

The Brand Positioning of Women's Teams in The Brand Portfolio of Their Club

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Final report

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Abstract

This research examines the strategic positioning of women's football teams within European clubs. It investigates how clubs position these teams, allocate resources, and leverage synergies with men's teams. The study, grounded in the resource-based view (RBV) and knowledge-based view (KBV), explores strategic decisions made by club executives, including brand positioning, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement. By addressing these key topics, the research aims to advance the academic understanding of strategic management in the context of women's sports.

The study draws on in-depth interviews with 26 experts working in the European football industry, including team marketers, managers, investors, and federation-level executives. Interview questions focused on the strategic positioning of the women's team within the club and how resources are allocated to the women's team. Findings are structured according to seven dimensions related to *Club Strategy, Brand identity, Business Case, Shared Resources, Influence of External Stakeholders, Sponsors, and Club Growth*. The findings offer valuable insights for clubs and UEFA, empowering them to optimize strategies, allocate resources effectively, and engage with stakeholders.

The research contributes to three major academic conversations. First, it extends literature on the growth of women's football by demonstrating how clubs are transitioning from passive inclusion to active strategic development. Second, it builds on RBV and KBV, by illustrating how organizations leverage both tangible assets (e.g., shared infrastructure) and tacit knowledge (e.g., embedded decision-making) to accelerate women's football development. Third, it adds to brand architecture framework by showing how clubs dynamically balance brand integration and differentiation to unlock new markets and mitigate reputational risk. On the practical side, the findings suggest that teams should treat women's football as a strategic growth asset, integrating it into core operations. Further, associations and federations should pair mandates with financial support, equitable policies, and investment in youth and grassroots development to ensure structural fairness. Finally, sponsors should view women's football as a unique platform for authentic, value and values-driven engagement.

Introduction

The European women's football sector has experienced substantial growth as demonstrated by record-breaking attendance numbers at European women's football games, expanding contracts with media companies, and growing attention to athlete brands. For example, the 15 top revenue generating women's football clubs in Europe have surpassed €100m for the first time in 2023-2024 season (Deloitte, 2025a), and the English Women's Super League (WSL) has exceeded one million in cumulative attendance in 2023-2024 season (Deloitte, 2025b). However, despite this growth, there are systemic challenges that the women's football sector has been facing at the level of funding, management, promotion, and from a diversity and equity standpoint (Doyle et al., 2024; Nasser & Deutscher, 2025). Despite this, scholarly attempts to systematize a perspective on existing challenges and barriers and investigate effective practices and a path forward to supporting women's teams and athletes have remained scarce (Bredikhina et al., 2025).

The strategic alignment and positioning of brands within a corporate portfolio is a crucial element of brand management strategy (Manoli, 2020). Recent academic work has underscored the notion that brands should be assessed in the context of other associated brands, focusing on the collective brand equity (Baker et al., 2022). Within the framework of brand architecture, master brands play a pivotal role in providing a brand framework, defining relationships, and significantly influencing sub-brands (Baker et al., 2022). Accordingly, athlete brands are influenced by their teams' and leagues' brands, which, as master brands, affect athlete brands through positioning, content dissemination, resource distribution, and visibility (Bredikhina et al., 2023). Thus, there is a need to study the effective scaling, management, and commercialization of women's sports brands (Doyle et al., 2024).

A common approach to the women's team brand management in Europe has involved managing men's and women's teams under a unified brand portfolio, with the latter often being introduced as brand extensions of established men's teams (Bredikhina et al., 2025). However, the rise of women's football introduces a tension in treating women's teams merely as brand extensions and points to the relevance of positioning them as their own independent brands. As stakeholders navigate the rise in women's football popularity and strategize the brand positioning of the women's teams, it becomes relevant to examine the decision-making of clubs and their strategic approaches to brand positioning.

Our research addresses this gap and dives deeper into an exploration of the positioning of the women's teams' brands by their clubs, contextualizing it within the market and gender hierarchies of the sport industry and exploring the implications thereof. We draw on semi-structured interviews with 26 stakeholders in managerial circles in the European football industry. Our findings uncover differential approaches to managing the women's sports product brand, capturing the promising start-up mindset and investment in development of the women's sport, yet also tensions deriving from extant inequities and stereotypes in the football industry. In the following sections, we overview relevant literature, discuss our methodology and findings, and outline recommendations to stakeholders and sponsors on how to best support women's teams.

Literature review

The European and Swiss women's football market

Women's football is growing at a rate that outpaces many other sports – both men's and women's (Murtas et al., 2024). It holds a unique identity as a sports product distinct from men's football, as evidenced by the unique brand associations that consumers develop toward women's sports (Doyle et al., 2024). These associations reflect a focus on new opportunities, diversity and inclusion, and the perception of women athletes as role models, yet they also highlight challenges such as financial limitations and insufficient media coverage (Doyle et al., 2024). While women's football in Europe has achieved significant levels of commercialization and professionalization, driven by sponsor, consumer, and media interest (Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2020; Valenti et al., 2020, 2021; Woodhouse et al., 2019), both academic and industry insights suggest that tensions and challenges persist in managing women's football, particularly as it continues to seek to establish itself alongside the more developed men's football product (Murtas et al., 2024). Scholars have identified historical issues faced by European women's football leagues and teams in negotiating its position within national associations (Woodhouse et al., 2019) and as horizontal extensions of men's football teams in European clubs (Valenti et al., 2021).

Despite these advancements, there remains a lack of comprehensive knowledge and frameworks for understanding stakeholder decision-making in managing European women's

football teams, particularly under clubs that operate both men's and women's teams. Additionally, existing studies have largely focused on a limited number of European markets, primarily those ranked highest in the UEFA league standings, such as the Women's Super League in the UK and Serie A Femminile in Italy (Valenti et al., 2021; Woodhouse et al., 2019). This underscores the need for a systematic examination of the experiences and decision-making processes of stakeholders managing women's football and their strategies for building the women's football brand alongside the men's.

This project was supported by the Swiss Football Association (SFA), thus, we provide a review of women's football in Switzerland and embed it within the European women's football market. Women's football in Switzerland has experienced notable growth, as evidenced by the women's national team achieving a record attendance for a test match against Australia in 2024 (Schaffhausen24, 2024). However, despite football being the most popular team sport in the country (Lamprecht et al., 2020), women's participation remains disproportionately low. As of 2025, women account for only 11.7% of all football players in Switzerland, indicating substantial room for growth (Swiss Football Association, 2024). The SFA successfully bid to host the UEFA Women's EURO 2025 in Switzerland. This prestigious tournament will be held across eight Swiss cities presenting a unique opportunity to address existing disparities between men's and women's football and foster sustainable growth (Swiss Football Association, 2024). The event is expected to serve as a catalyst for increased investment, visibility, and long-term development of women's football in the country (UEFA, 2025).

At the club level, the Swiss Women's Super League, established in 1970 and rebranded in 2020, represents the highest tier of women's club football in Switzerland (Swiss Football Association, 2024). The league currently comprises 10 teams that operate with an 18-round regular season followed by playoffs for the top eight teams, aiming to increase competitiveness and attract more viewers (Swiss Football Association, 2024). The competitiveness of the Women's Super League varies widely, with a significant gap between top-performing teams and those struggling to compete at the highest level (Swiss Football Association, 2024). Several clubs in Switzerland field both men's and women's teams. In these clubs, women's teams often rely heavily on the organizational structures of their male counterparts for commercial, operational, and administrative support (Indurain, 2021).

Despite this, women's football in Switzerland still faces significant challenges. As of 2025, only about 20 players in the Swiss Women's Super League can make a living solely from football, with more than half earning less than 500 Swiss francs per month (The Rise of Women's Football, 2025). This financial disparity has led to a talent drain, with only five Swiss national team players currently competing in the domestic league (The Rise of Women's Football, 2025). Girls' involvement in Swiss football stands at 9.4% in the children's category and 16.3% in the junior category (Swiss Football Association, 2024). The number of girl players has grown significantly, from 1,300-2,700 between 2015 and 2020, to 6,700 in 2025 (Swiss Football Association, 2024). As of 2023, Switzerland has over 30,000 registered female players across approximately 800 teams nationwide (Swiss Football Association, 2024).

Switzerland offers a compelling case for clubs across European countries due to its position as an emerging market in women's football. Despite relatively low participation rates and limited financial viability at the club level, the country has made notable progress in infrastructure development, youth engagement, and institutional commitment through the Swiss Football Association. Its hybrid landscape where women's teams often operate within or alongside men's professional clubs reflects structural dynamics seen across many European contexts. As such, Switzerland provides a valuable test case for understanding how to build competitive women's football structures in environments where professionalization is still in progress. At the same time, collecting data from clubs across Europe brings critical comparative insights that benefit Swiss clubs and stakeholders. Clubs in more mature markets offer lessons on strategic investment, branding, sponsorship integration, and structural alignment, all of which are highly relevant as Switzerland seeks to elevate its women's game. Conversely, examples from countries facing similar challenges in resource allocation, talent retention, or organizational integration provide realistic, context-sensitive benchmarks. This exchange of insights between emerging and established systems enables Swiss clubs to adapt proven strategies while contributing their own experiences to a broader European conversation on sustainable growth in women's football.

Theoretical background

Professional sports organizations invest in women's teams as part of their corporate growth strategy (Bredikhina et al., 2025). The positioning of how an organisation structures its brands provides the roadmap for the brand's successes and helps to determine the overall value and equity of the brand (Keller, 2014). In the context of European Football clubs, these women's teams are generally positioned as brand extensions of the club, where they share brand names, logos, and brand identity characteristics (Doyle et al., 2025). This involves leveraging existing resources to develop new (or invest in existing) women's teams, aiming to capitalize on potential synergies. Consequently, these expansions are considered product development strategies (Ansoff, 1957). To understand how professional sports organizations expand into the rapidly growing women's sports sector—and to provide insights for business management practice—we ground our study in two prominent strategic management theories: the Resource-Based View (RBV) and the Knowledge-Based View (KBV).

The Resource-Based View (RBV) and the Knowledge-Based View (KBV) are two strategies that help explain how clubs allocate resources to their portfolio brands (Pizzo et al., 2022). The RBV indicates a company's success comes from both its physical and non-physical resources, including the company's assets, skills, and business approach (Sirmon et al., 2011). Research examining the diversification strategies of sport organizations into esports (Pizzo et al., 2022) shows professional sport organizations have versatile resources that can be leveraged to generate sales and add value in the esports market. Departments like marketing, strategy, human resources, and legal counsel could potentially be repurposed for new operations without the need to develop them from scratch, giving the sport organizations strategic advantages.

The KBV indicates knowledge and expertise are crucial drivers of success when considering the brand positioning and resource allocation within football clubs (e.g., Liu & Meyer, 2020). The KBV distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge: explicit knowledge, which is easy to share and document, and tacit knowledge, which is hard to explain and pass on. Both are important and are embedded in the decision-makers of those who work for a club. Despite people being able to move to other companies, it's hard for competitors to copy tacit knowledge because they don't have the same setup or additional resources that make this knowledge useful in its original setting. Expanding into esports (Pizzo et al., 2022), research shows organizations must go beyond versatile resources by leveraging their expertise and tacit

knowledge – such as organizational know-how, professionalism, best practices, and monetization mechanisms – to gain strategic advantages. Professional sport organizations' years of experience in building and maintaining sponsorships help them monetize their investments in esports effectively. Thus, when employing to diversify their organization in competitive markets leveraging their existing versatile resources in tandem with their tacit knowledge may allow sport organizations to establish valuable sponsorships, enhance player performance, and ultimately gain a competitive advantages.

How do sport organizations position and fund their women's teams to maximize value creation?

Based on the identified gap and guided by the RVB and KBV frameworks, we formulate six research questions to guide our study. Sequentially, these research questions address several levels of factors that frame stakeholder strategies around women's football teams' brand positioning, including club level, brand ecosystem level, and market level (Baker et al., 2022):

RQ1: How do clubs strategize the positioning of their women's football product?

RQ2: How do clubs strategize resource allocation for their women's football product?

RQ3: How are resources and knowledge shared between the men's team and the women's team within a club?

RQ4: What is the influence of external stakeholders – particularly the role of a) the federation; b) sponsors; c) fans – in the strategic positioning of the teams?

RQ5: What is the influence of external stakeholders – particularly the role of a) the federation; b) sponsors; c) fans – in the resource-allocation decisions of the teams?

RQ6: What is the role of the women's team in the internationalization of clubs?

Method

We employed a constructivist grounded theory approach research design making sense of qualitative data. The constructivist approach relied on the premise that knowledge reflects Participants' constructed reality and the researchers' interpretations (Charmaz, 2006). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with managers (e.g., marketing manager; CEOs, or other C-level executives) of football clubs and federations. We conducted expert interviews with high-ranking individuals because their specialized expertise offers deep insights into

organizational strategies, policies, their implementation, and specifically the strategic positioning of women's teams within the overall club (Meuser & Nagel, 2009; Flick, 2014).

The interviews lasted between 50 and 75 minutes, averaging around 60 minutes. This duration is typical for expert interviews, reflecting both the Participants' extensive knowledge on the subject and the time constraints they often face (Creswell, 2013). Interviews were conducted via video conference software, Zoom or MS Teams, with video enabled. We conducted data collection in four iterative waves. As our understanding of the content deepened, we continuously updated the interview guide to tease out nuances (Gioia et al., 2013). For example, interviews in the first wave indicated external stakeholders do not influence resource allocation within clubs, but highlighted the opportunity of catering to sponsors through the women's team, thus, we shifted our interview questions to examine the potential of sponsors in helping the club achieve its mission. This shift is reflected in our discussion of research question 5 below. The data collection process concluded after we reached theoretical saturation.

Participants

Data for this study were collected from participants in four waves, targeting high-profile executives and experts across European football to capture both organizational specificity and broader strategic perspectives. The initial wave focused on Switzerland and comparable German clubs, where participants included CEOs, managing directors, technical directors, and heads of business from clubs with varied approaches to women's football – ranging from fully integrated departments to autonomous units with minimal resource allocation. Subsequent waves broadened the geographic and organizational scope. The second and third wave included participants from France, Germany Italy, Portugal, and Spain, representing clubs with established women's teams and a variety of integrated structures. Roles included CEOs, heads of marketing, and directors overseeing women's football, sponsorship, and sales – offering insight into national variation in governance and resource models. The final wave engaged six cross-national experts, including investors, consultants, gender equity advocates, former players, and federation executives. These participants provided a holistic, macro-level view of trends shaping women's football across organizational and national contexts, complementing club-level perspectives with strategic insight on sector-wide development. An overview of Participants and participating clubs is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants and their professional sports teams

ID	Country	League (level) male	League (level) female	Year expansion / integration of women's team	Resource allocation	Positioning of women's football in the organization	Position of Participant
Wave 1							
1	Germany	1st	4th	2021	Yes	Marketing	Head of girls' and women's football
2	Germany	1st	3rd	1990	Generally no	Sport	Managing Director Brand
3	Germany	1st	1st	2004	Yes	Sport	Technical Director
4	Switzerland	1st	1st	2008	Yes	Sport	Chairwoman
5	Switzerland	1st	1st	2009	Generally no	Autonomous department	Head of Business
6	Switzerland	1st	1st	2022	Generally no	Autonomous department	CEO
7	Germany	1st	1st	2007	Generally no	Sport	Director of Communication
Wave 2							
8	France	1st	NA	NA	NA	NA	Head of Marketing
9	France	1st	1st	2004	Yes	Autonomous department	Head of Marketing
10	Germany	1st	3rd	2004	Yes	Autonomous department	Head of women's football
11	Germany	2nd	3rd	2021	Yes	Integrated	CEO
12	Germany	1st	2nd	2010	Yes	Integrated	Head of Sales
13	Germany	2nd	2nd	1970	Yes	Integrated	Executive Board of Directors
14	Germany	1st	1st	2007	Yes	Integrated	Director Sales and Marketing
Wave 3							
15	Italy	NA	1st	2003	NA	Autonomous department	CEO
16	Spain	1st	1st	1970	Yes	Integrated	Director Women's Team
17	France	1st	2nd	2011	Yes	Integrated	CEO Women's Team
18	Portugal	1st	1st	2017	Yes	Integrated	Senior Brand Manager
19	Germany	1st	1st	2004	Yes	Sport	Director Analytics& Strategy
20	Portugal	1st	1st	2016	Yes	Sport	Head of Research
Wave 4							
21	USA	Investor in Women's Football teams					
22	England	Gender equity advocate in sport					

23	France	Women's Football expert and former player
24	Germany	Strategy consultant for sport organizations helping with the positioning of women's teams
25	England	Consultant and former head of women's football at national association
26	Spain	Head of digital marketing at the federation level

Note. Resources allocation “Generally no” means there is no official financial connection, but the men's team still supports the women's team in some instances

Analysis

Data were analyzed following the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013). Interviews were recorded by the research team and transcribed verbatim. Data were manually coded using ATLAS.ti software for storing and organizing the codes. Our initial step involved reviewing the audio recordings and reading the transcripts multiple times to familiarize ourselves with the data before initiating open coding (Gioia et al., 2013). By identifying similarities and differences among the open codes, we created categories of first-order codes and then abstracted these to a higher conceptual level. Drawing on existing literature, we grouped the codes into categories to formulate second-order themes. Our approach was guided by a combination of inductive and deductive methodologies (Charmaz, 2006). Through higher-level theorizing, we organized the themes into theoretical dimensions.

Results

Table 2:

Dimension	Theme	First order code
Strategy	Startup mindset	Club provides startup resources
	Vision-driven investment	Investors / owners see long-term value Clubs and owners have different appetite for investment
	Organizational structure	Structurally connected to the sport or marketing divisions Separate teams lead to friction Women structurally separated causes problems
Brand identity	Dual Brand Identity with Club DNA	Aligned with the overall club, but distinct from the men's team brand
	Signaling a modern and progressive brand	Club can't be perceived as progressive without women's team Brand development to create identification "go to" club for women in the region
Business case	Revenue Responsibility & Financial Friction	Building sustainability from within Justifying resource allocation Feeding the cash cow Ad-Hoc solidarity across organizational silos
Shared resources	Marketing and Cross-Promotion as Support Strategy	Men's team promotes women's team games Men's personnel helps promote women's team
	Access to Experts and Network	Access to scouting staff Access to medical staff and expertise
	Inherited Infrastructure	Club provides stadium and training facilities Teams build infrastructure for both
	Highlight games as a Catalyst	Highlight game covers 10% of budget of women's team Highlight game attracts players Highlight game attracts fans

Influence of external stakeholders	Symbolic Politics vs. Structural Investment	Politicians use women's sport as a platform without contributing in a meaningful way Politicians need to support infrastructure School curriculum changes support women's football Government funding helps with international expansion
	Success Penalties & Unprotected Talent	Success gets financially punished National Association requires clubs to engage in women's football Clubs want more support from association Youth player development compensation
	Fan-Driven Legitimacy Pressure	Fans put pressure on clubs to create a women's team
Sponsors	Image Alignment & Entry Point Potential	Women's team have a cleaner image and no (less) scandals than men's team Authentic fit important Women's teams unlock different sponsorship categories
	Value-Based Sponsorship Narrative	Women's team allows sponsors unique (value-based) positioning Sponsors can tap into different pots of money for DEI related issues Sponsors see value beyond CSR
	Player-Led Sponsor Activation	Female athletes engage with sponsors Female athletes more accessible than men Status of the player impacts sponsor engagement
	Tactical Partnership Blending	Even when women are structurally separate from men's team, sponsorship options for both exist
	Brand Halo Effects & Ambush Tensions	Sponsors seek association with overall club brand Sponsors try to get a discount on association with club brand (almost as a form of ambush marketing)
	Undervalued Assets and Structural Limits	Overall club policies (and tradition) restrict innovation in sponsorship activations Clubs ask too much for the value of the women's team Sponsors want measurable ROI Small region with limited businesses Exclusive partnerships with the club / men's team restrict sector-specific sponsors
Club growth	Global Reach through Sporting and Symbolic Capital	Focus on establishing national presence and internationalization not a focus Women's team goes on international tour and interacts with international stakeholders Players drive internationalization Internationalization through partners Sporting success basis for internationalization
	Expanding the Fan Universe	Many fans of the men's team are not interested in women's football Clubs continue to attract 'traditional' women's football fans Clubs attract a younger and more diverse audience

Strategy

The dimension Strategy reflects three interrelated themes: **Startup mindset**, **Vision-driven investment**, and **Organizational Structure**.

Startup mindset

In the early stages of developing women's football teams, clubs providing startup resources emerged as a critical practice. Clubs frequently positioned the women's team as an

entrepreneurial extension of the main organization, offering initial financial support, access to infrastructure, and shared expertise. Participant 17 described their situation as follows: “We are a start-up that benefits from the platform of the main club. So [we can tap into] knowledge, advice, and experience from the different departments and all the administrative, commercial, and operational services are shared... that's everything from selling sponsorships to obviously looking after our infrastructure to accessing our infrastructure, to managing our digital channels and so forth”. Participant 3 emphasized the strategic goal of achieving self-sufficiency, stating, “We do receive support because we aim to become self-sustaining. Achieving this self-sufficiency is one of my responsibilities, and our strategic goal is to create a product attractive enough to support itself”. Despite these ambitions, Participant 13 acknowledged the financial challenges inherent in the startup phase, noting that “it's been loss-making for us in recent years, but in the startup financing mindset, we simply have to view it as start-up financing in the first few years.”

Vision-driven investment

The second theme, vision-driven investment, reflected how stakeholders reconciled short-term losses with long-term strategic visions. Investors and club owners see the long-term value of investing in women’s football teams and financial returns were not immediate but maintained confidence in future value creation. Participant 15 explained, “They already know they're losing money, and they will continue to lose some for now. Of course, that doesn't mean they like it. That's why we're working hard to build something that will have greater value in the future”. However, differences across organizations were apparent, and clubs and owners have different appetite for investment. Participant 17 stated, “Different clubs, different owners will have different appetites for how far off the ledge they want to operate in terms of how much they're willing to invest compared to the current availability of business. It's also true that if you develop a strong identity and a strong business model, you know you can become a bit master of your own destiny”. Thus, the ability to frame investment in women’s football as a strategic, brand-building endeavor varied considerably across contexts.

Organizational structure

The **Organizational structure** theme highlights how structural decisions shaped the integration or isolation of women’s football within the club operations. Some organizations

adopted a model where the women's team is *structurally connected to the sport or marketing divisions*, fostering closer alignment. As Participant 3 noted, "We, as women's football, are assigned to the sports division. In contrast, the practice of establishing *separate teams* often led to *friction*. Isolating the women's team from the main club was seen to reduce access to resources and weaken alignment: "Some clubs choose to silo off women's football into a completely separate department. However, in my experience, it isolates women's football from the rest of the organization, making it harder to tap into shared resources and skill sets... It can even create friction, making it feel like an 'us versus them' situation" (Participant 25). Moreover, cases where women's team were *structurally separated causes problems* revealed administrative and legal complications. Participant 13 described: "We also legally tied to the e.V. [non-profit club]. That doesn't have to concern anyone, but it causes us problems, because we're part of the AG [stock corporation], which owns the training grounds, and the moment someone from the e.V. steps foot on them, you immediately have an auditor who says, "Yes, but stop, non-profit status and transferring pricing [prices that group companies charge each other for services or deliveries provided] are unfortunately a bit cumbersome in Germany".

Overall, these findings demonstrate that the strategic positioning of women's football teams a balance of financial investment, organizational philosophy, long-term vision, and structural integration. Many of the subsequent themes are impacted by the strategy and structure of the organization.

Business Case

The financial structure underpinning women's football teams was described by participants as both an evolving opportunity and an ongoing negotiation. The dimension of the **Business Case** reflects how clubs managed resource allocation, approached financial autonomy, and balanced priorities across men's and women's programs. The findings reflect **Revenue Responsibility and Financial Friction** and center on four interrelated themes: *Building sustainability from within*, *Justifying resource allocation*, *Feeding the cash cow*, and *Ad-Hoc solidarity across organizational silos*.

Building sustainability from within

Several clubs emphasized their commitment to treating the women's team as a financially accountable unit. In some cases, this meant structuring the department explicitly as a *self-*

contained business case. Participant 6 described this approach as highly systematized: “The whole women's department is actually managed according to the business case... when we reach certain thresholds, new resources are released again. The sponsor is one person from the board of directors who actually manages the whole business case directly”. This structured model linked performance and investment, incentivizing growth and financial discipline.

Other clubs, while not formally designating the women’s team as an independent business unit, expressed a strong drive toward *financial self-sufficiency*. One club representative noted: “We’ve been earning our own money from day one (...) and our long-term goal is to at least finance ourselves. We know it’s difficult, because top athletes require millions, but we’re on a very good path” (Participant 1). This quote reflects a pragmatic optimism: financial independence may not be immediate, but foundational structures had been established to support future viability.

Justifying resource allocation

While business-minded, financial decisions still depended heavily on internal resource assessments. Clubs utilized *formalized budgeting processes* to allocate funding. Participant 7 described: “We have a professional budget process where every department applies for money in great detail – for every cost center, be it for projects, investments, or personnel”. This systematic budgeting culture meant that decisions were grounded in detailed financial planning and strategic prioritization. Participant 4 highlighted the evaluative component of resource requests: “When we have the business part there (...) we must describe the positions and document exactly what we want to do and can’t do with existing resources. Then comes the balancing act: if we do it, what is the benefit? If we don’t, what’s the cost?”. The decision-making logic was not simply about funding availability, but also about weighing return on investment – whether reputational, competitive, or developmental.

Feeding the cash cow

Despite efforts toward transparency and financial planning, Participants acknowledged that *the men’s team remained the financial and organizational priority*. While not always framed as unfair, this reality shaped women’s football funding boundaries. Participant 2 was explicit: “Because we are one of the top professional football clubs with a professional men's team, we always make sure that resources and money do not flow out of the budgets that are there for

men's football". This structural separation of financial streams (e.g., member-based non-profit vs. for-profit company.) helped avoid internal competition but also reinforced the men's team's protected status within budget negotiations.

Ad-Hoc solidarity across organizational silos

Nevertheless, Participants shared that *informal support channels* existed when women's teams faced urgent needs – a kind of internal solidarity. Although not institutionalized, clubs could reach across departments for help: "If we have a problem, we can go to the sporting director and look for solutions. It's not a daily habit, but when it's needed – like in a medical case — the women's doctor can consult with someone from the men's team" (Participant 16). This support was described as reactive and situational rather than systemic, yet it underscored that the women's department was not entirely isolated within the club ecosystem.

Brand Identity

The development of a strong and authentic **Brand Identity** emerged as a central strategic concern for clubs integrating women's football. Clubs sought to align their women's teams with the overarching brand while allowing space for a distinct identity to develop. This tension produced two core themes: **Dual Brand Identity with Club DNA** and **Signaling a Modern and Progressive Brand**.

Dual Brand Identity with Club DNA

Clubs widely expressed the desire for *brand consistency* across the men's and women's programs while recognizing the importance of building the women's side as more than a subsidiary or "add-on". The aim was to craft an identity that remained true to the club's core values but also allowed women's football to stand independently. Participant 7 summarized this dual ambition: "We obviously want them to be perceived as [Club] and as what this club stands for, but not just as an appendix of the men's team, but as an independent group that stands for certain things — social values, community, and excitement". Creating this balance was not without difficulty. As Participant 3 reflected, "That's not so easy because, of course, you don't want to be something completely different since we belong to [Club]. But how do you manage to perhaps form a subsidiary that can make sense and act complementarily?" This theme highlighted the internal work being done to articulate *a dedicated women's brand strategy* –

something more than shared colors and logos. “We are in the process of developing a concept for a women's brand concept”, Participant 7 explained, “because we want them to be perceived as [Club], but also not just as a copy of the men’s team”. This conceptual independence was central to efforts to connect with new audiences and express different values through the women’s game.

Signaling a Modern and Progressive Brand

The presence of a women’s team was increasingly understood not just as a sport-related initiative but as a *symbol of modernity and inclusivity* in the club’s overall positioning. Several Participants viewed women’s football as integral to presenting a forward-thinking, socially engaged brand. Participant 8 reflected, “When you want to be perceived as a modern club, and then you ask yourself, ‘Okay, what are we doing to be modern?’... Not having a women's team puts us in a position to be limited in how we want to position ourselves – we can't authentically speak on certain topics without it.” Supporting women's football was viewed not merely as a business decision but as a societal obligation. Participant 14 framed it clearly: “I have a social responsibility to do both as a club... everyone knows that football belongs to everyone. It's not something that can't be exclusivized. Supporting women's football is part of your social responsibility”. Clubs that fail to support women’s football risk losing alignment with their broader role in society and undermining their own long-term business sustainability.

In this context, women’s football was both a brand asset and a social commitment, particularly for clubs lacking long-standing local or generational traditions. Participant 11 explained how their club’s identity required *active brand building*: “We have to invest heavily in our brand in order to offer identification potential – especially for children, young people, and the region — because we’re not the traditional club where father and son went 20 years ago.” Other clubs used their women's team to *establish clear regional anchors*. Participant 13 shared that their strategic focus was to become “the club for young [region] German women — both in the fan scene and among players,” suggesting that women’s football was not just a sporting project but a broader cultural and demographic positioning effort.

Shared Resources

The findings revealed that access to **Shared Resources** played a crucial role in the development of women’s football teams within clubs. Four key themes emerged: **Marketing**

and Cross-Promotion as Support Strategy, Access to Experts and Networks, Inherited Infrastructure, Highlight games as a Catalyst.

Marketing and Cross-Promotion and as Support Strategy

Support from the men's side was particularly visible in the area of marketing and communications. Clubs described how *men's team promotes women's team games* and *men's personnel helps promote women's team*. For example, Participant 5 noted, "For the cup final, there were male players there too. They [men's team] made a teaser video with players from the first team saying, 'Hey everyone, our women are playing in the cup final, come together in [City] and watch this game'". In some clubs, women's teams could also *access men's media departments* for promotional activities, although this access was limited by resource availability: "Marketing and social media and merchandising and ticketing, all these positions are supplied to us. We don't have our own resources there. (Participant 4). Participant 18 highlighted "The real value it's our database because we know everything about our members, our supporters – where they live, what products they buy, and so on – and we can use that for any sponsor of any team, including the women's football team." However, not all resources could be shared. In particular, *social media staff, athletics, physios, and team management* were often separate, as these areas were too specialized and workload-intensive to combine.

Access to Experts and Network

Women's increasingly benefit from *access to scouting staff* and *access to medical staff and expertise* within the broader club infrastructure. These connections enable clubs to leverage internal expertise to support the professionalization of the women's side. Participants emphasized the importance of having direct interfaces with experts who traditionally work with the men's teams. Participant 3 explained, "We have interfaces in all areas where it comes to strategic development. That means, in medicine, I have the same contact person—the head of medicine, who is also the head for the men—is responsible for us". Although not all services were fully integrated, incremental improvements were visible. For example, clubs were beginning to involve women's teams in areas such as nutrition: "We still have a way to go and want to become more and more professional, and some topics only come up from season to season, so we're currently dealing with the topic of nutrition, for example. We haven't done that before, but (...) we have the experts in men's professional football and we meet with them and they give us tips

and they support us” (Participant 1). The physical proximity and operational integration within clubs also facilitated collaboration: “We have direct access to the office. These routes have now become much easier and it is a big step, a really big step, because we realise that when we are there, if we have a question, we can go to the other office and discuss it straight away. That makes things a lot easier” (Participant 4). In addition to medical and operational knowledge, informal scouting networks also benefited women’s teams. It was common for *scouts working for men’s teams* to notice promising female players during routine activities: “It often happens that scouts for men’s teams visit other clubs and say, ‘Hey, I spotted a talented female player.’ In many places, boys and girls play together up to a certain age, so it’s not unusual for scouts to notice standout girls during these matches” (Participant 17). These observations, though informal, expanded talent identification opportunities for women’s teams without requiring parallel scouting infrastructure.

Inherited Infrastructure

The theme of **Inherited Infrastructure** revealed both opportunities and persistent inequalities. While some clubs ensured that *stadium and training facilities were provided to women’s teams*, there was significant reliance on *repurposing former men’s facilities*. As Participant 15 observed, “At men’s clubs, everything is already in place — facilities, infrastructure — so all that’s needed is to buy players and hire staff. Women’s teams often train in former men’s facilities, like [some well-known clubs]”. Investments to build new infrastructure were underway in some cases, particularly around medical care: “We are currently building a state-of-the-art medical care center... with radiology, a rehabilitation center... for professional football players as well as female players.” However, challenges persisted, including overuse of pitches, as described: “Both men’s and women’s games were canceled because the pitch couldn’t handle the double burden of a game every weekend” (Participant 11).

Highlight Games as a Catalyst

One strategic innovation that emerged across clubs was the use of **highlight games** — playing women’s matches in large, often iconic, men’s stadiums. Far from being symbolic exercises, these matches were identified as critical drivers of financial sustainability, player recruitment, and fan engagement. Participants emphasized that highlight games could contribute materially to the women’s team’s financial health. Hosting matches in major venues attracted

larger audiences, corporate hospitality sales, and media attention, with direct financial benefits. From a financial perspective, clubs emphasized that stadium matches could substantially offset annual operating costs. One executive noted, “We actually managed to break even for the first time this year because of one sold-out game — it moved us from a mid-six-figure loss to break-even. Of course, we can't plan on [large audience] every year, but it shows the potential” (Participant 13). Beyond financial benefits, highlight games also enhanced the club’s attractiveness to players by showcasing a professional and ambitious environment. As one Participant reflected, “The more attractive the environment here, the easier it is to potentially get a player and take the next step” (Participant 7). Highlight games were also key to broadening the fan base, providing access to supporters who might otherwise struggle to attend men’s matches. Clubs described how women’s matches offered an alternative for football fans who faced long waitlists for men’s games: “There are four to five times as many requests as there are men's tickets, and at a women's highlight game, fans can experience the club, bring their children, and enjoy the stadium in a way they might not otherwise” (Participant 7). Thus, highlight games were not mere one-off events but integral to financial viability, talent acquisition, and fan development strategies in women’s football. However, Participant 11 cautioned “The real question is how many spectators the games actually attract. Because it's not cool to play in a 40,000-seat arena in front of 1,000 spectators. That's no fun either.”

Influence of External Stakeholders

The growth and development of women’s football teams were not only shaped by internal club strategies but also heavily influenced by external stakeholders. These actors including politicians, federations, national associations, and fans played a complex, sometimes contradictory role in either supporting or constraining progress. Three major themes emerged: **Symbolic Politics vs. Structural Investment, Success Penalties & Unprotected Talent, and Fan-Driven Legitimacy Pressure**

Symbolic Politics vs. Structural Investment

Political actors were widely perceived as inconsistent partners in the development of women’s football. Participants frequently observed that *politicians use women’s sport as a platform without contributing meaningfully* to its infrastructure or sustainability. As Participant

13 summarized, “Everyone wants to be on stage when women are honored, but no one wants to pay for the party” (sarcastically referencing their city’s self-proclaimed sports reputation).

Political barriers were also apparent in the day-to-day operations of women’s teams, particularly around *access to public infrastructure*. For example, obtaining access to major stadiums often remained a bureaucratic struggle: “We are looking for local councillors who will submit motions so we can play more games at [Stadium name] without having to beg for it every time” (Participant 4). The desire for guaranteed, regular access to premier facilities underscored the mismatch between symbolic political support and actual investment.

At the same time, positive examples demonstrated how political will could drive systemic change. In England, the success of the Women’s EURO victory led to a *change in the national school curriculum*, mandating that girls have the same access to football as boys: “After England’s win, they penned a letter to the government and said, ‘Shouldn’t girls be able to play football at school?’ — and the government agreed. That was a huge change.” Similarly, international partnerships showed how *government funding could support expansion*. Participant 9 explained how negotiations with the French government helped secure funding for women’s sports initiatives abroad: “We engaged the French Government on our partnership in Senegal to push women’s sport, providing more material and support.”

Success Penalties & Unprotected Talent

The relationship between clubs and football federations was often strained. Despite increasing visibility, Participants highlighted a critical contradiction: *success in European competitions resulted in financial losses* for clubs. One Participant expressed frustration: “When we play in European competitions, it still results in a financial loss for us. That simply cannot be the case. Success in sport should not be punished — that must be the top priority” (Participant 3). Without structural incentives to reward competitive achievement, clubs faced financial disincentives to invest aggressively in women’s football, limiting growth.

National football associations were formally requiring greater involvement in women’s football, but Participants described a gap between regulation and meaningful support. According to one Participant, “Since last season, professional clubs have to deal with women’s football, but how you do it is up to you. There are no regulations about how professionally you have to work” (Participant 1). Moreover, clubs reported that *support from national associations was minimal*, particularly in financial terms. “It would be absolutely desirable if associations...would provide a

little more money for the clubs. Right now, conditions are often set by the association, but the club has to pay” (Participant 4). Championship titles brought limited rewards — for example, winning the Swiss championship brought just 10,000 Swiss francs — offering little financial incentive for high-level performance. Participants also called for more *youth player development compensation* from federations to incentivize clubs to invest in long-term player development: “If the association actually wants to push women's football, more training compensation should be available” (Participant 5).

Fan-Driven Legitimacy Pressure

Fans emerged as a critical external stakeholder group pushing for greater commitment to women’s football. In several cases, *fans pressured clubs to create women’s teams*, viewing it as integral to the identity and social responsibility of the club. As one Participant recounted, “The initial spark came from our fans, who said, ‘Hey, you’ve been talking about women’s football for a long time, what now? It belongs to [Club] too.’” (Participant 2). Clubs responded not only by establishing women’s programs but also by conducting fan surveys to better understand their audience and align branding strategies: “We now have a good overview of who our fans are and how we can advance brand development in the coming years” (Participant 3). Fan-driven momentum highlighted that support for women’s football was no longer purely top-down but increasingly emerged from grassroots stakeholder expectations.

Sponsors

Sponsorship emerged as a critical dimension in the development and professionalization of women’s football teams. Rather than simply replicating traditional men's sponsorship models, women’s teams opened up distinct opportunities and challenges that reflected their unique market positioning. The findings identified six major themes: Image Alignment & Entry Point Potential, Value-Based Sponsorship Narrative, Player-Led Sponsor Activation, Tactical Partnership Blending, Brand Halo Effects & Ambush Tensions, Undervalued Assets and Structural Limits.

Image Alignment & Entry Point Potential

Participants emphasized that sponsorship success in women's football was largely driven by *fit* – the degree to which a club’s values, image, and public perception aligned with a

sponsor's brand identity. In contrast to men's football, where associations with scandals or ostentatious displays sometimes deterred sponsors, women's teams were seen as offering a 'cleaner' image. As one Participant explained, "We have no chance of sponsorship with men's football because [sponsors] say, 'No, we don't want this sport, it doesn't suit our image (...) but the women's team does.'"

This shift elevated the strategic importance of partner selection. Clubs were deliberate in cultivating authentic sponsorship relationships: "We have a strategy and consider which partners fit to make it appear authentic, to get the maximum for both parties because that's our understanding of a good partnership" (Participant 19). Moreover, women's teams expanded the sponsorship landscape by unlocking partnerships with brands traditionally absent from football, such as luxury cosmetics, offering access to new demographics: "Our shirt sponsor [a luxury cosmetics brand] had never done any sports sponsorship before. They saw an opportunity to reach a younger, care-focused audience through women's football" (Participant 1).

Value-Based Sponsorship Narrative

Women's football was increasingly valued for enabling *unique, values-driven sponsor positioning*. Participants described how brands used women's teams to highlight commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), accessing *different corporate budget lines* beyond traditional sports marketing. One Participant captured the commercial shift: "Men's football is so saturated with commercial partners, it's hard to stand out. In women's football, brands can actually bring their values to life — and it's where the future is going, particularly for Gen Z audiences." This development also reflected a broader transformation of women's football from a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) project into a genuine commercial product. As Participant 3 put it, "Previously, it was under the cloak of social responsibility. Now, it's changing — it's an attractive product that can bind and attract customers".

Player-Led Sponsor Activation

Another significant advantage was *the engagement of female athletes with sponsors*. Participants consistently noted that women's players demonstrated greater willingness to participate in sponsorship activities compared to male players, particularly because of the financial realities of the women's game. As one Participant observed, "The willingness of the female players is very high because it's a product still in development, and they know they need

to contribute beyond what you see on the pitch” (Participant 3). However, the *status of the player* influenced this dynamic: while most athletes were accessible, star players — particularly those with strong personal brands — sometimes limited their involvement based on agent negotiations, reflecting growing professionalism. Nonetheless, in general, women’s players understood the commercial ecosystem better, recognizing that “sponsors are actually making them have a better life” (Participant 9).

Tactical Partnership Blending

Despite some structural separation from men’s teams, *sponsorship collaboration* was possible — and sometimes preferable — for brands seeking to balance visibility and authenticity. Some sponsors specifically targeted the women's team to project progressive values while also benefiting from the men's team’s larger brand ecosystem. “Some sponsors want to do something with the women's team, and the people there understand it's good to bring everything into harmony”, explained one Participant (Participant 2). Successful collaboration required careful management to align interests across the men's and women's sides without diluting the distinctiveness that made women’s football attractive.

Brand Halo Effects & Ambush Tensions

A major asset for women’s teams was their *association with the overall club brand*, particularly when clubs had strong, recognizable identities. Sponsors appreciated the ability to leverage the club’s broader recognition: “The brand is appealing for the sponsors, since it's the same name as the men's team, so they can associate themselves to it” (Participant 9). However, challenges arose when sponsors sought to “*piggyback*” on the men's club marketing at a reduced cost by sponsoring only the women's team. One executive warned: “There are clever sponsors who say, ‘I'll sponsor the women's team, but I get transported through the men's channels and get the same reach for a fraction of the cost.’ We can't allow that, of course” (Participant 2). Managing this tension was key to protecting the value of sponsorships for both sides.

Undervalued Assets and Structural Limits

Although opportunities were growing, important *barriers to sponsorship* remained. Clubs sometimes priced women's sponsorship packages too high relative to their current market reach,

leading to friction with cautious sponsors: “People are creating new strategies for commercial revenue, but they're asking too much money — it's not there yet. The viewership still isn't there, and the sponsors are too scared to take a chance on it” (Participant 23). Moreover, differences in sponsorship culture between countries affected growth. In some contexts, sponsorship conversations still focused heavily on *reach and visibility*, whereas in others, particularly England, discussions prioritized *values, equality, and community engagement* (Participant 14). In smaller markets, *regional economic limitations* further constrained opportunities: “Economic power in [specific region] is obviously not comparable to other regions” (Participant 11). Finally, *existing exclusive partnerships between clubs and men's team sponsors* often prevented women's teams from securing sector-specific deals. Even when theoretically possible, practical constraints made it difficult: “If we were to get a bank sponsor now, it would be tough because we already have a long-term deal with Sparkasse Bochum” (Participant 12). These restrictions limited the autonomy of women's teams to fully exploit their growing market appeal.

Global Reach through Sporting and Symbolic Capital

The role of internationalization in the growth of women's football teams revealed a diverse spectrum of approaches. While some clubs viewed it as a future aspiration rather than an immediate priority, others actively leveraged international players, partnerships, or visibility strategies. The findings are best understood through five interrelated patterns: *limited strategic focus, international tours and exposure, players as bridges, partnership-driven expansion, and sporting success as a foundation for global reach*.

For many clubs, *internationalization was not yet a strategic focus*, particularly when resources were limited and domestic presence remained underdeveloped. As one executive put it, “We'll be happy if we can penetrate this region... But we don't have a strategy now. Internationalization up to now — the focus is really on profitability” (Participant 6). Instead, clubs prioritized regional anchoring and national performance, with international elements appearing only at the periphery, such as NFT-based campaigns or minor merchandising initiatives: “The only thing that's a bit international is the NFTs — also because of digitalization” (Participant 5). Nonetheless, clubs with greater sporting stability or commercial networks *engaged in international tours and branding activities*, particularly in cooperation with sponsors. Marketing trips to Asia or North America, often aligned with sponsors, provided opportunities

for both the men's and women's teams: "If the sporting level is right, then the women and men will go on a marketing trip to the USA or Asia, always alternating things up... the women's team also play there with partners and sponsors" (Participant 1). These events were not just for competition but for building international visibility and expanding commercial relationships.

Individual players also served as informal drivers of internationalization, particularly when recruited from abroad. One club described the case of a Singaporean player whose arrival enhanced both the team's sporting quality and its visibility in Asia: "We used internationalization for women's football... bringing players to us from abroad naturally gives us greater reach too — it's a bit of give and take in both directions" (Participant 1). While logistical barriers, such as visa restrictions or differences in league systems (e.g., U.S. college football), limited expansion into certain regions, the sporting and symbolic benefits of international player recruitment were seen as significant.

A more structured path toward internationalization came through *partnerships with clubs, academies, and federations*. For instance, Participant 9 outlined plans to use their consulting agency as a platform for youth training initiatives abroad, while Participant 12 highlighted early-stage collaborations in Canada and Japan: "We have club partnerships with [Club 1] and [Club 2]... and we're trying to include women's football in our activities. These partnerships are still very new". Such partnerships offered a scalable, low-risk model for entering international markets and incorporating women's football into existing pathways.

Finally, *sporting success itself was framed as a prerequisite for international engagement*. Some clubs emphasized that performance at the national level was foundational to any future global strategy: "In terms of sport, we always aim to be international... and in marketing we also want to take that step" (Participant 4). In some cases, women's teams were already more internationally consistent than their male counterparts. As Participant 4 pointed out: "We women have been more international than the men – we were always present in the Champions League, except for this season". This athletic credibility bolstered club's claims to international relevance and visibility.

Expanding the Fan Universe

Women's football teams significantly expand a club's addressable target market by reaching beyond the traditional fanbase of men's football. Participant 13 noted, women's football

attracts a “different audience than for men's football. It's not just the case that normal season ticket holders automatically go to women's football, but we are also reaching a new, different target group.” This statement was supported by Participant 2 who stated, “In fact, the people who go to professional men's football here are mostly only interested in professional men's football.” This signals that the women’s game is not merely an extension of the men’s brand but a strategic opportunity to diversify the fan base. Clubs are successfully retaining a core of long-time women’s football supporters – those whose connection to the sport often stems from personal or familial ties – and are now also engaging new segments. For example, Participant 10 observed an influx of “young families” who appreciate the “relatively harmonious coexistence” at matches—free of stress or chants of abuse. This atmosphere appeals to fans who may feel alienated from the intensity of the men’s game, thus creating a more inclusive, family-oriented matchday experience. Furthermore, the women’s game skews “younger and more diverse,” attracting “many more women, many more children, many more young people.” The commercial impact of this expanded market is evident in digital engagement: “Chelsea they've got a four-person dedicated women's football content team. At the start of 2024, they launched a Tiktok women's channel, and in 2024, the women's team had more views on Tiktok than 14 English Premier League men's clubs. That's huge.” (Participant 25), which highlights the digital and commercial growth potential of the women’s game.

Discussion

European football clubs have increasingly expanded into women's football, recognizing both the sporting and commercial potential of the women's game. This strategic move aligns with broader organizational goals, allowing clubs to leverage existing resources and knowledge to create synergies between men's and women's teams. The expansion into women's football by European clubs is driven by multiple factors, including market growth opportunities, brand development, corporate social responsibility, and the promotion of gender equality in sports.

Addressing *Research Question 1* highlights clubs approach the positioning of their women’s football product through a combination of strategic vision, brand integration, and long-term business logic. While approaches vary, a clear distinction appears between passive inclusion and proactive development, with several clubs treating women’s football as a distinct growth opportunity rather than merely an extension of the men’s side. Strategically, clubs differ

in their appetite for investment and risk. Some clubs have embedded women's football into their club identity and articulated goals such as European competition or full professionalization. Others acknowledge its potential but adopt a more cautious, long-term development approach, preferring organic internal motivation over external pressure. Positioning is often tied to club values and how they see the club's role in society, which the club would not be able to achieve without investing in a women's team. Importantly, clubs recognize that the women's team offers a unique value proposition— not only in reaching new fans but in driving future commercial growth. Thus, the women's product becomes both a brand enhancer and a commercial accelerator.

Addressing *Research Question 2* shows clubs strategize resource allocation by adopting a multifaceted approach to resource allocation for their women's team, shaped by organizational structure, leadership commitment, financial strategy, and access to shared resources. These strategies reflect a balancing act between dependency on the men's team and long-term goals of financial independence and structural equity. Women's teams embedded within unified legal entities benefit from shared infrastructure, streamlined communication, and cross-departmental expertise, enhancing efficiency and integration. Conversely, clubs with autonomous women's departments, often tied to amateur or non-profit models, face more siloed operations and limited access to institutional resources. Leadership plays a critical role, with strategic progress strongly tied to the presence of dedicated advocates within governance structures. Financial strategies vary: some clubs rely on performance-based release of funds and detailed budgeting processes, while others pursue increasing financial self-sufficiency through revenue generation and reinvestment. Still, complete independence remains rare, and many clubs initially subsidize the women's program through men's team revenues as a short-term professionalization strategy often seen in start-up companies. Over time, clubs aim to reduce this dependency by strengthening commercial operations and attracting sponsors aligned with the women's game. Importantly, non-monetary resources – such as access to medical staff, training grounds, and dedicated digital platforms – are equally vital. Investments in media and communication infrastructure, for instance, directly enhance visibility and engagement, contributing to the broader strategic growth of women's football within club ecosystems.

Addressing *Research Question 3*, the resources and knowledge sharing process is guided by deliberate strategies that enable access to physical infrastructure, cross-functional

collaboration, and targeted integration of personnel. This approach facilitates operational efficiency and accelerates the development of the women's team within the broader club structure. While financial boundaries are often maintained to protect men's budgets, significant collaboration occurs across facilities, marketing, medical services, and internal know-how. Shared training grounds and performance environments support recruitment and operational efficiency. Marketing teams frequently extend support through dedicated personnel and collaborative campaigns, including men's players promoting women's matches. Highlight games enhance visibility for the women's team and can contribute notably to revenue, representing an example of supporting the women's team through providing critical infrastructure and promotional support. However, the extent of support is often constrained by departmental capacity and prioritization. Access to medical, nutrition, and performance experts from the men's side provides vital knowledge transfer and supports emerging competencies in the women's game. Administrative integration, such as access to club management and decision-makers, streamlines operations and staffing. Hybrid models are common, where dedicated women's team staff operate within overarching structures led by the men's departments, ensuring alignment with club-wide performance standards. Although some clubs emphasize financial autonomy by maintaining separate budgets, the strategic sharing of infrastructure, expertise, and promotional resources has proven critical to the growth and integration of women's football within the broader organizational ecosystem.

Addressing *Research Question 4*, external stakeholders play a critical role in shaping the strategic positioning of women's football within professional clubs, influencing structural priorities, resource flows, and brand narratives. Federations, while setting regulatory frameworks, are often viewed as lacking proactive support and offering minimal financial incentives, resulting in inconsistent levels of engagement across clubs. Conversely, sponsors increasingly recognize women's football as a distinct and authentic branding opportunity and push clubs to professionalize their women's team operations, especially those sponsors who are seeking value-driven alignment. Sponsor interest increases as fan engagement increases, and fans serve a dual function as both cultural advocates and catalysts for organizational change. In several clubs, supporter demand directly influenced the establishment of women's teams, and ongoing fan feedback now shapes branding and integration strategies. Women's football also attracts new demographics, expanding the audience base through family-friendly and inclusive

matchday experiences. These stakeholder groups shape the trajectory of women's football by legitimizing its value, providing resources, and influencing direction of its institutional integration.

Addressing *Research Question 5*, the influence of external stakeholders on resource allocation was generally viewed as limited, however, sponsors emerged as the primary external actors shaping the development of women's football. Sponsorship proved critical not only for funding but also for enhancing the strategic positioning and commercial legitimacy of women's teams. Rather than replicating men's sponsorship models, women's football offered unique value propositions, characterized by strong sponsorship fit, authentic brand alignment, and the appeal of a values-driven narrative. This positioning attracted non-traditional sponsors, including brands previously uninvolved in sports marketing, and allowed clubs to tap into new demographics. Sponsors increasingly used women's football to signal commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion, enabling companies to access different corporate budget lines beyond traditional sports marketing. Sponsors also valued female athletes' willingness to engage in promotional activities, enhancing sponsor relationships, though top-tier players occasionally limited participation due to agent negotiations. Clubs also leveraged their overall brand identity to attract sponsors, but tensions arose when brands sought to gain men's team exposure through women's team deals at reduced costs. Sponsorship growth was constrained by factors such as inflated pricing, regional economic disparities, and existing exclusivity agreements from men's team sponsors, limiting women's teams' autonomy to fully capitalize on their market potential.

Addressing *Research Question 6*, women's teams play an increasingly valuable role in the internationalization strategies of football clubs, though their impact varies depending on sporting success, marketing integration, player recruitment, and resource availability. Participation in international competitions like the UEFA Women's Champions League provides consistent global exposure, sometimes surpassing that of men's teams in terms of continuity. Clubs also involve women's teams in international marketing activations, including preseason tours and sponsorship campaigns targeting growth markets such as the USA and Asia, enhancing global visibility and reinforcing inclusive brand identities. The recruitment of international players serves as a strategic tool to build fan bases and foster regional connections, although logistical barriers such as visa restrictions can constrain these efforts. While these activities signal progress, many clubs still prioritize national or regional objectives, and fully developed

internationalization strategies that explicitly include women's teams remain rare. Some clubs are beginning to define target markets, but integrated approaches are still emerging and provide opportunities for future growth.

Theoretical Contribution

Our research makes three key contributions to the literature on women's football, strategic management in sport, and organizational brand architecture: the growth and positioning of women's football, the resource-based and knowledge-based views of the firm, and schema theory embedded in brand architecture literature.

The research extends existing literature on the growth of women's football (Bredikhina et al., 2025; Doyle et al., 2024; 2025; Fielding-Lloyd et al., 2020; Valenti et al., 2021) by showing how clubs approach women's teams not merely as CSR initiatives or symbolic extensions, but increasingly as strategic assets that contribute to commercial growth, brand development, and internationalization. While past studies acknowledged challenges in legitimacy and financial investment, this research demonstrates how clubs are moving beyond passive inclusion toward proactive brand-building efforts. Similar to the strategic integration of esports teams within sport organizations (Pizzo et al., 2022), clubs use the women's team to reach new demographics and access untapped sponsorship categories. However, beyond the commercial benefits reaped through esports integrations highlighted in previous work (Pizzo et al., 2022), women's teams allow clubs to signal progressive values and position the organization aligned with its role in society.

By applying the RBV and KBV to the management of women's football, this research provides new empirical insights into how clubs strategically allocate both tangible and intangible resources across their brand portfolios. Findings from RQ2 and RQ3 highlight how shared infrastructure, marketing departments, medical teams, and institutional knowledge offer economies of scope and explicit knowledge advantages when supporting women's teams (e.g., Liu & Meyer, 2020). These shared resources – although constrained by legal or administrative boundaries in some cases – enable clubs to accelerate the development of women's football without duplicating entire organizational systems. At the same time, tacit knowledge embedded in leadership, cross-functional governance, and internal advocacy drives differentiated implementation. The study therefore advances KBV by illustrating how clubs leverage internal

expertise, embedded decision-making processes, and organizational culture to adapt resource allocation strategies to a new, rapidly developing sport product. This extends organizational diversification in sport research (e.g., Pizzo et al., 2022), showing that strategic advantages in women's football stem from asset versatility, knowledge transfer, and collaborative club culture.

A third contribution lies in organizations balancing the brand management of women's teams between integration and differentiation within an organizational brand structure, contributing to brand architecture knowledge (e.g., Bredikhina et al., 2025; Kunkel et al., 2013). We demonstrate clubs navigated this duality by determining which resources should be shared – such as the brand name, facilities, marketing platforms – and which resources should remain unique – such as brand voice, sponsorship strategy, athlete storytelling. Findings explain the decision-making underlying the gendered dynamics of social media marketing of women's football players (Bredikhina et al., 2025). Although brand consistency offers legitimacy and resource efficiency, differentiation allows women's teams to access new markets, represent progressive values, and avoid negative associations sometimes tied to men's football. This dynamic was particularly visible in sponsorship management (RQ5) and internationalization strategies (RQ6), where alignment with the parent club amplified reach, but overly close associations sometimes risked diluting the unique appeal of the women's game (Bredikhina et al., 2025). The study therefore contributes to a more nuanced understanding of sport brand architecture strategy in sport (Bredikhina et al., 2025; Doyle et al., 2025; Kunkel et al., 2013), where brand architecture positioning is not a static choice, but an evolving process shaped by external pressures, internal capacity, and strategic intent.

Managerial Implications

Associations and federations

Clubs articulated a range of wishes to associations and federations focused on ensuring the sustainable growth of women's football without replicating the pitfalls of the men's game. First, several clubs emphasized the need to avoid extreme commercialization, expressing concerns that women's football could become capitalistic like the men's competitions. Instead, clubs urged associations and federations to foster fair, balanced, and socially responsible growth, potentially learning from U.S. sports models such as salary caps.

Financial support was a major theme. Clubs called for higher prize money in international competitions like the Women's Champions League, noting that current payouts barely cover travel expenses. Smaller clubs especially stressed the need for financial support beyond elite teams – potentially distributing prize money more equitably, not only to participating teams but also to support the wider ecosystem of women's football – to ensure that competitive balance is preserved and a second-tier competition can thrive. Clubs also requested greater investment in grassroots and youth development, emphasizing that growing the game at all levels is a social as well as sporting imperative.

New ideas for incentivizing player development were proposed, such as bonuses for clubs that field homegrown players during international competitions, or matching player development payments to clubs who develop youth players, to incentivize clubs investing in their youth teams. Lastly, concerns were raised about licensing policies that tie women's teams to men's clubs. Clubs cautioned that such strategies treat symptoms rather than causes and risk undermining the independent growth of women's clubs. Instead, associations and federations were urged to develop sustainable models that also enable standalone women's organizations to flourish.

Clubs

The findings underscore that clubs must approach the development of their women's football teams not as auxiliary projects but as strategic investments aligned with long-term brand building, diversification, and community engagement. Adopting a *startup mindset* with clear goals for eventual financial self-sufficiency can help structure initial resource allocation while leveraging existing organizational capabilities through shared infrastructure, medical staff, marketing channels, and operational expertise. Clubs should consider integrating women's football structurally within core departments (e.g., sport, marketing) to avoid silo effects and maximize alignment. At the same time, fostering a brand identity that is aligned yet distinct enables clubs to speak to new demographics and values-based audiences without diluting the overarching club brand. Financially, the creation of a flexible yet rigorous budgeting system that supports professionalization while linking funding to performance metrics can facilitate sustainable growth. Highlight matches in flagship stadiums offer a low-cost, high-return opportunity to boost visibility, engage broader fan bases, and drive revenue. Depending on the state of the club women's football may support international growth through leveraging

international players, partnerships, and marketing tours that extend reach, particularly when built on sporting success and meaningful brand narratives.

External stakeholders, such as sponsors and politics

External stakeholders play a pivotal role in enabling or constraining the strategic development of women's football. For sponsors, the women's game presents a differentiated brand opportunity rooted in authenticity, inclusion, and emerging consumer segments (e.g., Gen Z, women, families). Rather than applying men's football models, sponsors should embrace values-based positioning, collaborate with clubs to co-create activation strategies, and ensure fair resource allocation that reflects the distinctiveness of the women's product. Sponsors also benefit from athlete engagement levels, which tend to be higher than in men's football, particularly for activations and community engagement. For policymakers, the findings highlight the need to move beyond symbolic support toward enabling infrastructure access and funding mechanisms. Bureaucratic hurdles, such as difficulty accessing public stadiums should be addressed through regulatory reform and long-term facility agreements. Local governments can also incentivize youth development and community programs that integrate women's football as part of broader social inclusion and health strategies.

Limitations

This study presents three key limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, gaining access to senior decision-makers posed a challenge due to their demanding schedules, the strategic sensitivity of the topic, and a general reluctance to disclose internal brand positioning strategies. Notably, we were unable to secure interviews with representatives from clubs in the English Women's Super League (WSL), despite its status as one of the most advanced women's football leagues in Europe. However, to mitigate this gap, our sample included seven clubs that regularly participate in the UEFA Women's Champions League and six expert interviewees with direct strategic insights into English clubs through their roles as consultants or investors.

Second, the heterogeneity of European football posed analytical complexities. Differences in governance structures, investment levels, and the institutionalization of women's football across clubs and national contexts limited the generalizability of findings. In response,

we adopted a theoretical sampling approach, guided by the research questions and emergent themes. Multiple waves of data collection allowed us to capture a range of organizational types and structural configurations. While our analysis and presentation accounted for these variations, the structural diversity of European football nonetheless requires contextual consideration when implementing organizational changes.

Third, the women's football landscape is evolving rapidly. Several strategic recommendations mentioned by interviewees in earlier stages of data collection, such as the expansion of the UEFA Women's Champions League and increased prize money, have since been implemented. To address this, we employed a multi-wave research design, enabling us to track developments over time and focus on enduring organizational patterns rather than transient practices. This allowed us to discuss these changes with respondents in later waves, who mentioned continued development related to organizational changes and prize money is required. Thus, the fast-paced evolution of the women's football industry may render some findings temporally bound, and future research should continue to revisit and refine insights as the women's game matures.

Conclusion

This research provides a comprehensive, multi-level analysis of how European football clubs are positioning, funding, and integrating women's football within their broader organizational strategies. Drawing on rich qualitative data from executives and experts across a diverse range of national contexts, the findings reveal that while clubs are increasingly treating their women's teams as strategic assets, the pace and depth of integration vary significantly. Some clubs pursue a proactive, brand-driven approach, embedding women's football into long-term commercial and social goals, while others adopt more cautious, resource-constrained models. The study highlights that structural alignment, leadership commitment, and access to shared resources are critical enablers of growth, while fragmented governance and inconsistent stakeholder support continue to limit progress in many settings. Importantly, external stakeholders, such as sponsors, federations, and political actors, play a dual role as both facilitators and gatekeepers of sustainable development. The research contributes to our theoretical understanding of strategy and resource allocation within brand architecture research by outlining how sport organizations manage multi-brand portfolios in evolving markets. The

women's football team is not merely a developmental add-on but a valuable organizational sub-brand capable of delivering commercial growth, brand differentiation, and social legitimacy. In the words of Participant 17: "The women's team adds a lot of value to the overall club. There's pride and identity. There's reaching new audiences – or reaching the same audiences with different value propositions and experiences. There is providing social value because you're able to engage more with young girls or women. There is commercial value because you open the doors to different sponsors who maybe wouldn't go into men's football or to sponsors who want to invest more by supporting women's football. You provide value from a valuation perspective to the overall club because for many potential investors, it's important that there's a woman team that's looked after and that you provide a sense of identity. So I think the women's team provides value in more than one way, some are more measurable than others." As women's football continues to professionalize and expand, both clubs and external stakeholders must align strategic intent with resource commitment, ensuring that the future of the women's game is built on integration, equity, and long-term vision rather than symbolic gestures or short-term fixes.

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