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An image of a woman in a sports advertisement

Jarosław Kończak, PhD Faculty of Journalism, Information and Book Studies, University of Warsaw j.konczak2@uw.edu.pl; ORCID 0000-0002-1690-4333

Abstract

Introduction and purpose. In 1987, sport was known in the literature as an area representing a traditional male power, strength and violence. In 2020, women's sport became recognized as the mainstream, which only confirmed similar conclusions made over the past years. One of the challenges in the area of sport over the next years was women's sport activation and reaching them through sponsorship communication. This has been facilitated, inter alia, by the development of women's sport and its marketing potential.

The study aims to present the image of a woman in marketing communication based on sports motives. The selected aspects subjected to analysis will help to define the role of women in advertising sports communication and verify the declarations of the companies that achieve their goals using this level of communication. Another aim is to investigate whether the belief in the feminization of sports fandom and involvement of women in the fan culture finds confirmation in advertising.

Material and method. The author has analysed selected TV, cinema and internet advertising campaigns (audio-video format) containing sports accents. Communications of 1,270 films representing 254 brands was analysed. The analysis covered seven different areas: characters, image and product advertising, share of sports disciplines, sports accessories used, the woman's attitude, an area of the sports involvement, and the values presented.

Results and conclusions. The analysis allowed to obtain an image of a woman being aware of her strength, who can derive great joy from sport. She believes that this is an important and popular area which has a beneficial effect on health and guarantees a shapely figure and great fun. She is a woman being aware of a number of values that come with sport, as she can see how much she benefits in the spiritual, physical and emotional dimensions. However, she feels her emotions much more often through the way to success and fighting for the position of a leader rather than cheerleading.

Key words: image, woman, sports advertisement

Introduction

Sport is an attractive platform not only for sales, but also for communication with customers. Sports motives are used not only by companies whose core business relates to this industry. Not only producers of sportswear, sports equipment or food or drinks for people actively practicing in some sports discipline communicate on this level. Moreover, the companies that use sport as a platform for understanding and establishing relationships with stakeholders are not only sport sponsors or brands using ambush marketing, i.e. brands impersonating sponsors [1-3]. Also other companies that are neither sponsors nor use ambush marketing make practical use the wealth of sports connotations to pursue their business goals. It has been confirmed by theorists [4-5] and proved by studies of companies in Poland, Europe and the USA [6-10]. Considering the study results, at least five groups of goals implemented by sponsorship can be distinguished: building brand awareness, building brand image, corporate goals, relationship goals, and sales goals.

However, the theoretical framework requires verification, and one of the method to do so is to examine marketing communications, especially that of film campaigns, as those most persuasive and most influencing the audience. It should be noted that the sport image in its various forms is relatively easy to transfer to almost every brand, and the number of emotions, values associated with sport and other sport motives make them very adaptable to various forms of communication. In addition, they are understandable to the audience and have prevailingly positive connotations.

Just a few decades ago sport was promoted as an area of "traditional male power, strength and violence, as well as contemporary concerns about social feminization" [11]. In 2020, women's sport was recognized as the mainstream [12], which only confirmed similar presumptions made before [13-15]. For years, we have heard a lot about the feminization of sports fandom, both professional and amateur sports are developing. Half of women in Central European countries are actively participating in sports (more than men), and even those who do not practice any discipline are regularly buying sports-related products, e.g. clothing [16].

It is believed that one of the challenges in the sport area over the next years is continuous sport activation of women and reaching them through sponsorship communication. This has been facilitated, inter alia, by the development of women's sport and its marketing potential. Also, the attributes associated with women's sport show values that are attractive to companies, which additionally increase the communication potential. Women's sport is in particular seen as more progressive and inspiring, less money-driven, more family oriented and cleaner than men's sport. The attractiveness of women in the world of sport is also influenced by the increasing number of female protagonists who, for example through social media, become role models and fashionable influencers. This potential is also noticed among sponsors and advertisers for whom a woman is an appealing hero in advertising based on sports motives.

The study aims to present the image of a woman in marketing communication based on sports motives. The selected aspects subjected to analysis will help to define the role of women in advertising sports communication and verify the declarations of the companies that achieve their goals using this level of communication. Another aim is to investigate whether the feminization of sports fandom and women participation in fan culture finds confirmation in advertising.

The author arguments that since most of the objectives of sponsorship and advertising communication based on sport concern brand and relationship building, and women's sport is considered purer, less commercial, then also marketing communication should be more

image-based and promote values and emotions associated with sport. At the same time, considering media patterns, where the measures of a woman's success is a shapely, athletic figure, also sport-based corporate communication should also frequently use the image of an aspirational or ideal SELF by portraying a satisfied, athletic, fashionable woman who, owing to her physical activity rather than beating records, enjoys good life and a good figure.

Material and method

The author has analysed selected TV, cinema and internet advertising campaigns (audio-video format) containing sports accents. The communication of 254 brands were analysed (5 films per each). In total, the study covered 1,270 advertisements, whereby each of them came from a different advertising campaign. Companies representing different industries, particularly international European and American as well as large Polish companies whose activity covers more than one country, were analysed. Both the most famous sport sponsors and companies that use ambush marketing were surveyed. Among the analysed brands there were also those not bound by sponsorship contracts, but using sports motives in their advertising campaigns. Most of the ads come from the second and early third decades of this century and only a few are older than 2000.

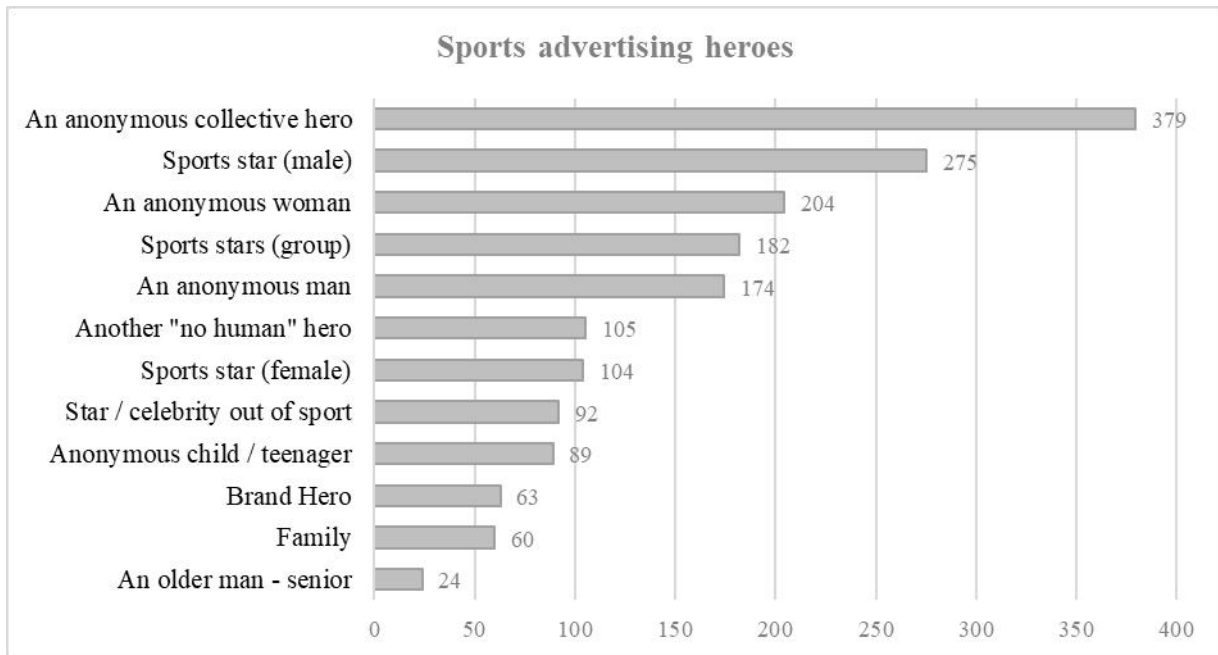
For the purposes of this publication, the author has identified and described brands in which the main characters of the advertisement were two groups of women: anonymous characters of the advertisement and stars of women's sports. Out of 1,270 commercials in 203 films, the main character was an anonymous woman, and in 104, a female sports star. In this way, 307 advertisements containing sports accents, in which a woman plays the dominant role, were distinguished. They were examined according to seven different areas: characters, image and product advertising, share of sports disciplines, sports accessories used, the woman's attitude, the area of sport involvement, and the values presented.

Results

Sports advertising characters

The examined 1,270 advertisements most frequently represented a group of anonymous characters both men and women. The woman ranked third in the group of advertising characters, displacing the man. Noteworthy is a certain disproportion between the gender role with regard to anonymous characters and with regard to sports stars. While the male sports stars (275 ads) appear almost three times more often than the female sports stars (104), the anonymous women (203) appear more often than the anonymous man (174).

Figure 1. The heroes of sports advertising (n=1270; max. 3 answers). Own study



A woman in the image and product advertising

In both categories of the examined advertisements, both among anonymous women and female sport stars, a clear advantage of image advertisements over product advertisements is visible. In the first group, there were 82 campaigns with image advertisements, where the products were secondary, placed in the background; 67 image advertisements based on the values, emotions, vision and mission of the brand, where the product was not exposed at all, whereas direct product advertising accounted for 54 only. As regards female sport stars, in the same categories there were 50 image advertisements with products in the background, 37 purely image ads and 18 product ads.

Figure 2. Brand building vs product sales in ads on sports themes – a woman (n=203). Own study

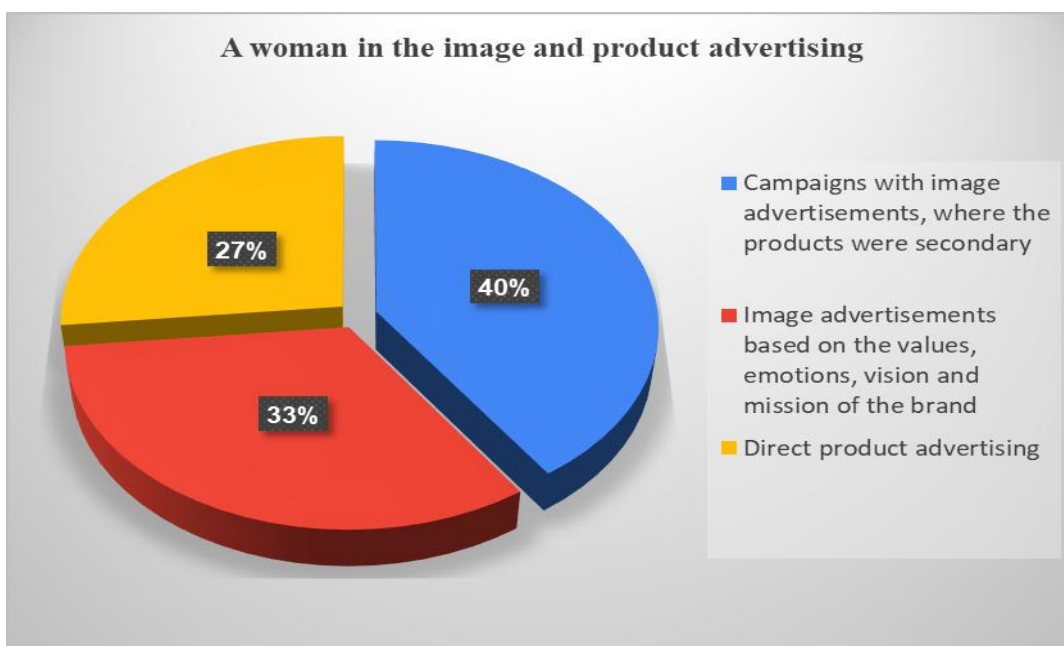
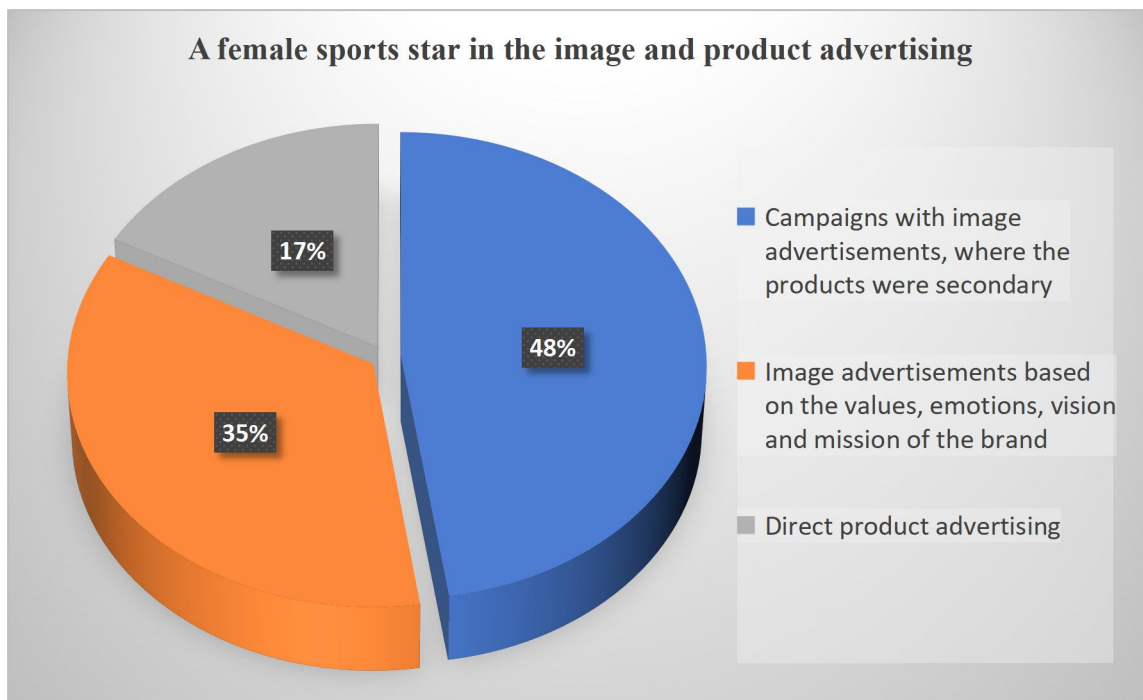


Figure 3. Brand building vs product sales in ads on sports themes – female sports stars (n=104). Own study

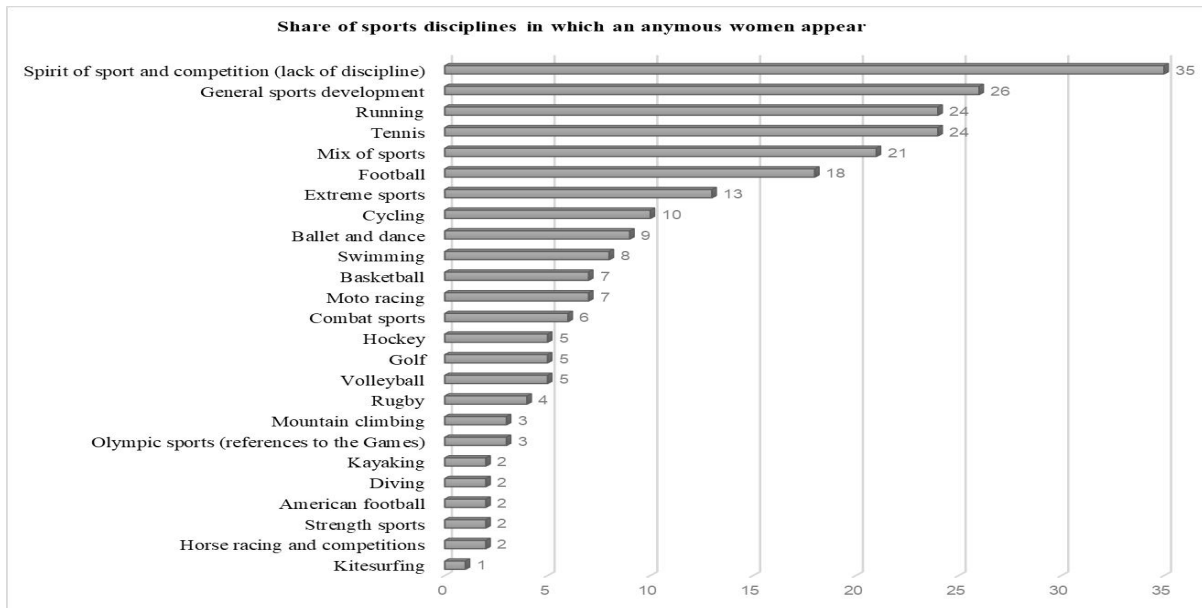


The share of sports disciplines in women's advertising

In advertisements featuring anonymous women, there is usually no discipline of sport clearly emphasized, but only the ideas and spirit of sport (35 advertisements). The second-ranked is all-development sport, which also does not represent any discipline (28). This evidently overlaps with the above-mentioned advantage of image advertising based on the values, emotions, missions or visions of a company, as well as those image advertising in which products appeared in the background. Tennis *ex aequo* and running - 24 advertisements each – are only ranked third. Fifth ranked is the mix of sports, and the most popular one – football is ranked sixth.

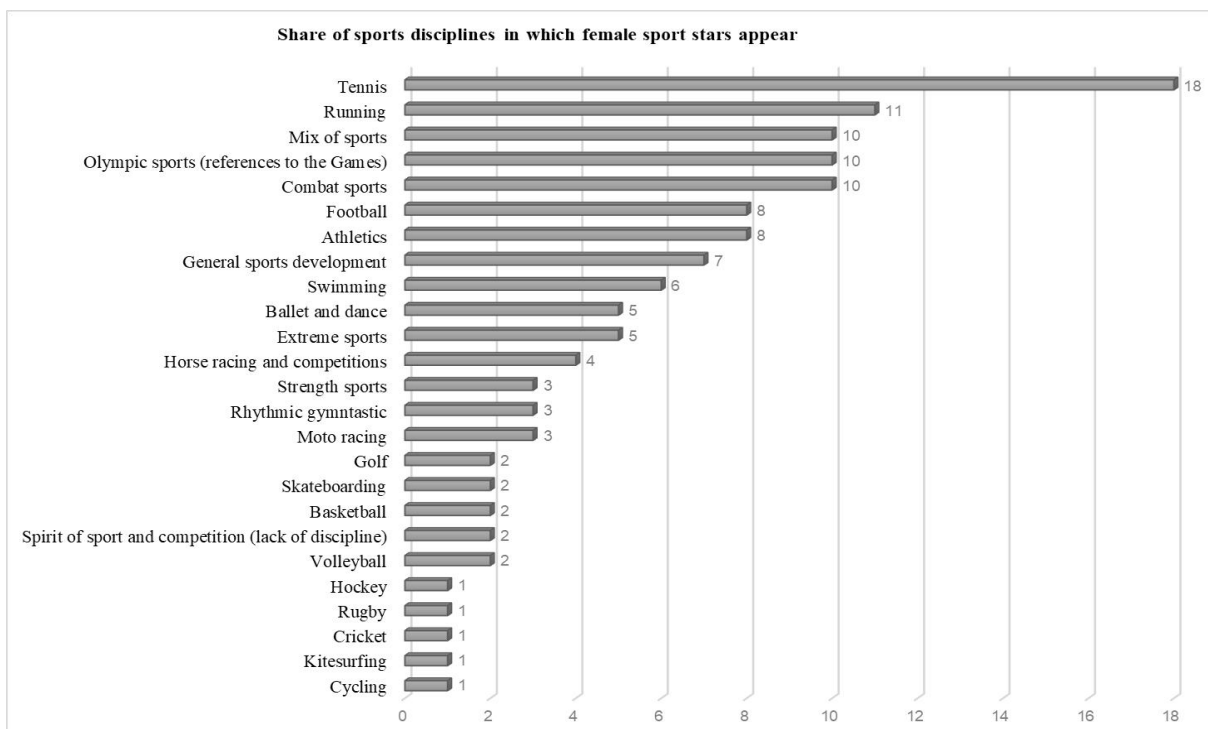
Although it seems that such a position of the most popular sport is distant, until recently the male bulwark, which was football, has also become a popular platform for communication addressed to women. This is one of the elements of sports fandom feminization, which has been discussed for years both in Poland and in the world, and which is also profitable from the marketing point of view for the broadly understood football business [17-19]. However, when looking at the Havas study, according to which as many as 60 female subjects are interested in football [20], it is not visible in the advertising reality, at least. Seven-ranked are extreme sports, which are ahead of cycling, ballet and dance (including skating and sports), and swimming that closes the top ten.

Figure 4. The share of sports disciplines in which anonymous women appear (n = 203; max. 3 answers), Own study



On the other hand, among the female sports stars, the most frequently advertised discipline was tennis (18), then running (11) and ex aequo, then martial arts, Olympic sports and mix of sports mix, i.e. 10 ads each, which were ranked third. The next in the top ten were athletics, football, all-development sports, swimming and extreme sports.

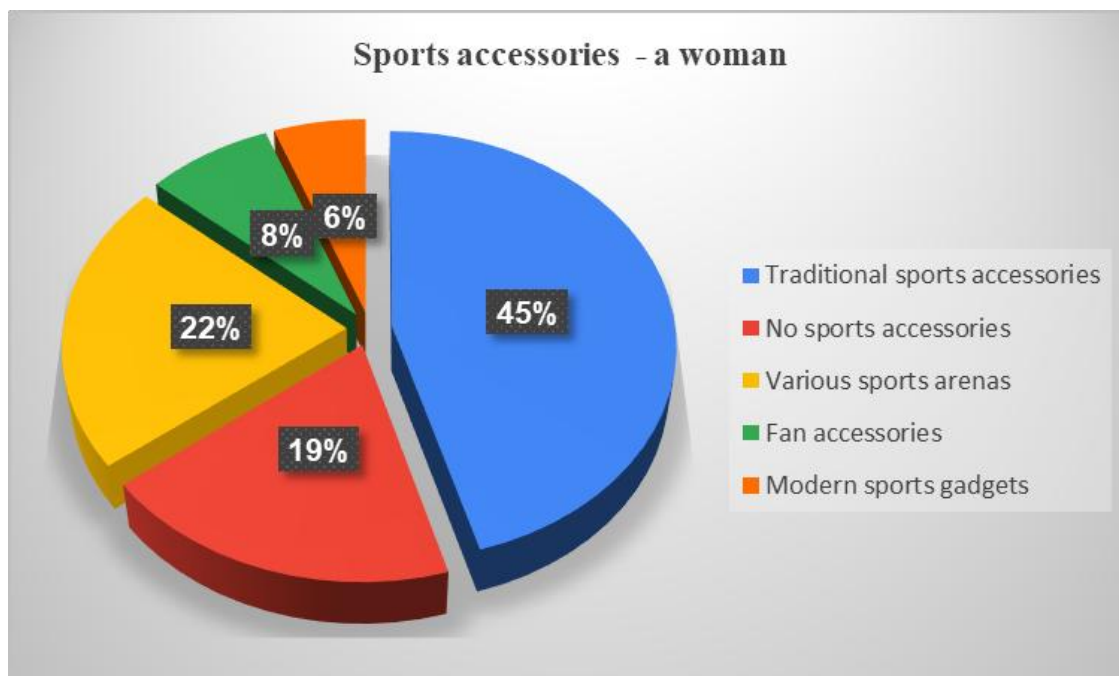
Figure 5. Share of sports disciplines in which female sport stars appear (n = 104; max. 3 answers), Own study



Sports accessories presented in the advertising

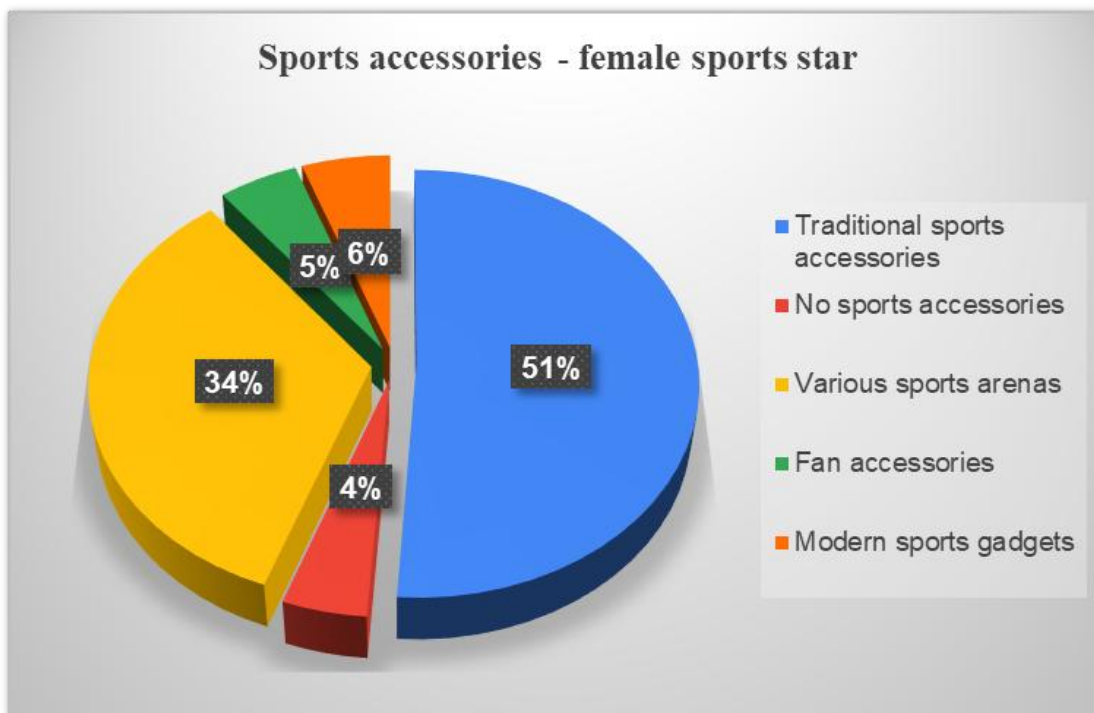
The most common were traditional sports accessories (127 commercials), which included sports clothes and equipment for practicing a given discipline. The second place was occupied by various sports arenas in which women exercised (61). The third position belongs to the category where no sports accessories were emphasized (53). This is largely advertising based on the values associated with sports and the associated brand values. The rarest were modern sports gadgets, such as lifestyle element (16). The fan accessories were also relatively rare among women - only 22 commercials. This shows that although the challenge for sports sponsorship for years has been greater activation of women in sport [21-24], they still relatively rarely appear as committed fans of any sports discipline.

Figure 6. Sports accessories presented in the ad - anonymous woman (n = 203, max. 3 answers). Own study



Considering the examined advertisements in terms of involvement of female sport stars, basically two prevailing categories were distinguished: traditional sports accessories (92 advertisements) and sports arenas (61).

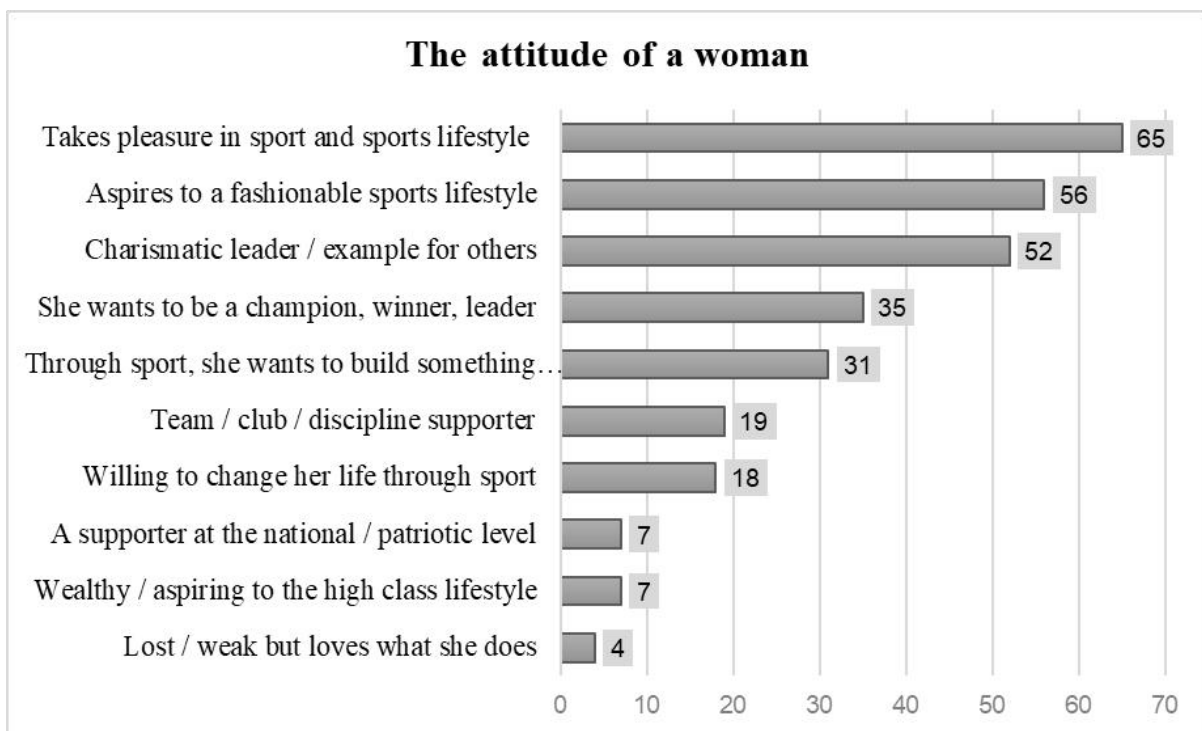
Figure 7. Sports accessories presented in the ad - female sports star (n = 104, max. 3 answers). Own study



The attitude of a woman in sports advertising

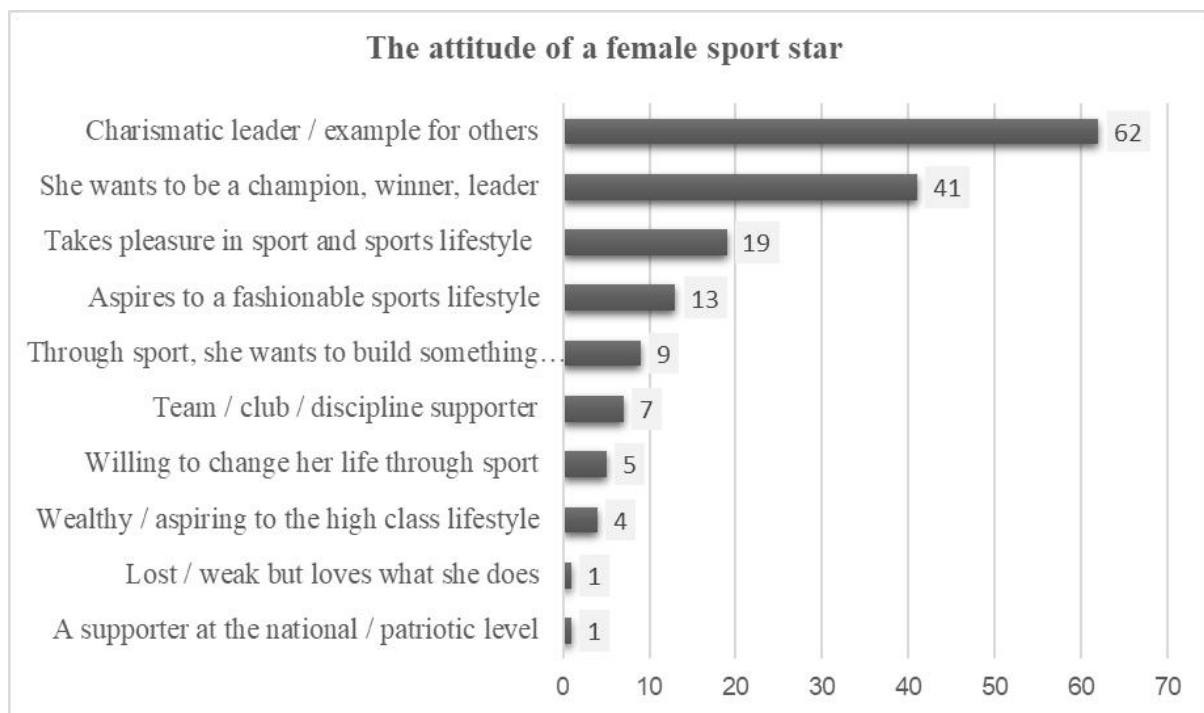
Taking into account the attitudes of women, they see sport especially as good fun and a sporty, fashionable lifestyle, a lifestyle that guarantees joy of life, health and a shapely figure. A woman who takes pleasure in sport and sports lifestyle occurred most frequently (65 films), while the second-ranked was a woman aspiring to a fashionable sports lifestyle (56). The second clearly defined category was represented by charismatic leaders who, through their sporty lifestyle, became a reference point and a role model to follow (52). They were accompanied by women who wanted to be successful, a champion, a winner in a given area, whereby the victory did not always mean fighting others, but also their own weaknesses (35). This group, in turn, resonated with another category: the desire to change one's life through sport (19). Building social connections, creating something together with others was also considerable (31). The other aspects were scarce. The fandom aspects at the level of sports club were only reported in 19 cases, whereas at the level of pride in the national colours and cheering for the national team – in only 7 cases.

Figure 8. The attitude of the main character - an anonymous woman (n = 203, max. 3 answers). Own study



Absolutely the most frequently presented attitude of a female sport star was a charismatic leader / role model for others to follow (62) and a woman who devotes her time and life to become a leader, winner, and medal-oriented (41). The prevalence of female leaders in sports advertising indicates that advertisers are somewhat dependent on sports success as an attractive source of communication. The so-called human stories about sportsmen, such as a ski jumper Eddie Edwards or Jamaican bobsleigh team, who had no achievements in sport yet were attractive to advertisers. Fashionable sports lifestyle was present in 13 films, and sport games in 19. The marginal fan attitudes of that group are also accompanied by a small number of advertisements about building social connections through sport and aspirations for high-class life standards.

Figure 9. The attitude of the main character - a female sports star (n = 104; max. 3 answers). Own study

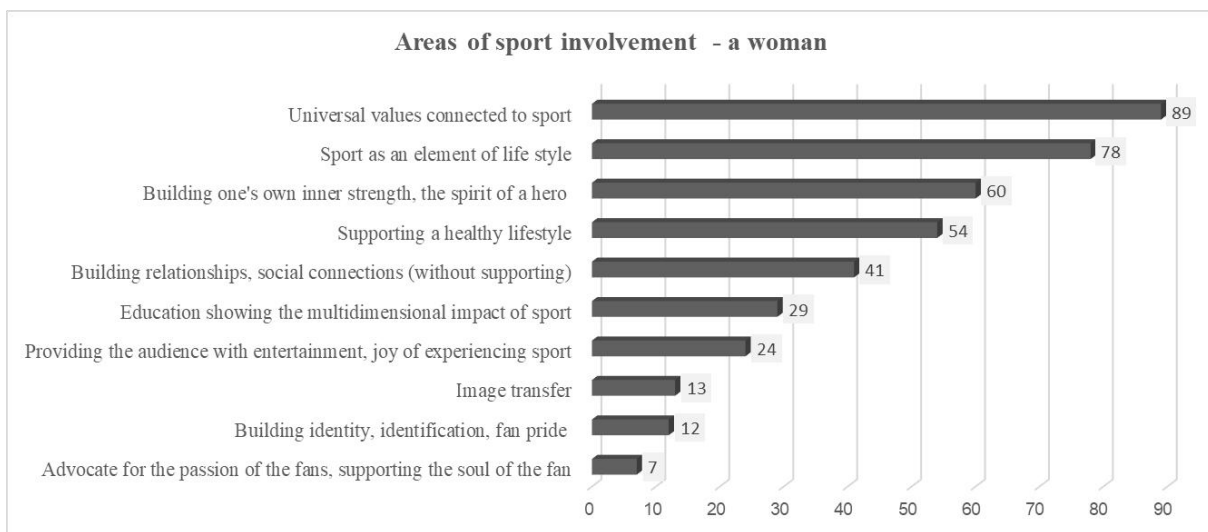


Areas of sport involvement in women's advertising

Sport is considered by companies as an attractive platform for communication owing to its numerous attributes. They primarily include sincere, uninhibited and often very strong emotions entertained for a given sport discipline, regardless of active or passive participation in one, which helps to maintain closer connections with customers [25-27]. Such sport participation can take many forms. For example, in an international study of football fans, it was divided into eight categories [28]. Other types of passion and participation have been described from the perspective of people doing sport [29-30]. A broader spectrum than the participation of fans only allowed to identify ten categories of sports motives.

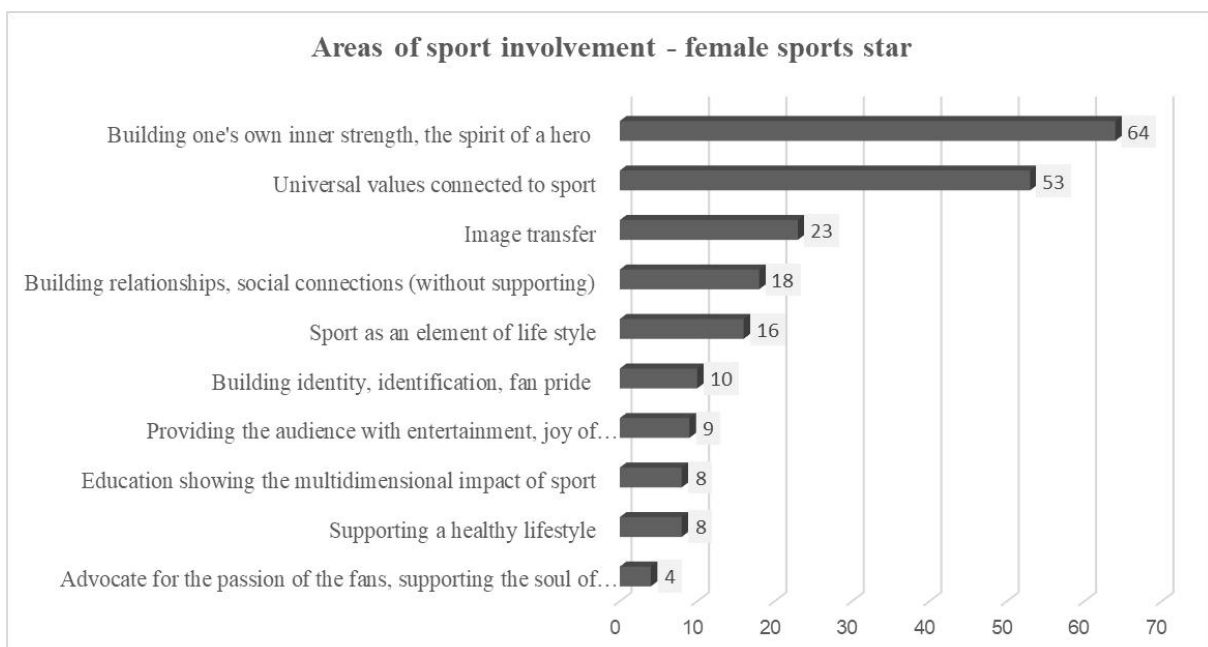
Most often, sport was perceived as an attractive area in terms of universal values (89 advertisements) that it involves. On the one hand, it enabled the transfer of these values to the supporting brand, and on the other, it is associated with universal values attractive from the point of view of both the recipient and the brand. A little less often (78 films) sport was portrayed as an element of lifestyle, where style and fun matters, not necessarily competition, outcomes, or even amount of physical effort. Building of one's own inner strength, spirit of the advertising character, and support for the tedious work and sports effort of an ordinary person (60) were ranked next. As in other categories, it evidently shows that the soul of a female fan is very rarely shown in sports advertising campaigns. Building identity, identifying club or national fans, creating loyalty to the team and building fans' inner pride was the subject of just 12 ads. Even more rarely, advertising became a sort of an advocate of fans' passions, who supports their passions, argues the importance of their passion and emotions. Advertising spots promoting fan spirits appeared only 7 times.

Figure 10. Areas of sport involvement – an anonymous woman. (n = 203, max. 3 answers). Own study



The advertisements featuring sport stars mostly showed the building own inner strength, the spirit of the advertising actor/character, and support for the tedious work and sport effort of a sportsman (64); portrayed sport from the perspective of universal values (53) and used the image transfer from player to the brand (23), i.e., transfer of a positive image of a player, together with his features, sponsored or used in advertising onto the image of the sponsor or advertiser [31-33].

Figure 11. Areas of sport involvement – a female sport star. (n = 104, max. 3 answers). Own study



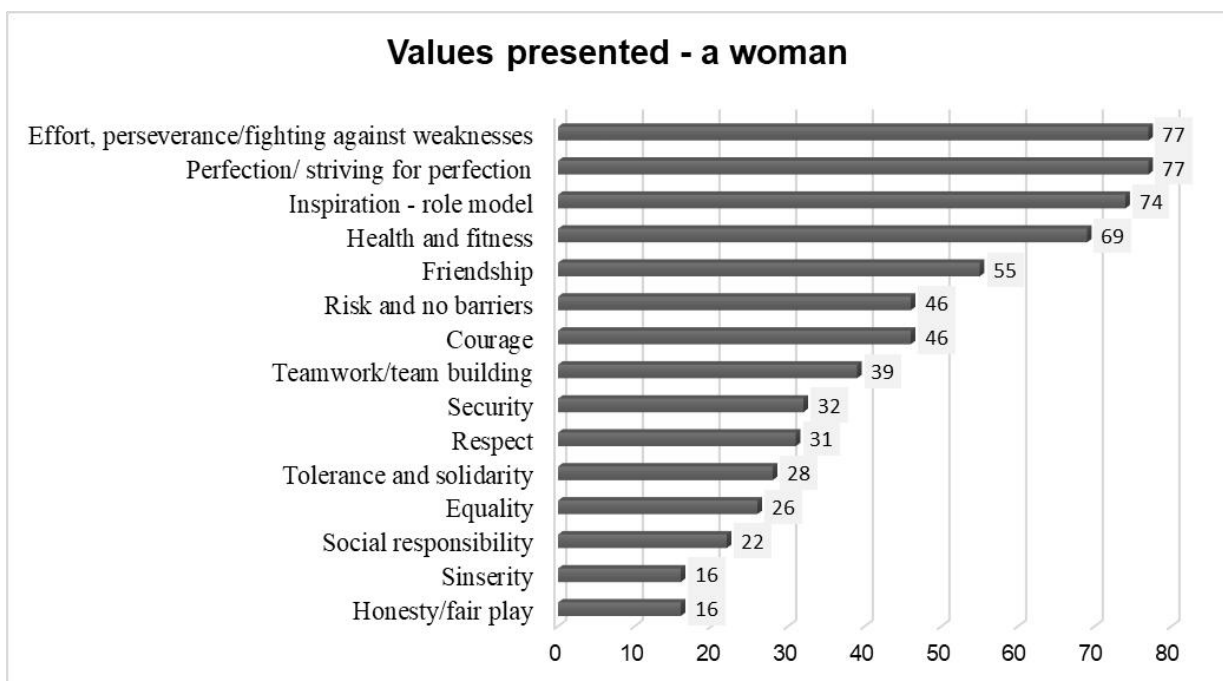
Values presented in a sports advertisement

Values such as respect, friendship, striving for excellence (IOC) and fair play [34] do not only count in Olympic sport. Also in business there are a number of values described both by theorists and declared by companies [35-37]. They are seen as a set of timeless guidelines that

require no external justification. What is fundamental to making purchasing decisions is the value of individual products and services perceived by the customer. Consumers also obtain added value in addition to the functional characteristics of the product, define themselves, and manifest the values they believe are part of their identity through the brand. Brands, by referring to these deeply rooted values and beliefs, have a very persuasive influence on us and our purchasing decisions. Branding specialists used a catchall to reach our heads by referring to values in communication [38-40].

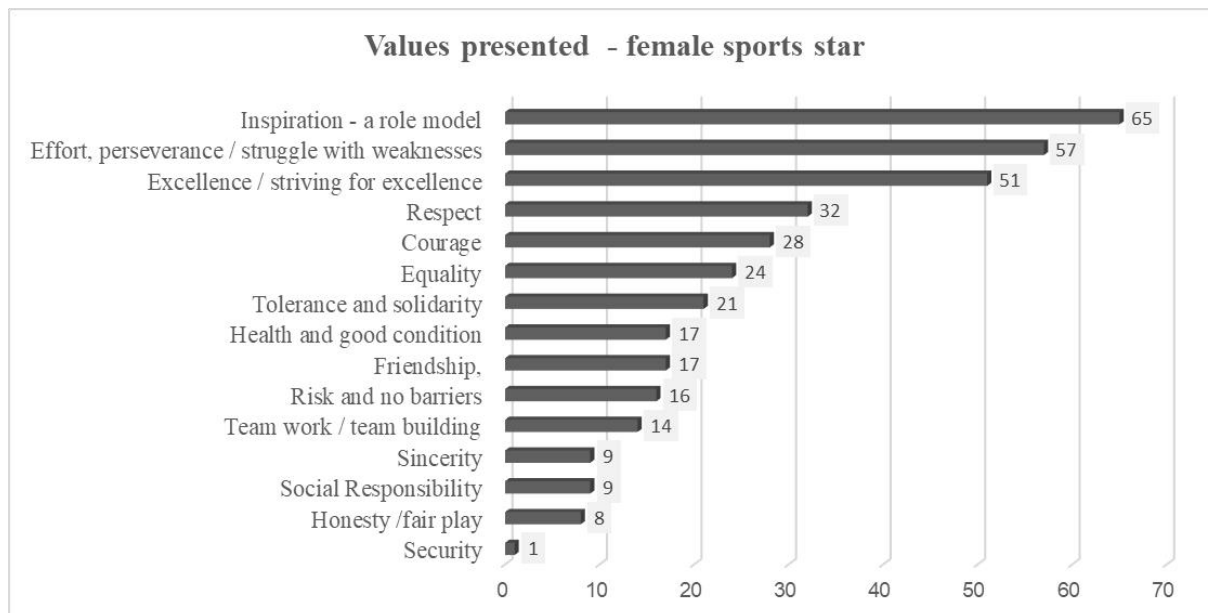
The most common values in advertising featuring women were: effort, perseverance and fighting weaknesses (77), excellence and striving for perfection (77), inspiration – a role model (74), good health and fitness (69), as well as friendship (55). Whereas, the last five included: tolerance and solidarity (28), equality (26), social responsibility (22), respect (16) and fair play (16).

Figure 12. Values presented – an anonymous woman. (n = 203, max. 3 answers). Own study



In the case of female sports stars, the most frequently presented values were: inspiration-role model (65), effort, perseverance and fighting weaknesses (57), excellence – striving for perfection (51). Respect (32), courage (28), equality (24) as well as tolerance and solidarity (21) appeared slightly less frequently.

Figure 13. Values presented – a female sport star. (n = 104, max. 3 answers). Own study



Discussion

The overwhelming advantage of image advertising once again highlights the dominance of the image goals in the brand communication based on sports motives. In sports sponsorship, for years there has been a discussion about which of the goals are the most important: sales, corporate, relational, brand awareness-building or image-building [41-43]. Most theorists and practitioners admit that sport is a good platform for selling products, but due to its enormous emotional load, sport is primarily used to build brand awareness and image and establish relationships with various groups of stakeholders [44-47]. The communication of sports sponsors is consistent with the communication of other brands not directly related to sponsorship which use the same sport motives in advertising as the sponsors do, referring to the same emotions. This translates into the great advantage of image motives over sales elements. In fact, the only category of brands that maintains the balance between sports product and image advertising are companies that sell directly on the sports market, such as manufacturers of sports equipment, sports clothing, as well as drinks and food for people doing sport [48].

A woman is now as attractive sports ad character as a man is. In the studied sample, a female was even slightly more common than a man. However, due to the insignificant difference, it cannot be said that she was a more attractive ad character. The creators of the advertisements recognized women and their role in sport; therefore, they shape on their own or reflect the existing trends in sports lifestyle, which can be seen in societies belonging to European or North American culture.

While the average anonymous character, regardless of gender, is attractive to advertisers, there are clear differences with regards to sportsmen. Women's sport in its professional form is even less attractive. In the American local television stations of 1989, it occupied 5 percent of the time devoted to sport, while a decade later it took 8.7 percent, and in 2014 it was only 3.2 percent [49]. Advertising also appears less attractive. The number of female famous masters, recognizable leaders, is definitely lower than of men. Therefore, advertisers do not have such a wide range of female sport stars. In many popular disciplines, such as football,

basketball, speedway, and cycling, male stars are almost exclusively used as recognizable brand ambassadors. This is also evident in the advertising advantage, where male sport stars appear almost three times more often than female stars.

Conclusions

Comparing a total of 449 campaigns where the spokescharacter was an anonymous man or a male sports star, in 307 campaigns featuring women and female stars, it can be seen that the feminization of sport, visible in society, is also visible in advertising. The quotation mentioned in the introduction to this study saying that sport is an area representing traditional male power, strength and violence is already an archaism, also from the perspective of sports advertising. Women start to play sport even more often than men and are surrounded by advertising that shows sport as a trendy, fun and important part of an attractive lifestyle. On the one hand, we have a large number of advertisements showing the joy of life, a shapely figure, health resulting from practicing or experiencing sports in any way, as well as emphasizing a number of values related to this area. On the other hand, the area of competition is also strongly highlighted. There were a lot of advertising campaigns based on the role of leader, the desire to be successful and a role model to follow.

In advertising reality, it can also be clearly said that a woman rarely has the soul of a fan. Identity building, identification of club or national fans, and creation of loyalty to the team and building the inner pride of the fan scarcely occurred. Advertising rarely put a woman in the role of an advocate for fans, who supports their passions, argues the importance of their passion and emotions. And although it has been said for years that the activation of women not as much in the field of sports as in the field of fans is one of the business priorities [50], yet the brands involved in the messages based on sports motives rarely use the image of a female fan. As if they did not believe that it would be an attractive image for their target groups.

The image that resonates the most in advertising is the image of a woman who is aware of her strength and who can derive great joy from sport. She knows that this is an important and fashionable area, which has a positive effect on her health and guarantees a shapely figure and good fun. She is a woman who is aware of the great amount of values associated with sport, as she can see how much she benefits in the spiritual, physical and emotional dimensions. However, she feels her emotions much more often through the way to success and fighting for the position of a leader rather than by being a sport fan/supporter.

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