accounting for 41.1% of variance ($R^2 = .41$, $F(1,110) = 76.74$, $p < .001$). Respondents with positive attitudes toward activism reported higher purchase intent. Although variance explained was lower than for H1, the relationship remained strong and reliable. Thus, H2 was supported.

A hierarchical regression tested whether purchase decision involvement (PDI) moderates the relationship between attitudes toward female athlete activism and purchase intent. In Step 1, attitudes toward activism and PDI explained 41.5% of variance in purchase intent ($R^2 = .42$, $F(2,109) = 38.63$, $p < .001$), indicating significant main effects. In Step 2, adding the interaction term contributed only 0.6% additional variance ($\Delta R^2 = .006$, $F(3,108) = 26.10$, $p < .001$), and the interaction was not significant ($B = -0.20$, $\beta = -0.10$, $t(108) = -1.02$, $p = .312$). This suggests PDI does not moderate the effect of activism on purchase intent. H3 was not supported.

A hierarchical regression tested whether gender moderates the relationship between attitudes toward female athlete activism and brand attitudes. In Step 1, activism attitudes and gender explained 54.5% of variance in brand attitude ($R^2 = .55$, $F(2,109) = 63.38$, $p < .001$), indicating significant main effects. Adding the interaction term in Step 2 increased explained variance by only 0.1% ($\Delta R^2 = .001$, $p = .590$), and the interaction was not significant ($B = 0.10$, $\beta = 0.06$, $t(108) = 0.54$, $p = .590$). This suggests gender does not moderate the relationship; effects were similar for male and female respondents. H4 was not supported.

A hierarchical regression tested whether gender moderates the relationship between attitudes toward female athlete activism and purchase intent. In Step 1, activism attitudes and gender explained 47.7% of variance in purchase intent ($R^2 = .48$, $F(2,109) = 48.27$, $p < .001$), indicating significant main effects. Adding the interaction term in Step 2 did not increase explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .00$, $p = .763$), and the interaction was not significant ($B = 0.06$, $\beta = 0.04$, $t(108) = 0.30$, $p = .763$). This suggests gender does not moderate the relationship; effects were similar for male and female respondents. H5 was not supported.

5. Discussion

5.1 Main Findings

This study demonstrates that attitudes toward female athlete activism strongly predict both brand evaluations and purchase intentions, confirming the central role of value alignment in shaping consumer responses. These findings support Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior, which posits that attitudes influence behavioral intentions, and extend prior research (Kim, 2024; Lou et al., 2024) by showing that activist messaging resonates in the context of female athletes. Importantly, the effect was consistent across genders and involvement levels, indicating that socially charged marketing messages may override traditional segmentation assumptions.

The absence of moderation by purchase decision involvement challenges the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which predicts stronger effects under central-route processing for highly involved consumers. Similarly, the lack of gender moderation contradicts expectations based on Social Identity Theory, suggesting that shared values, rather than demographic identity, drive consumer reactions. These results point to a cultural shift toward inclusivity and normalization of feminist discourse in marketing, where gender-based backlash appears less pronounced than previously assumed.

Despite the non-significant moderation effects, descriptive findings revealed that most respondents perceive male athletes as receiving greater public approval for activism. This highlights persistent double standards and systemic bias, echoing concerns raised by Kaufmann (2008). While these perceptions did not translate into differential behavioral outcomes in this study, they underscore the need for brands to provide greater visibility and support for female athletes, addressing structural inequalities in sport and marketing.

5.2 Practical Implications

For sports brands, these findings offer clear guidance: supporting female athlete activism can enhance brand image and drive purchase intent, provided campaigns are authentic and aligned with brand values. The lack of gender and involvement effects enables broader targeting strategies, reducing reliance on segmentation and allowing for more inclusive, cost-efficient campaigns. However, authenticity and consistency remain critical to avoid perceptions of opportunism (Lee & Koo, 2015; Seo et al., 2024). Brands should invest in long-term partnerships with activist athletes, reinforce values across all touchpoints, and anticipate potential backlash through proactive communication and campaign testing.

5.3 Future Research

Future studies should employ qualitative or mixed-method approaches to uncover why and which consumers respond positively to female athlete activism and examine drivers such as perceived authenticity, value alignment, and social identification. Expanding the model to include additional moderators and mediators (e.g., age, education, political orientation, moral identity, and brand credibility) would provide a more nuanced understanding of consumer behavior. Improved measures of purchase decision involvement, using multidimensional scales or scenario-based items, are recommended to capture real-world complexity. To address the intention-behavior gap, future research should incorporate longitudinal designs and field experiments, leveraging digital analytics (e.g., click-through rates, purchase data) and emerging technologies such as AI-driven consumer tracking. Comparative studies between male and female athlete activism using experimental designs could clarify gender-based differences and enable stronger causal claims. Additionally,

exploring intersectionality, such as race and socioeconomic status, would shed light on how overlapping identities influence consumer perceptions.

Further research should also examine the impact of media framing and delivery formats, testing how tone, visual framing, and platform-specific content (e.g., TikTok, Instagram Reels) affect message effectiveness. Beyond campaign-level outcomes, longitudinal studies should assess how consistent, authentic activism influences brand loyalty, trust, and equity over time. Finally, expanding research beyond the sports industry and across cultural contexts will enhance generalizability and provide actionable insights for brands seeking to integrate activism into their broader identity and marketing strategy.

5.4 Limitations

This study's findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported data limit causal inference and may be affected by social desirability and the intention-behavior gap. Second, the sample size was relatively small and skewed toward younger, female respondents, reducing generalizability. In addition, the small sample size may limit the statistical power of the tests employed. This raises the question of whether the lack of moderating effects is a result of insufficient sample size. Third, the measurement of purchase decision involvement was simplified and may not capture its full complexity. Finally, while established theories such as TPB and SIT provided a strong conceptual base, they may oversimplify responses to socially charged marketing messages. Future research should address these limitations through larger, more representative samples, mixed-method designs, and longitudinal approaches.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated how attitudes toward female athlete activism influence consumer responses in sports marketing. Results demonstrate that stronger support for activism predicts more favorable brand evaluations and higher purchase intent, highlighting the strategic potential of cause-driven campaigns. These findings should be interpreted conditionally: they reflect relationships within the sample rather than the prevalence of positive attitudes in society. Consequently, the conclusions apply when consumers already hold favorable views of activism, not as evidence of widespread endorsement.

Importantly, these effects were consistent across genders and purchase involvement levels, challenging assumptions that male consumers respond less favorably to feminist messaging or that high-involvement consumers process activism differently. This suggests that value alignment may override demographic segmentation in shaping consumer reactions, at least within the studied context.

Beyond commercial implications, the study underscores the evolving role of brands as cultural actors. By authentically supporting female athletes, companies can strengthen brand equity while contributing to more inclusive narratives in sport. However, these benefits depend on genuine alignment between brand values and activist messaging; opportunistic or inconsistent approaches risk backlash and reputational harm. Ultimately, this study reinforces that sport and activism are not opposing forces but complementary drivers of social change, where gender equality represents both an ethical imperative and a strategic opportunity for brands willing to engage authentically.

Ethics declaration: Ethical clearance was not required for the research. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Participants were informed about the study's general purpose, participants' rights, and ethical guidelines.

AI declaration: Microsoft CoPilot was used to improve flow and academic tone in several sections of this paper.

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