THE FAME GAP

How athlete fame can **unlock growth**
in women's sport

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Contents

Introduction

As an integrated agency for brands in sport, there's one question we've been asked repeatedly over the past year: 'How do we make women's sport unmissable?'.

Getting bums on seats (or butts, depending on which side of the Atlantic you're on) remains such a challenge that, despite its phenomenal growth over the past decade, many areas of women's sport remain in a precarious financial and commercial position.

Our new research, in partnership with Appinio, validates our hypothesis that female athletes' lack of fame is not only a barrier to making games unmissable but that female athletes aren't as famous *even among fans of the competitions they play in* compared to their male counterparts.

We call this discrepancy **The Fame Gap.**

The Fame Gap has significant implications for rights holders and sponsors as they seek to maximise the long–term commercial value of women's sport.

In this report, we identify the role of athlete fame in driving growth, the size of the Fame Gap, how it varies across markets and sports, and how to market female athletes to fans of female sport.

A 'lift and shift' approach from the men's game won't suffice.

What this study doesn't explore is why the Fame Gap exists. We are a marketing agency, not a civil rights organisation, and there are social scientists far more qualified than us to explain it.

What we are qualified to explore is how to market sport effectively. We're conscious that women's sport wouldn't be where it is today without the tireless work of women whose dedication and passion must never be forgotten. We hope our research can help take it to ever greater heights.

Rory Natkiel
Head of Strategy,
Sid Lee London

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Executive Summary

This report summarises research across eight sporting properties; in the UK, the English Premier League and Women's Super League, and the Six Nations and Women's Six Nations. In the US, Major League Soccer and the National Women's Soccer League, and the NBA and WNBA. The findings highlight the significant role of athlete fame in drawing audiences to women's sport and reveal a notable fame gap between male and female athletes.

Key findings include:

- The fame of individual athletes is an important tool in in driving attendance in women's sport. Fans were 51% more likely to be influenced to follow women's sport by buzz about individual athletes on social media than fans of male sport.

- Athlete fame is nearly as important as team support in driving attendance at women's sports, especially in leagues like the WNBA. In contrast, team rivalries and atmosphere dominate in men's sports.

- A Fame Gap exists, with a 14.8% difference in unprompted awareness between top male and female athletes, compounded by a 96% discrepancy in Instagram followings, resulting in a combined fame gap of 72.06%.

51%
MORE LIKELY
to be *INFLUENCED* to follow *women's sport* by buzz around individual athletes on social media than fans of male sport
—
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This represents a *'Fame Trap'* for women's sport: what would **most help** it to grow is what it lacks compared to men's sport.

The research also found that fans of women's sports engage more through digital channels. They are more likely to follow athletes and teams on social media, and less likely to watch live broadcasts. When building the profile of female athletes, qualities such as being role models, advocacy, and non-sport media appearances are valued more than among fans of men's sport.

The research suggests that women's sport marketing should neither replicate men's sport marketing strategies nor focus on directly challenging inequality. Instead, rights holders should focus on building female athletes' profiles to boost fan engagement and match-day attendance, while sponsors should prioritise investing in female athlete fame to maximise ROI.

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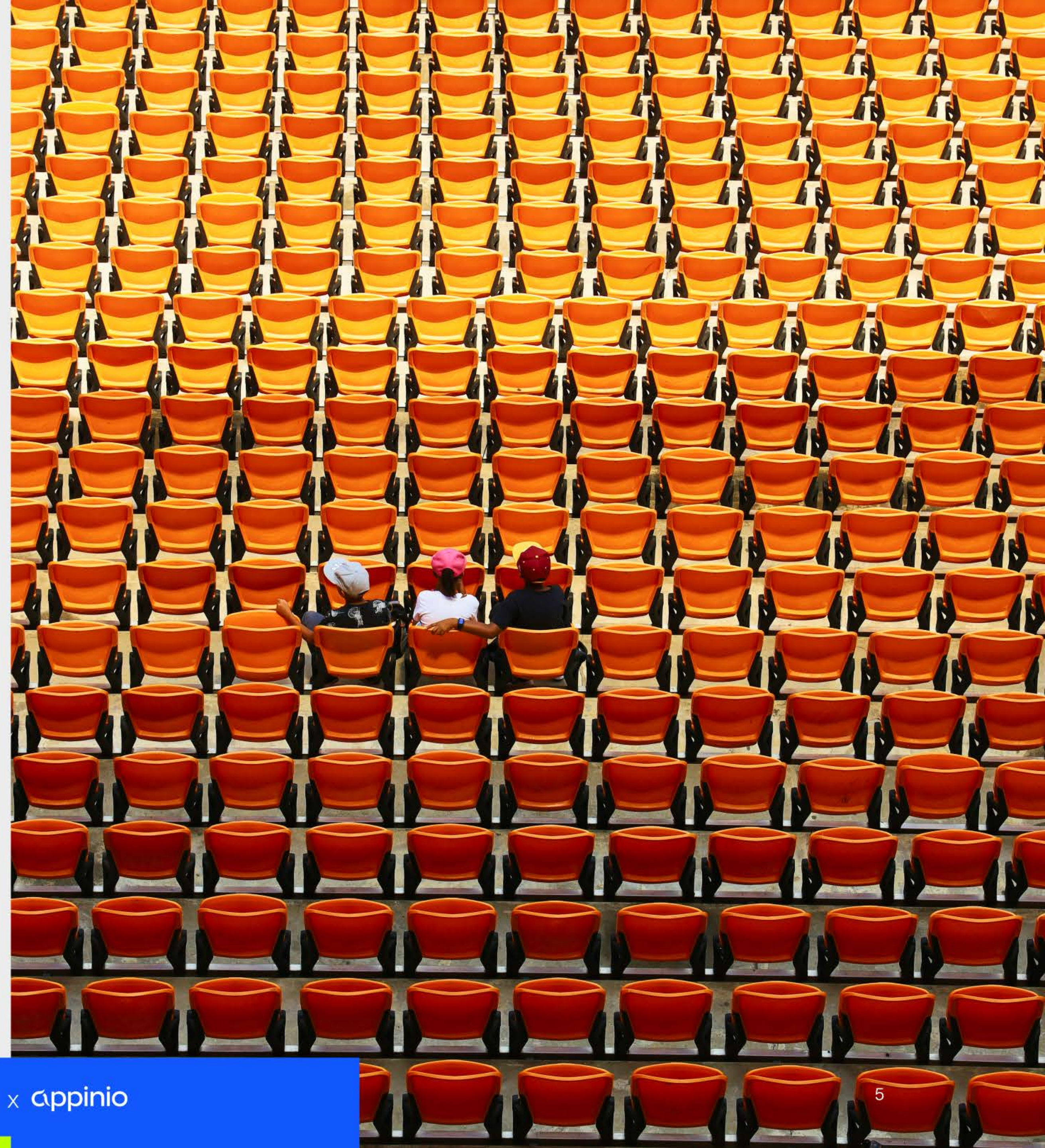
Data and methodology

To understand the *Fame Gap* between male and female athletes, we conducted a multi-faceted study using fan surveys, statistical analyses, and social media metrics.

Survey Methodology

We surveyed 1,400 fans in the UK and US who followed one of eight major sports competitions. Running from August 7th to August 19th, 2024, the survey explored fan engagement through 29 questions, offering a well-rounded perspective.

Unprompted Awareness

Fans were asked to identify the top three scorers from the previous season. This revealed a 14.8% recognition gap between male and female athletes, though it had limitations by only focusing on top scorers.

Statistical Analysis

We used t-tests and effect size (Cohen's d) to analyse the data. While not significant in some cases, a striking gap was identified broadly. Cohen's also showed moderate engagement differences, with women's sports fans more likely to engage digitally.

Social Media Metrics

Analysing Instagram followings of the 20 most-followed players in each of the eight competitions revealed a 96.6% fame gap between male and female athletes.

Combined Fame Gap

By integrating unprompted awareness and social media data, we calculated a fame gap of 72.06%, emphasising the dual challenges female athletes face in gaining recognition.

Fan Behaviour Analysis

Fans of women's sport showed significantly more digital engagement, reflecting a personal connection with athletes. Z-tests identified that fans value social media presence, advocacy, and media appearances more in women's sports.

Limitations and Context

While the study validated the fame gap's existence, it wasn't designed to measure its exact scale. Combining unprompted awareness and social media metrics, we provide a comprehensive view with actionable insights to address the gap.

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1.
FAME
ATTRACTS
FANS

–
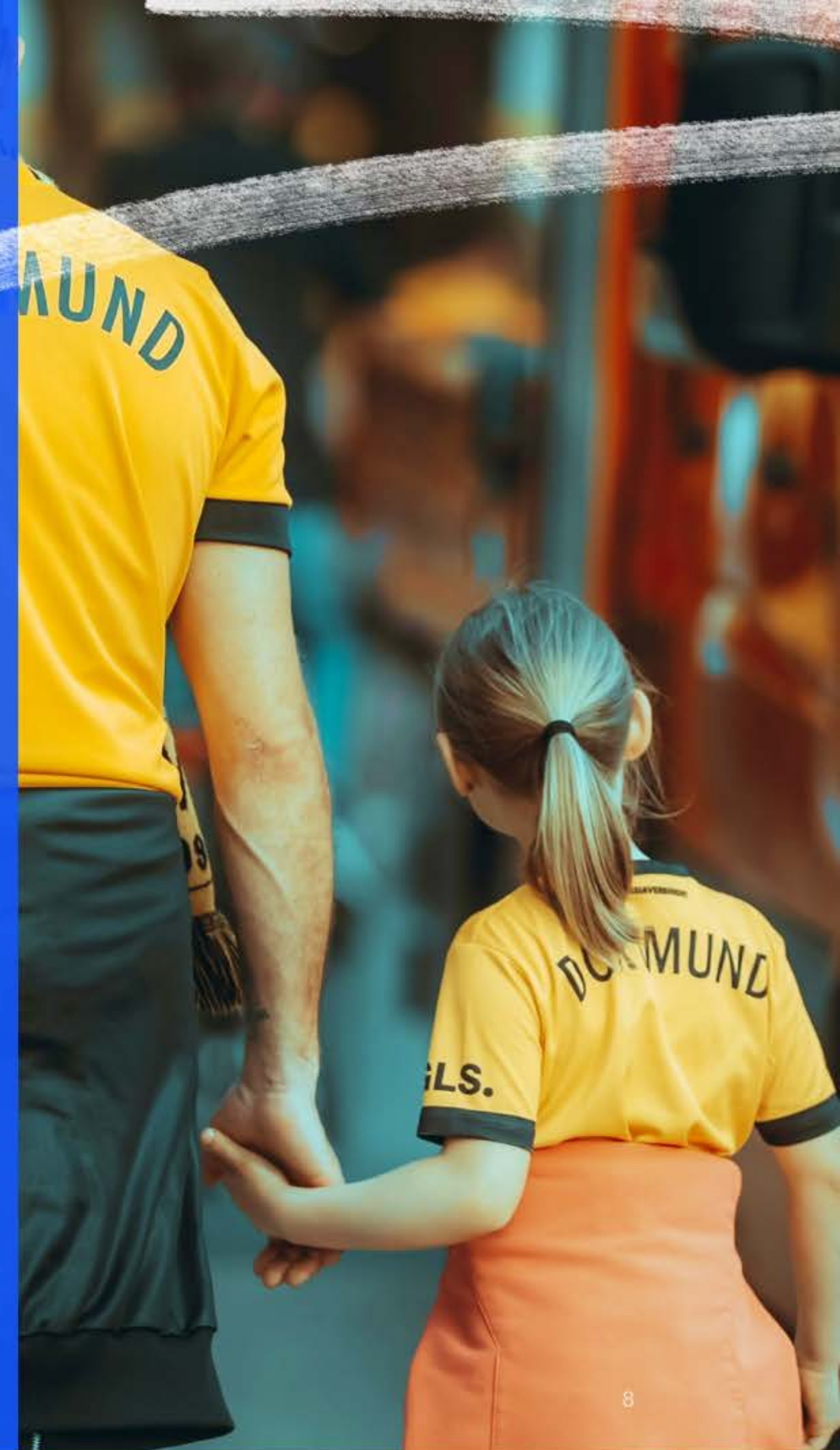
"
Honestly,
Caitlin Clarke is what drew
me ***into*** the WNMBA

-

WNBA fan, 55, US

In women's sport, *athlete fame* is a significant driver for attracting new fans, more so than in men's sport.

Fans of women's sport are 51.4% more likely to start following a competition due to **social media buzz about an individual athlete.**

Fame attracts fans

While participation-related reasons ("I currently practice the sport competitively" and "I currently practice the sport for fun") show similar influence across men's and women's sport, fame-related factors reveal a stark contrast.

Women's sports fans are significantly less likely to be influenced by friends and family, but significantly more likely to be influenced by fame aspects, such as relating to an athlete's backstory, liking an athlete's personality, and buzz about athletes on social media.

The "Fame" category collectively shows a statistically significant difference between men's and women's sports fans, suggesting that social media presence and athlete narratives substantially attract fans of women's sport.

GET INTO

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Fame attracts fans

Thinking about when you first started following the [competition], what influenced you to follow it?

Fame factors

Data by category (Men's Sport Fans / Women's Sport Fans):

Category	Men's Sport Fans	Women's Sport Fans
I currently (or used to) practice the sport myself competitively	15.7%	16.1%
I currently (or used to) practice the sport myself for fun	20.7%	18.7%
Friends / family members influenced me to start following it	52.3%	36.7%
Because an athlete broke records in the sport	7.9%	11.3%
Because a team broke records in the sport	9.4%	11.3%
Because I like an athlete and relate to their backstory	16.3%	20.4%
Because I like an athlete's personality	17.4%	23.7%
There was buzz about one of the athletes on social media / in the news	12.9%	26.4%
There was buzz about the sport on social media / in the news	17.7%	29.3%

■ Men's Sport Fans   ■ Women's Sport Fans

The importance of social buzz

Social media buzz about a star player can be a game-changer, particularly in the US.

US fans overall show a higher susceptibility to social media buzz compared to UK fans.
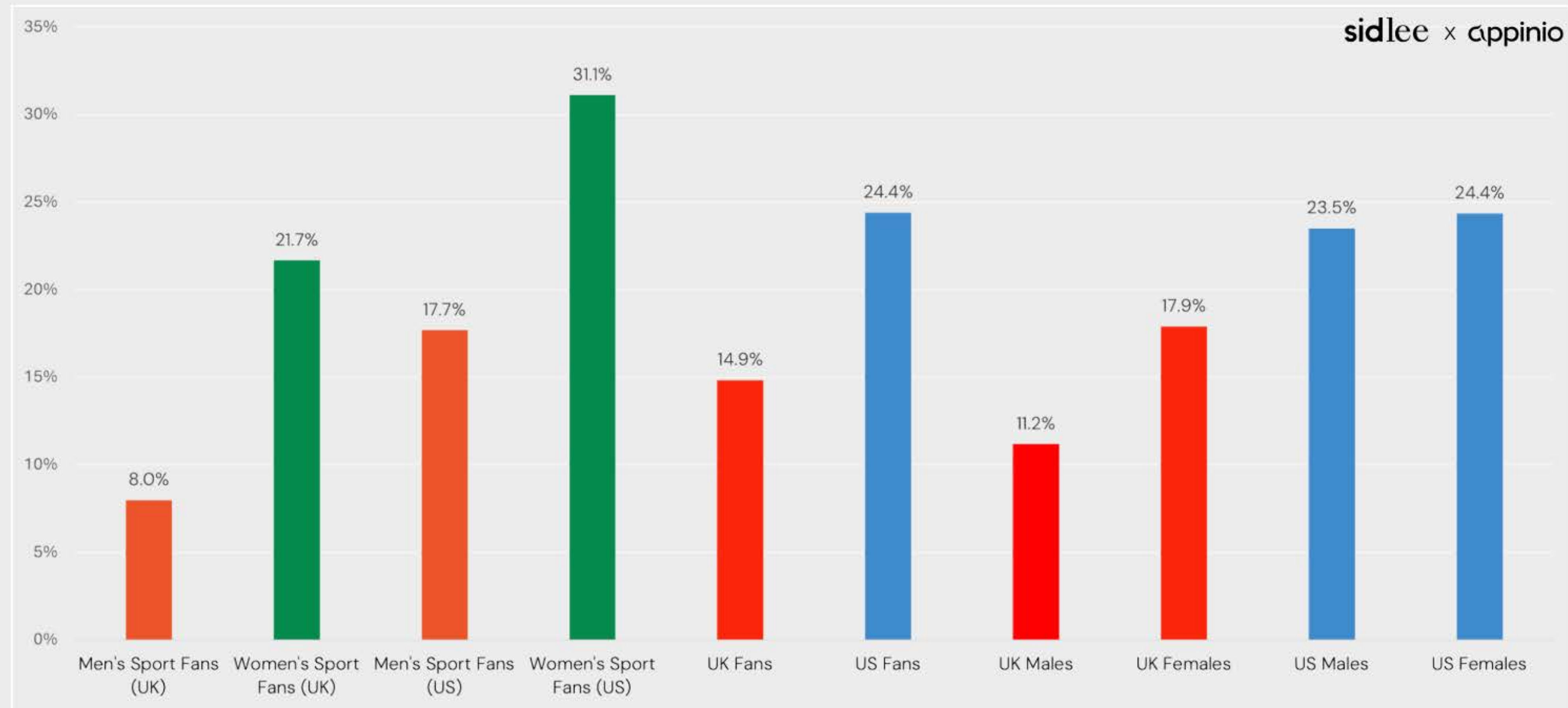
Women's sports fans, both in the UK and the US, are consistently more influenced by athlete buzz than their male counterparts.

These findings further highlight the impact of athlete fame on sports fandom dynamics.

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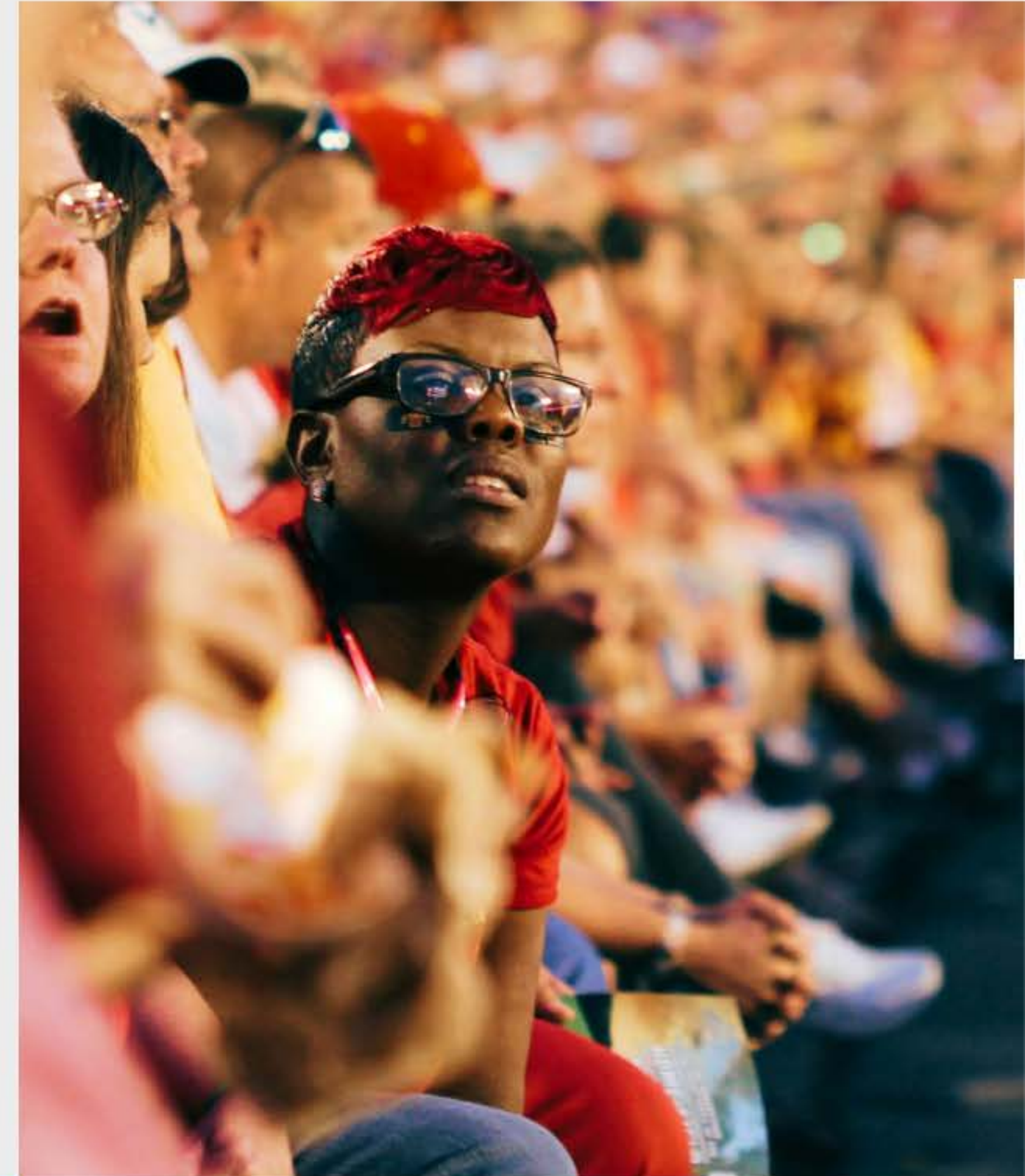
The importance of social buzz

There was a buzz about one of the athletes on social media/in the news

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Chart — "There was a buzz about one of the athletes on social media/in the news":

- Men's Sport Fans (UK): 8.0%
- Women's Sport Fans (UK): 21.7%
- Men's Sport Fans (US): 17.7%
- Women's Sport Fans (US): 31.1%
- UK Fans: 14.9%
- US Fans: 24.4%
- UK Males: 11.2%
- UK Females: 17.9%
- US Males: 23.5%
- US Females: 24.4%

UNRIVALED

2.
FAME *SELLS* TICKETS

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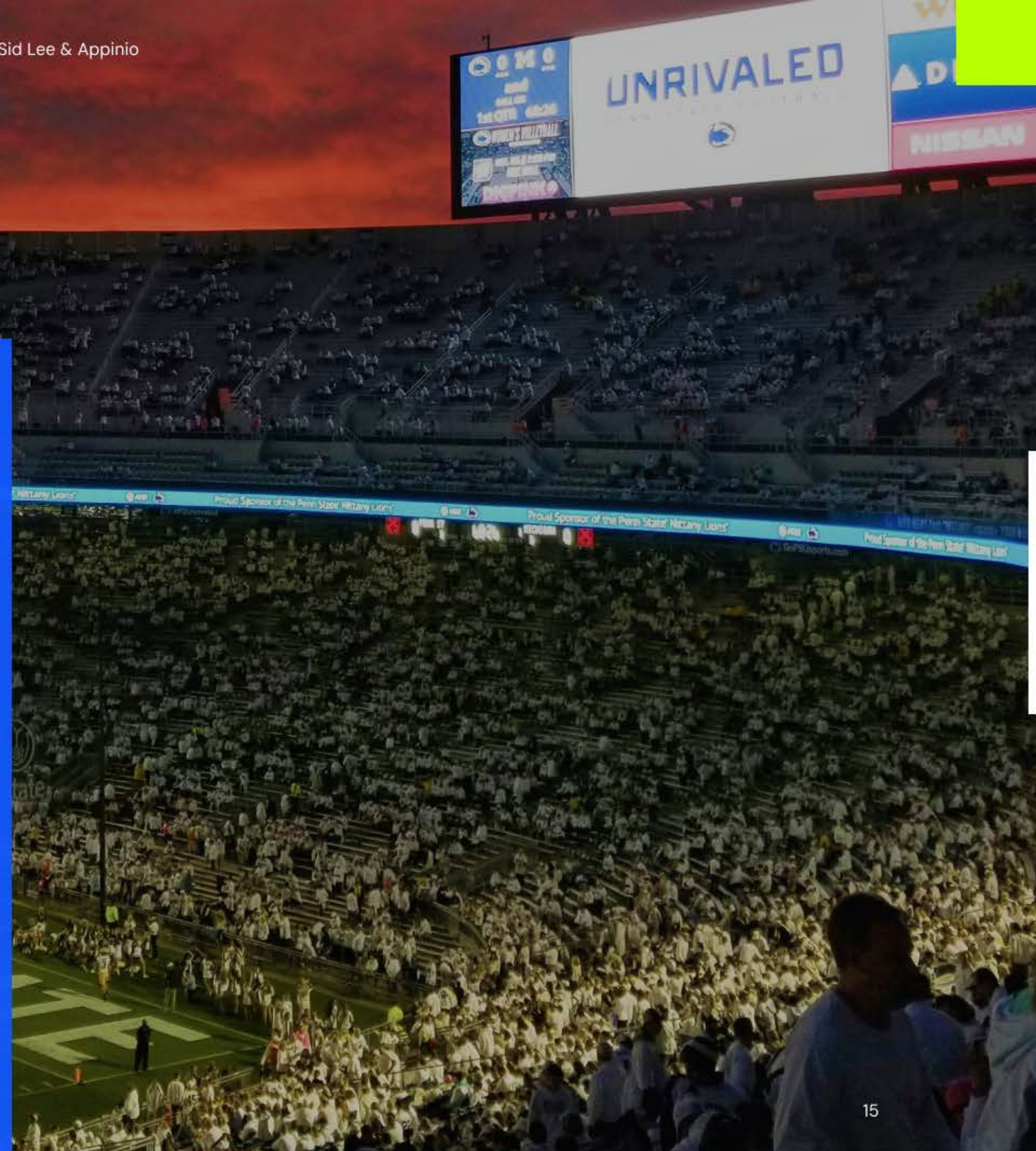
The presence of famous players is a _more important driver_ of intent to attend in women's sport than to men's.

Attendees of women's sport are more influenced by individual athlete's fame than team rivalries or match stakes.

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"

I love
Alexia Putellas's
unending passion
and skills, which makes me
attend more games.

-

WSL fan, 27, UK

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Fame sells tickets

Want more bums on seats at women's sport events? The importance of fame is clear to see.

In this Max–Diff analysis of attendance drivers, the 'fame factors' of talented and/or favoured athletes competing are the **only two** factors that are more important to fans of women's sport than fans of men's.

There is a stark contrast in the 3.6 PPT gap in importance between team support and talented players in women's sport (36.1% vs 32.7%), and the 13.6 PPT gap in men's sport (42.5% vs 28.9%).

Indicate which factors you consider the <u>least important</u> and the <u>most important</u> when deciding whether to attend a [competition] event in person.

Men's Sport Fans (Total)	Max–Diff Score	Women's Sport Fans (Total)	Max–Diff Score
Affordable tickets	48.0%	Affordable tickets	41.3%
Support for a team playing	42.5%	Support for a team playing	36.1%
Talented and skilled players are playing	28.9%	Talented and skilled players are playing	32.7%
The expectation of a good atmosphere	19.6%	My favourite player is playing	23.5%
There's a lot at stake in the match	19.6%	The expectation of a good atmosphere	14.2%
My favourite player is playing	16.0%	Rivalries between the teams playing	11.5%
Friends or family are going	14.7%	Friends or family are going	10.2%
Rivalries between the teams playing	13.7%	There's a lot at stake in the match	9.5%
Famous players are playing	9.6%	Famous players are playing	7.7%
The current form of the teams playing	6.0%	The current form of the teams playing	4.6%

Fame wins in the USA

It is when we look at the US that we see the clearest impact of fame.

Women's sport in the US is unique in athlete fame outranking team support in importance, and coming very close to ticket affordability as the most important.

Our initial finding of the overall importance of athlete fame within the US market is also confirmed here.
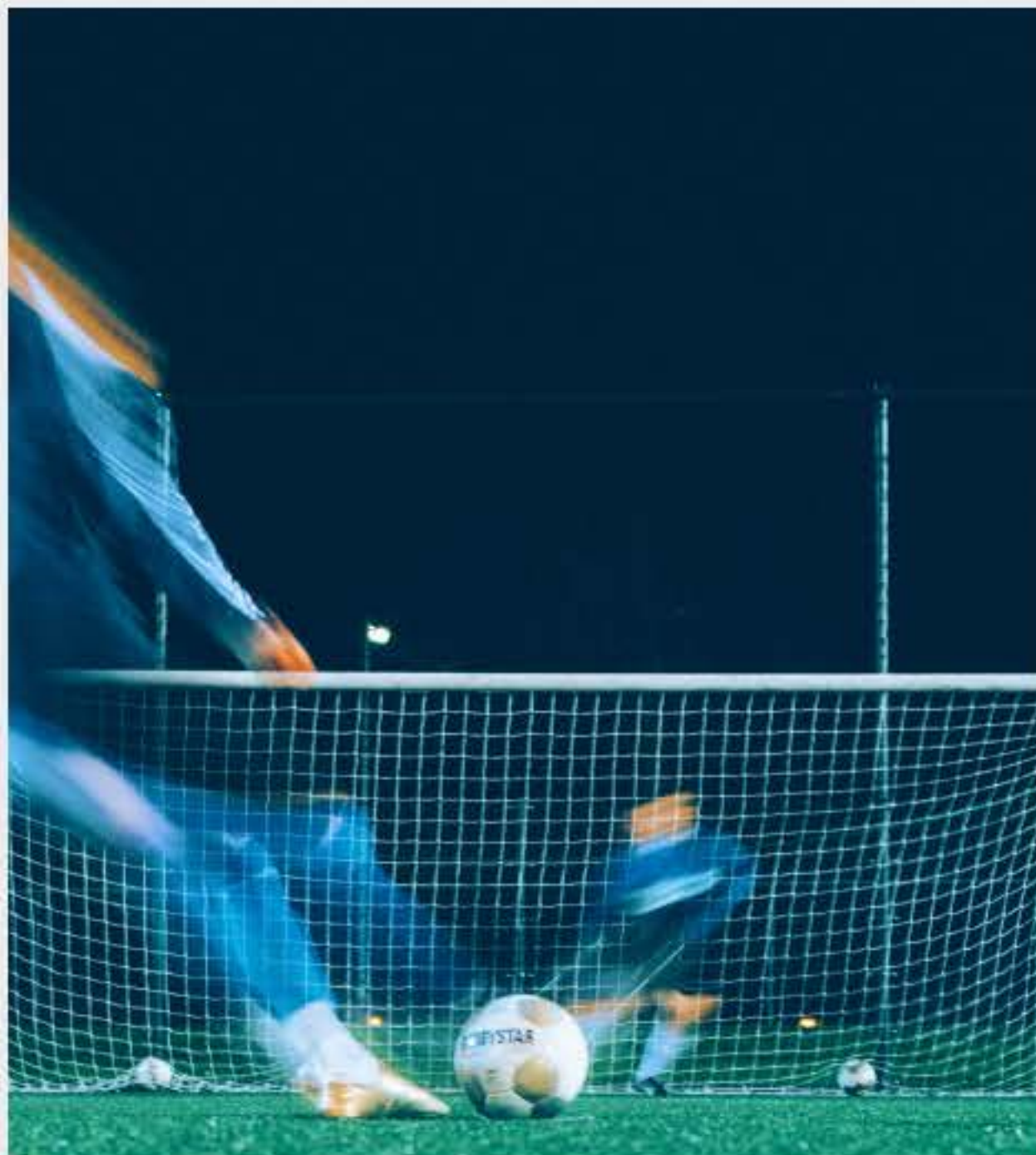
Indicate which factors you consider the <u>least important</u> and the <u>most important</u> when deciding whether to attend a [competition] event in person.

| Men's Sport Fans (US)	Max-Diff Score	Women's Sport Fans (US)	Max-Diff Score
Affordable tickets	37.4%	Affordable tickets	38.1%
Support for a team playing	33.3%	Talented and skilled players are playing	36.5%
Talented and skilled players are playing	31.8%	My favourite player is playing	30.5%
My favourite player is playing	26.9%	Support for a team playing	28.2%
Famous players are playing	16.9%	There's a lot at stake in the match	17.5%
Rivalries between the teams playing	13.8%	The expectation of a good atmosphere	12.4%
There's a lot at stake in the match	12.5%	Famous players are playing	11.2%
The expectation of a good atmosphere	9.4%	Rivalries between the teams playing	7.6%
Friends or family are going	8.4%	Friends or family are going	5.3%
The current form of the teams playing	4.3%	The current form of the teams playing	-0.4%

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Fame still key in UK

While the role of fame is less pronounced in the UK, there is a clear difference in its importance in women's sport compared to men's.

Indicate which factors you consider the <u>least important</u> and the <u>most important</u> when deciding whether to attend a [competition] event in person.

Men's Sport Fans (UK)	Max-Diff Score	Women's Sport Fans (UK)	Max-Diff Score
Affordable tickets	58.4%	Affordable tickets	44.4%
Support for a team playing	51.7%	Support for a team playing	43.8%
The expectation of a good atmosphere	30.2%	Talented and skilled players are playing	29.0%
There's a lot at stake in the match	26.7%	The expectation of a good atmosphere	23.5%
Talented and skilled players are playing	26.1%	My favourite player is playing	16.5%
Friends or family are going	20.8%	There's a lot at stake in the match	11.4%
Rivalries between the teams playing	13.6%	The current form of the teams playing	9.6%
The current form of the teams playing	7.7%	Friends or family are going	9.1%
My favourite player is playing	4.2%	Rivalries between the teams playing	5.3%
Famous players are playing	2.9%	Famous players are playing	3.3%
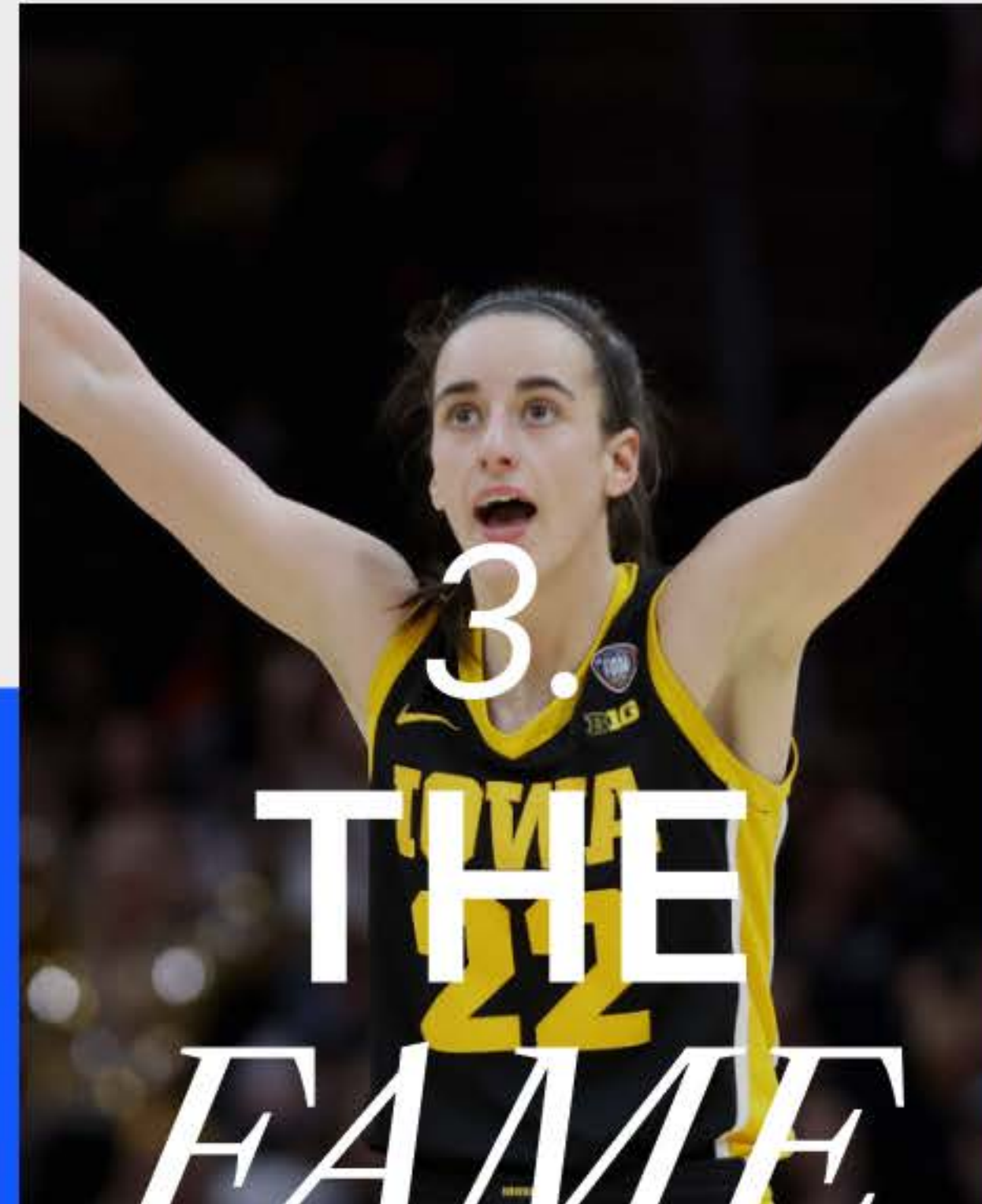
3.
THE
FAME
GAP
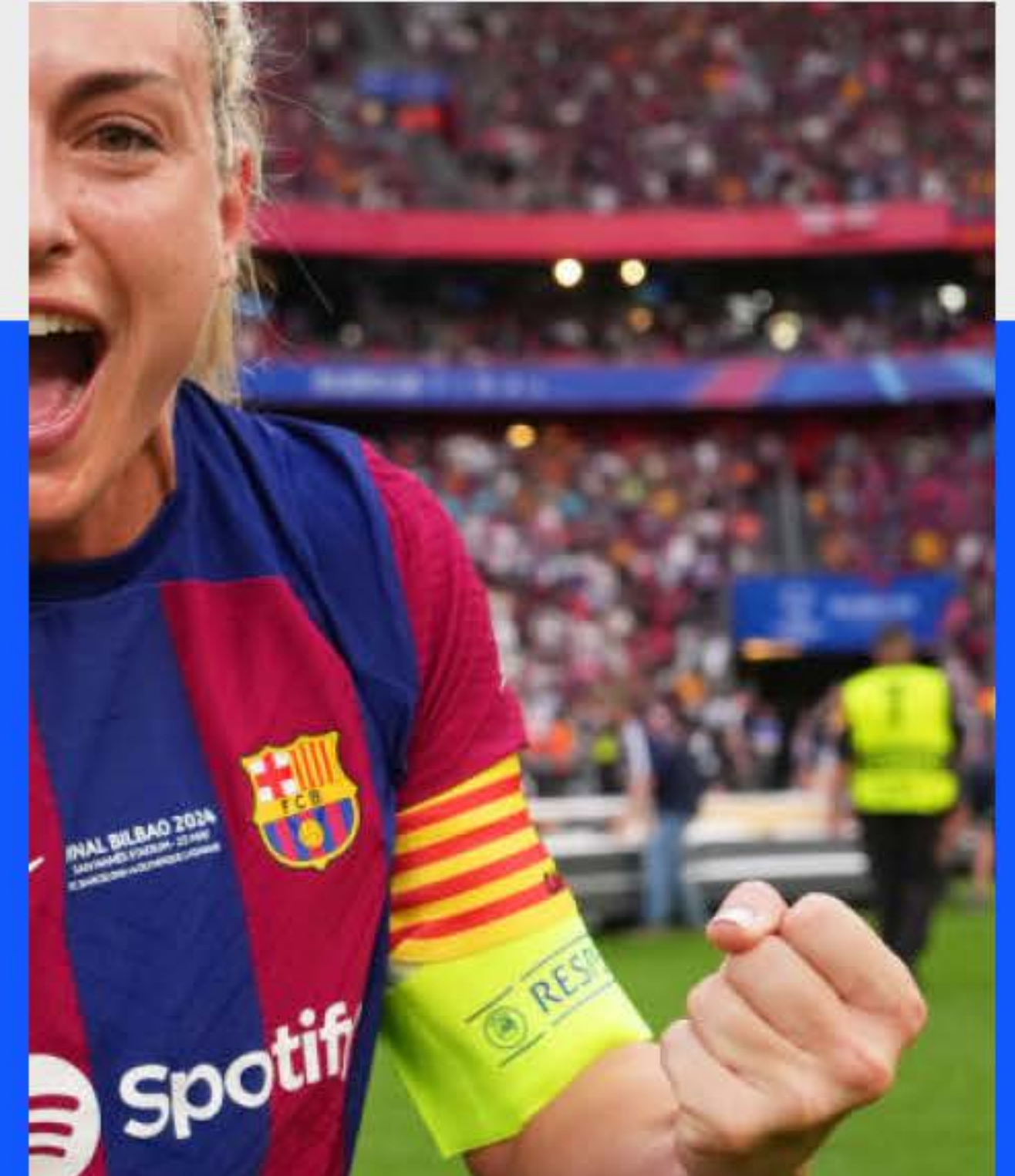
There is big hype about men's soccer, I never hear anything about the women's league.

-

NWSL fan, 50, US

72.06%

The combined Fame Gap between male and female athletes, when we incorporate both unprompted awareness and Instagram followings

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Understanding the Fame Gap

To explore the Fame Gap, we began with unprompted awareness, asking fans of each competition to name the top three scorers from the previous year's tournaments. This was to gain a basic understanding of the gap.

Focusing on the top three scorers allowed us to create a level playing field for comparing fame between male and female athletes across various competitions, ensuring equity across the different competitions within the survey.

Top scorers are often the most visible athletes, central to media coverage and fan conversations, regardless of the sport.

However this method had its limitations. For example, Lionel Messi was not one of the players featured in the MLS survey. These results indicate that there is a large Fame Gap, with male athletes generally more recognised. This prompted us to look further into the metrics to understand the Fame Gap better.

Male sport (average) **38.29%**
Female sport (average) **23.48%**
Fame Gap **14.81%**

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The Fame gap in detail

We examined fame scores by specific sports and regions to further explore the Fame Gap. While the analyses found notable gaps in unprompted awares in UK football and US basketball, they were not statistically significant. This doesn't imply full equality in fame – only that the observed differences in this dataset weren't strong enough to be considered statistically significant.

What is the name of this player?

WNBA	Arike Ogunbowale	19.43%
	Kahleah Copper	20.00%
	A'ja Wilson	42.86%
	27.43%

NBA	Giannis Antetokounmpo	59.43%
	Luka Doncic	56.57%
	Shai Gilgeous-Alexander	33.71%
	49.90%

MLS	Christian Benteke	24.57%
	Cristian Arango	22.29%
	Denis Bouanga	18.29%
	21.71%

NWSL	Temwa Chawinga	13.71%
	Barbra Banda	10.86%
	Sophia Smith	30.29%
	18.29%

W6N	Jess Breach	13.14%
	Abigail Dow	14.86%
	Ellie Kildunne	23.43%
	17.14%

6N	Duhan Van De Merwe	26.29%
	Dan Sheehan	9.71%
	James Lowe	15.43%
	17.14%

PL	Alexsader Isak	43.43%
	Erling Haaland	86.86%
	Cole Palmer	62.86%
	64.38%

WSL	Khadija Shaw	27.43%
	Lauren James	61.71%
	Elizabeth Terland	4.00%
	31.05%

The fame gap by sport

US Soccer (MLS v NWSL)	**3.43%**
US Basketball (NBA v WNBA)	**3.43%**
UK Football (EPL v WSL)	**33.33%**
UK Rugby (6N v Q6N)	**0.00%**

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What's going on with Rugby?

While we saw no gap in rugby that doesn't mean it isn't there. But the awareness scores were low in both the men's and women's Six Nations, suggesting that rugby itself may have a Fame Problem.

Looking at Instagram

To gain more insight, we turned to Instagram followings, a crucial metric in today's sporting world. By examining the Instagram followers of the 20 most–followed athletes in each competition, we aimed to fill in the gaps left by our initial method.

Male Athletes: **21.4 million followers on average**

Female Athletes: **728,543 followers on average**

This revealed a striking and statistically significant gap of 96.6%. Unlike the unprompted awareness results, which suggested a difference, the Instagram data confirmed it. The vast disparity in social media followings highlighted the challenges female athletes face in building fame to the level of their male counterparts. It showed that while unprompted awareness offered a starting point, social media metrics provided a fuller picture of how fame plays out in modern sports fandom.

What does this all mean?
Using the top three scorers across each competition gave us a fair and focused lens to gain an initial understanding of the Fame Gap, confirming our hypothesis that a gap existed. However, when we expanded our scope to include social media metrics, the Fame Gap became unmistakable. The Instagram data didn't just hint at a difference, it confirmed a substantial fame disparity that female athletes continue to face, highlighting the multifaceted nature of fame in sports today.

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Instagram followings

EPL	#	WSL	#	6 Nations	#	W6N	#
Mohamed Salah	63,296,140	Sam Kerr	1,700,000	Antoine Dupont	1,000,000	Ellie Kildunne	55,600
Erling Haaland	38,600,960	Leah Williamson	1,100,000	Romain Ntamack	498,000	Emily Scarratt	48,200
Kevin De Bruyne	26,460,875	Chloe Kelly	868,000	Joe Marler	419,000	Holly Aitchinson	35,800
Gabriel Jesus	23,029,653	Alessia Russo	863,000	Owen Farrell	359,000	Romane Menager	33,800
Richarlison	22,980,996	Lauren James	845,000	Johnny Sexton	325,000	Natasha Hunt	27,800
Casemiro	22,492,436	Lucy Bronze	806,000	Maro Itoje	322,000	Pauline Bourdon Sansus	27,700
Marcus Rashford	17,136,457	Ella Toone	742,000	Peter O'Mahony	301,000	Marlie Packer	25,500
Julián Álvarez	16,595,801	Alex Greenwood	567,000	Marcus Smith	280,000	Sarah Hunter	23,800
Virgil van Dijk	15,876,226	Vivianne Miedma	513,000	Damian Penaud	270,000	Zoe Harrison	22,300
Emiliano Martínez	14,619,669	Rachel Daly	462,000	Connor Murray	265,000	Gaelle Hermet	20,200
Son Heung-min	14,419,229	Millie Bright	453,000	Leigh Halfpenny	230,000	Jasmine Joyce	20,000
Phil Foden	12,373,547	Mary Fowler	424,000	Ange Capuzzo	218,000	Caroline Droulin	18,000
Lucas Paquetá	11,788,962	Katie Mccabe	406,000	George North	214,000	Megan Jones	17,000
Trent Alexander-Arnold	11,567,495	Lauren Hemp	377,000	Danny Care	198,000	Abbie Ward	16,900
Alejandro Garnacho	11,338,534	Zecira Musovic	335,000	Thomas Ramos	178,000	Poppy Cleall	16,700
Enzo Fernández	11,316,057	Bethany England	265,000	Courtney Lawes	170,000	Abby Dow	16,200
Willian	10,851,945	Guro Reiten	233,000	Finn Russell	153,000	Hannah Botterman	15,000
Raheem Sterling	10,811,394	Yui Hasegawa	205,000	Tom Curry	144,000	Rhona Lloyd	14,500
Antony	10,307,061	Erin Cuthbert	173,000	Robbie Henshaw	139,000	Sarah Bern	14,100
Jadon Sancho	10,254,661	Bunny Shaw	137,000	Kyle Sinclair	134,000	Gabrielle Vernier	7,323
Average	**18,805,905**	**Average**	**573,700**	**Average**	**290,850**	**Average**	**23,821**

NBA	#	WNBA	#	MLS	#	NWSL	#
LeBron James	159,982,038	Angel Reese	4,200,000	Messi	484,000,000	Alex Morgan	10,000,000
Stephen Curry	58,124,997	Caitlin Clark	2,900,000	Luis Suarez	48,900,000	Marta	2,900,000
Russell Westbrook	22,987,351	Te'a Cooper	2,600,000	Marco Rues	15,700,000	Megan Rapinoe	2,000,000
Kyrie Irving	20,089,587	Paige Bueckers	2,000,000	Douglas Costa	6,200,000	Asisat Oshoala	1,300,000
Lonzo Ball	18,147,639	Sabrina Lonescu	1,300,000	Giorgio Chiellini	5,300,000	Kelley O'Hara	814,000
Klay Thompson	17,124,644	Cameron Brink	1,300,000	Riqui Puig	2,900,000	Christen Press	759,000
Giannis Antetokounmpo	16,071,973	Kelsey Plum	1,200,000	Federico Bernardeschi	2,900,000	Mallory Pugh Swanson	698,000
Kevin Durant	13,762,678	A'ja Wilson	1,200,000	Xherdan Shaqiri	2,800,000	Rose Lavelle	579,000
Chris Paul	11,706,031	Candace Parker	1,100,000	Lorenzo Insigne	2,100,000	Debinha	523,000
Damian Lillard	10,326,222	Skylar Diggins-Smith	1,000,000	Carlos Vela	1,700,000	Trinity Rodman	485,000
Paul George	10,225,904	Juju Watkins	970,000	Thiago Almada	1,500,000	Sophia Smith	447,000
LaMelo Ball	10,186,366	Sue Bird	775,000	Josef Martinez	1,200,000	Crystal Dunn	347,000
Jimmy Butler	9,949,264	Britney Griner	755,000	Sebastian Driussi	1,000,000	Michelle Alozie	323,000
Ja Morant	9,775,605	Elena Delle Donne	445,000	Gabriel Pec	1,000,000	MacKenzie Arnold	288,000
Luka Doncic	9,381,701	Breanna Stewart	430,000	Christian Benteke	654,000	Amandine Henry	252,000
Bronny James	8,122,143	Lisa Leslie	320,000	Cucho Hernandez	406,000	Alyssa Naeher	242,000
Joel Embiid	7,621,539	Aliyah Boston	316,000	Facu Torres	346,000	Leicy Santos	237,000
Ben Simmons	7,421,651	Maya Moore	282,000	Federico Redondo	338,000	Becky Sauerbrunn	235,000
Jayson Tatum	7,216,668	Arike Ogunbowale	281,000	Aleksey Miranchuk	298,000	Meghan Klingenberg	217,000
Devin Booker	5,767,399	Naphessa Collier	142,000	Marlon Santos	226,000	Rafaelle Souza	171,000
Average	**21,699,570**	**Average**	**1,175,800**	**Average**	**138,700,000**	**Average**	**1,140,850**

(Correct as of Sept 16 2024)

Creating a combined score

Combining the Fame Gap from unprompted awareness (14.8%) and social media metrics (96.6%) into a single number is challenging because they measure fame in fundamentally different ways. However, one approach is to create a combined metric is to calculate a weighted average of the two gaps.

Given that the unprompted awareness results reflect opinions from a knowledgeable audience, they carry a certain weight of credibility. However, the stark contrast with social media metrics, which provide a broader measure of fame, still shows a substantial gap.

Given the importance of both measures

1. Unprompted Awareness
Reflects recognition among informed fans: 30% weight.

2. Social Media Metrics:
Reflects general visibility and digital presence: 70% weight.

72.06%

Combined Fame Gap =

$(0.3 \times 14.8\%) + (0.7 \times 96.6\%) = 4.44\% + 67.62\% = 72.06\%$

The **72.06%** combined Fame Gap highlights a two-layered challenge:

Core Fan Base: Female athletes are under-recognised even among dedicated fans.

Wider Audience: This lack of recognition becomes far more pronounced in the digital world, where broader visibility is crucial for fame and commercial success.

4.
THE
FAME
TRAP

The trap

This all combines to trap women's sport in a vicious cycle. One in which fame is paramount to its growth, but is also the crucial element it lacks compared to men's sport.

To break the cycle, a different approach is needed.

Women's sport is a different game not only on the pitch but also off the pitch.

The good news is that our research has also identified potential strategies to get women's sport out of the Fame Trap.

THE
FAME
TRAP

Women's sport needs famous athletes to grow

The Fame Gap means there are fewer famous female athletes

Sponsorship investment goes to male athletes

The Fame Gap persists hampering fan acquisition

Commercial growth is limited

5.
SOCIAL
FIRST
FANDOMS

Fans of women's sport are more likely to follow players on social media and take part in online communities.

There's a consistent pattern of increased future engagement through digital channels among women's sport fans.

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"

Amy Cocayne
is my favourite player.
She's highly skilled
and her social media is engaging.

–

Women's 6 Nations fan, 27, UK

Social-first fandoms

Our analysis showed that, statistically, fans of women's sport are significantly more likely to seek out and follow individual players on social media.

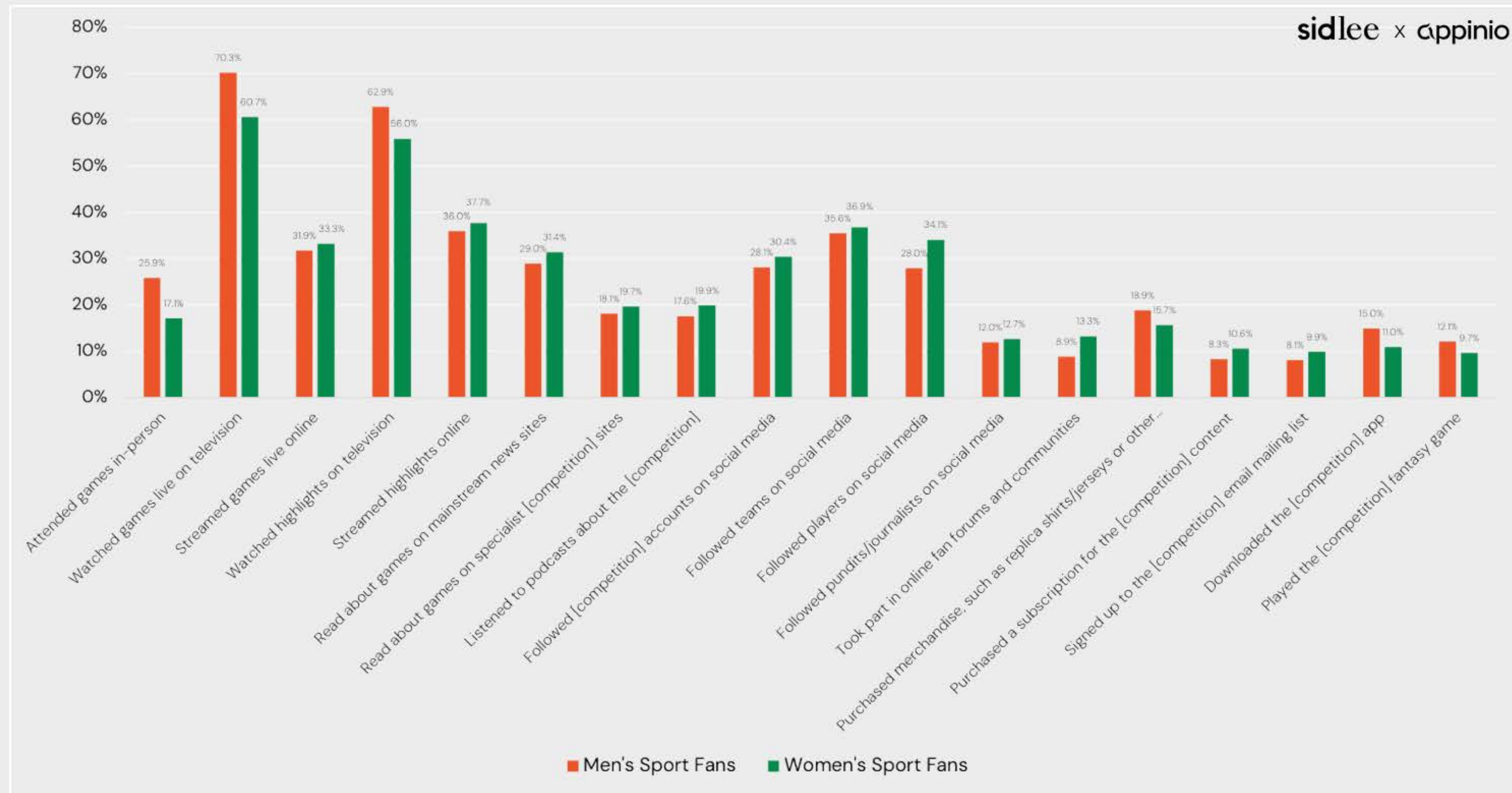This preference suggests a strong desire for direct interaction and offers a strategic pathway to building the fame of female athletes and, in turn, the competitions they play in.

The analysis also indicated a significant difference in participation in online forums and communities among fans of women's sports. This digital–first mindset presents an opportunity to foster vibrant online communities centred around female athletes.
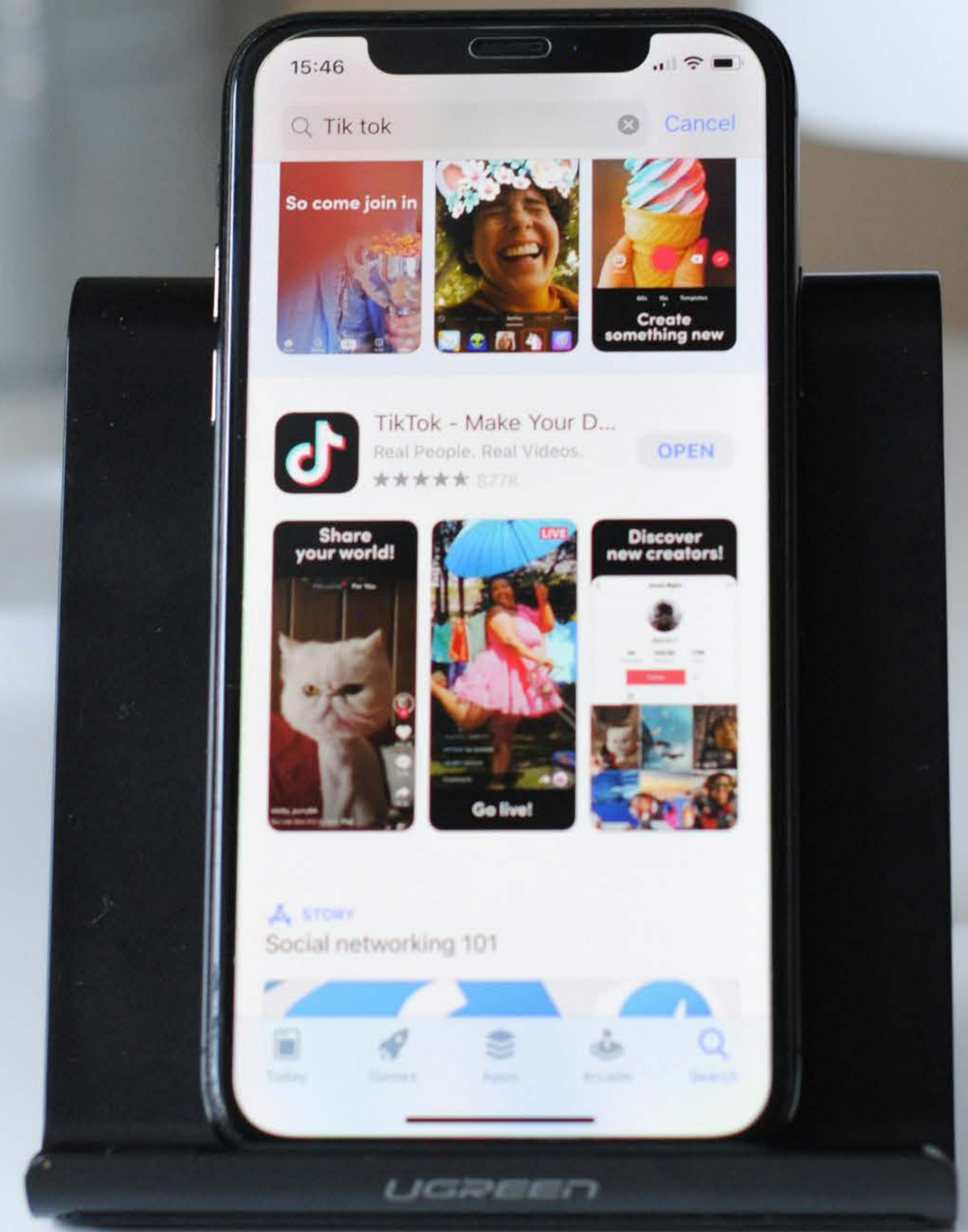
Social-first fandoms

Thinking about the [competition], which of the following have you done since the start of last season?

Bar chart comparing Men's Sport Fans (orange) and Women's Sport Fans (green):

Activity	Men's Sport Fans	Women's Sport Fans
Attended games in-person	25.9%	17.1%
Watched games live on television	70.3%	60.7%
Streamed games live online	31.9%	33.3%
Watched highlights on television	62.9%	56.0%
Streamed highlights online	36.0%	37.7%
Read about games on mainstream news sites	29.0%	31.4%
Read about games on specialist [competition] sites	18.1%	19.7%
Listened to podcasts about the [competition]	17.6%	19.9%
Followed [competition] accounts on social media	28.1%	30.4%
Followed teams on social media	35.6%	36.9%
Followed players on social media	28.0%	34.1%
Followed pundits/journalists on social media	12.0%	12.7%
Took part in online fan forums and communities	8.9%	13.3%
Purchased merchandise, such as replica shirts/jerseys or other...	18.9%	15.7%
Purchased a subscription for the [competition] content	8.3%	10.6%
Signed up to the [competition] email mailing list	8.1%	8.9%
Downloaded the [competition] app	15.0%	11.0%
Played the [competition] fantasy game	12.1%	9.7%

Legend: ■ Men's Sport Fans ■ Women's Sport Fans

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A distinct and consistent digital preference

While these differences in predicted future behaviour may look small, statistical analysis indicates that the differences in engagement behaviours between fans of men's and women's sports are not small or negligible; they are moderate and meaningful.

Given the moderate effect sizes, focused efforts in digital engagement can have a noticeable impact. Creating targeted social media campaigns, enhancing athlete–fan interactions, and fostering active online communities are all areas where investments can lead to a meaningful reduction in the fame gap.

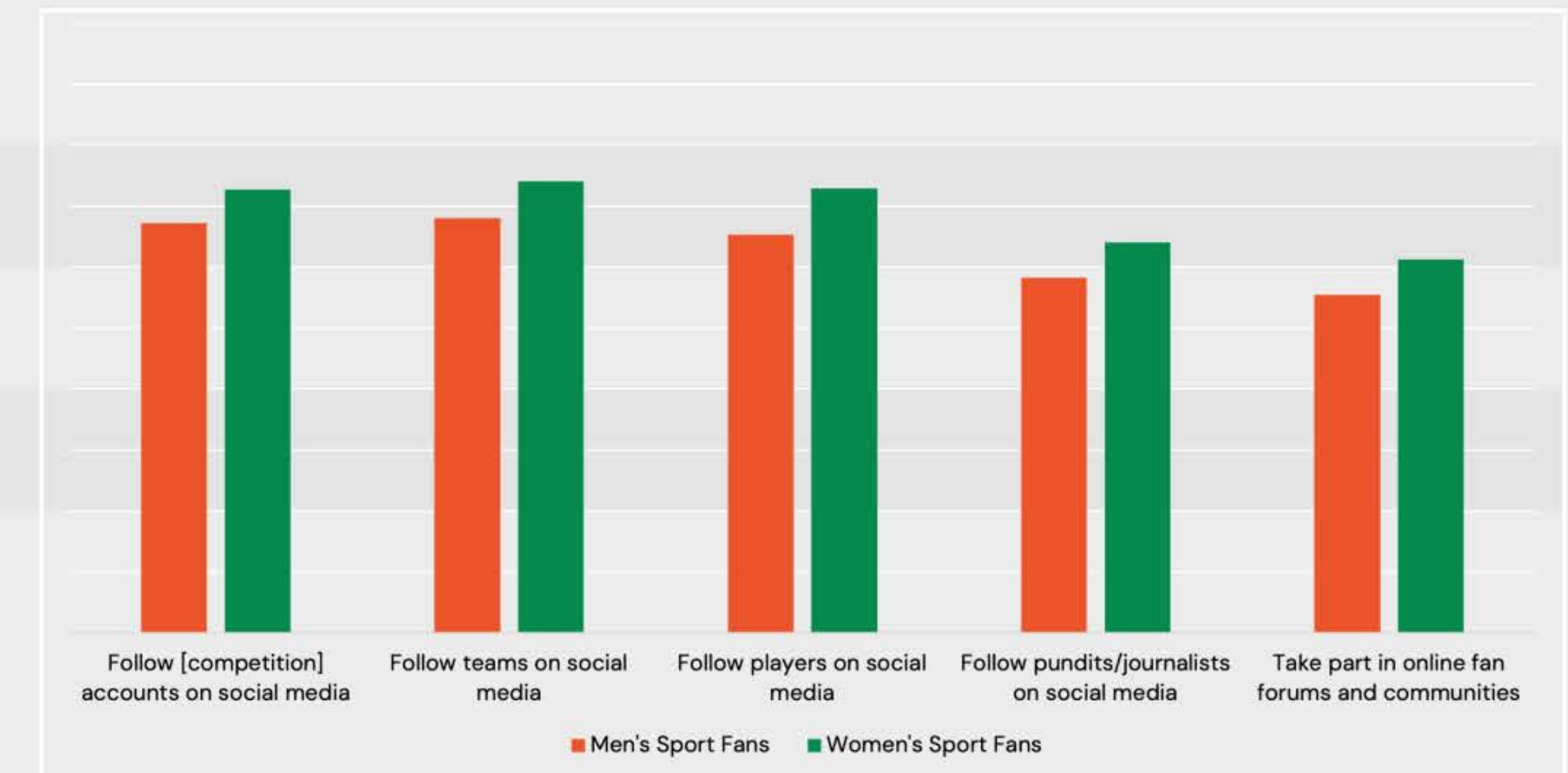Thinking about the [competition], how likely are you to do each of the following activities?

Very likely

Likely

Neither likely nor unlikely

Unlikely

Very unlikely

Follow [competition] accounts on social media · Follow teams on social media · Follow players on social media · Follow pundits/journalists on social media · Take part in online fan forums and communities

■ Men's Sport Fans　■ Women's Sport Fans

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6.
THE
POWER OF
PERSONALITY

Fans of women's sport are more likely to value athletes who stand up for their beliefs, act as role models, and engage in community and charity work.

Traditional attributes like skill and performance are still important, but less so than in men's sport.

sidlee x appinio

I love Angel Reese's attitude, personality, and spirit about the sport. I would say she is a great role model for young girls today.
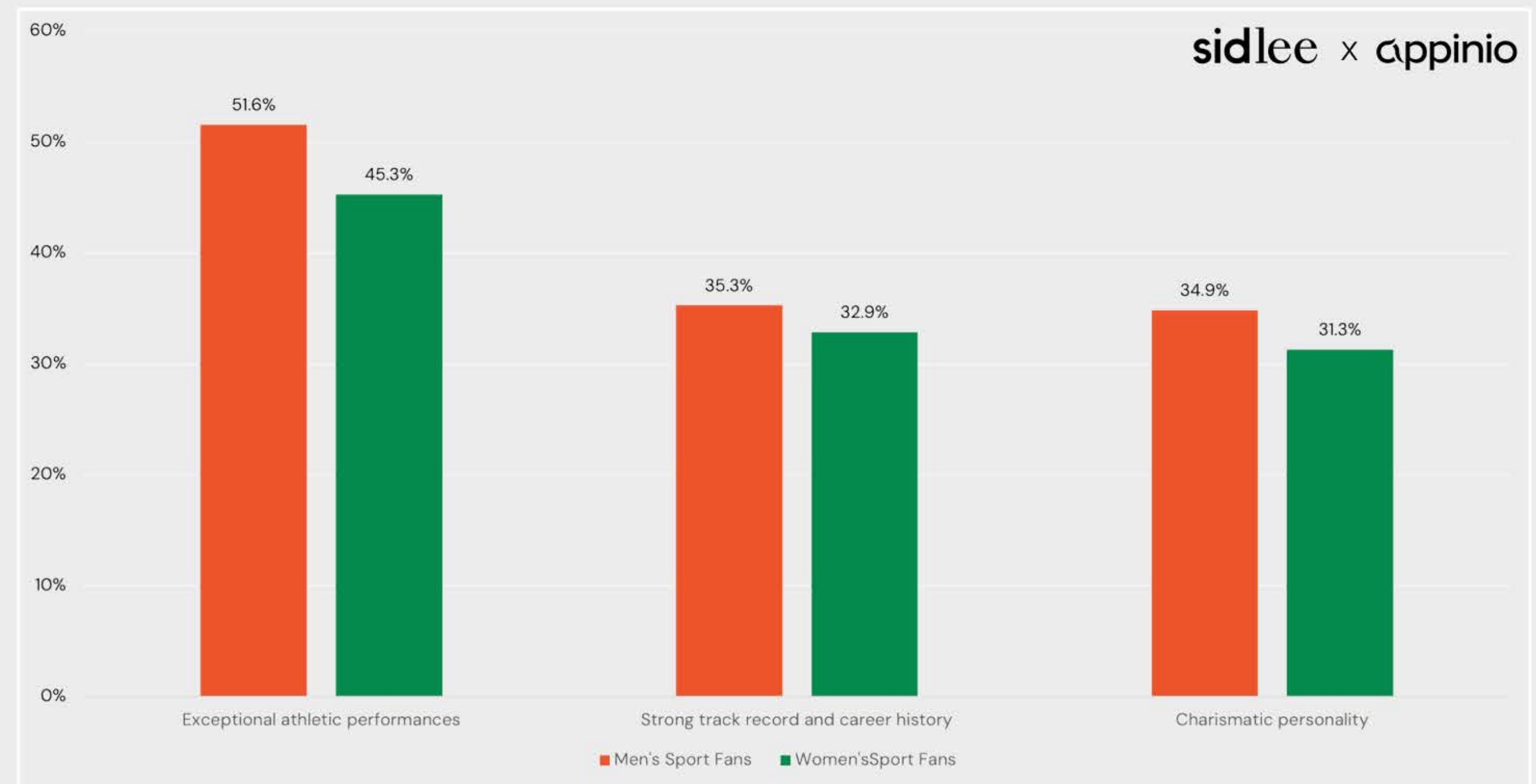
-

WNBA fan, 30, US

The fundamentals remain consistent

Not all perceptions are different. Fans of both men's and women's sports value areas like exceptional athleticism, a strong track record, and charismatic personality equally.

While we'll see there are unique opportunities to build fame in women's sport, the foundational qualities of a great athlete are universally appreciated.

Which of the following factors make someone your favourite athlete?

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Chart values:
- Exceptional athletic performances: Men's Sport Fans 51.6%, Women's Sport Fans 45.3%
- Strong track record and career history: Men's Sport Fans 35.3%, Women's Sport Fans 32.9%
- Charismatic personality: Men's Sport Fans 34.9%, Women's Sport Fans 31.3%

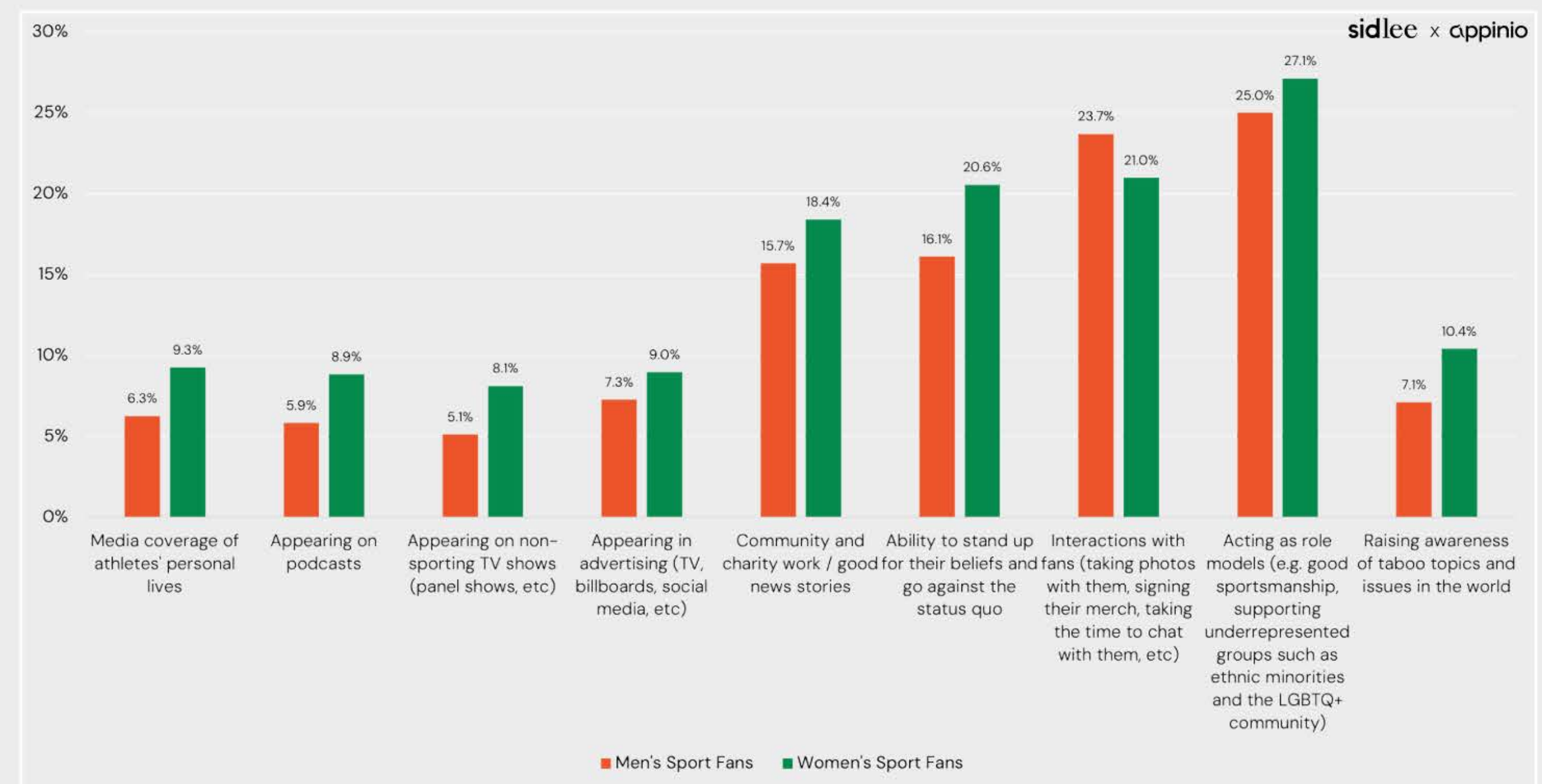■ Men's Sport Fans ■ Women'sSport Fans

Women's fans see the whole person

Fans of women's sports place significantly more emphasis on an athlete's social media presence than fans of men's sports.

This indicates the importance of digital platforms in building the profiles of female athletes. Fans of women's sport also value media coverage of athletes' personal lives more than fans of men's sports. They show a stronger appreciation for athletes who stand up for their beliefs and raise awareness of taboo topics.

This points to a unique avenue for female athletes to distinguish themselves, not just as sports stars, but as influential voices in society. Finally, the data shows a significant difference in how fans of women's sport perceive the importance of athletes appearing on podcasts and non-sporting TV shows.

Which of the following factors make someone your favourite athlete?

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|	Men's Sport Fans	Women's Sport Fans
Media coverage of athletes' personal lives	6.3%	9.3%
Appearing on podcasts	5.9%	8.9%
Appearing on non-sporting TV shows (panel shows, etc)	5.1%	8.1%
Appearing in advertising (TV, billboards, social media, etc)	7.3%	9.0%
Community and charity work / good news stories	15.7%	18.4%
Ability to stand up for their beliefs and go against the status quo	16.1%	20.6%
Interactions with fans (taking photos with them, signing their merch, taking the time to chat with them, etc)	23.7%	21.0%
Acting as role models (e.g. good sportsmanship, supporting underrepresented groups such as ethnic minorities and the LGBTQ+ community)	25.0%	27.1%
Raising awareness of taboo topics and issues in the world	7.1%	10.4%

Desired attributes vary by geography

Looking at different geographies we can see that athletes standing up for their beliefs are particularly important in women's sport in the US, whereas a strong social media presence is a notable advantage in building the female athlete fame in the UK.

This suggests that marketers should understand the attributes that are particularly appealing to fans within each market, rather than relying on global appeal.

Which of the following factors make someone your favourite athlete?
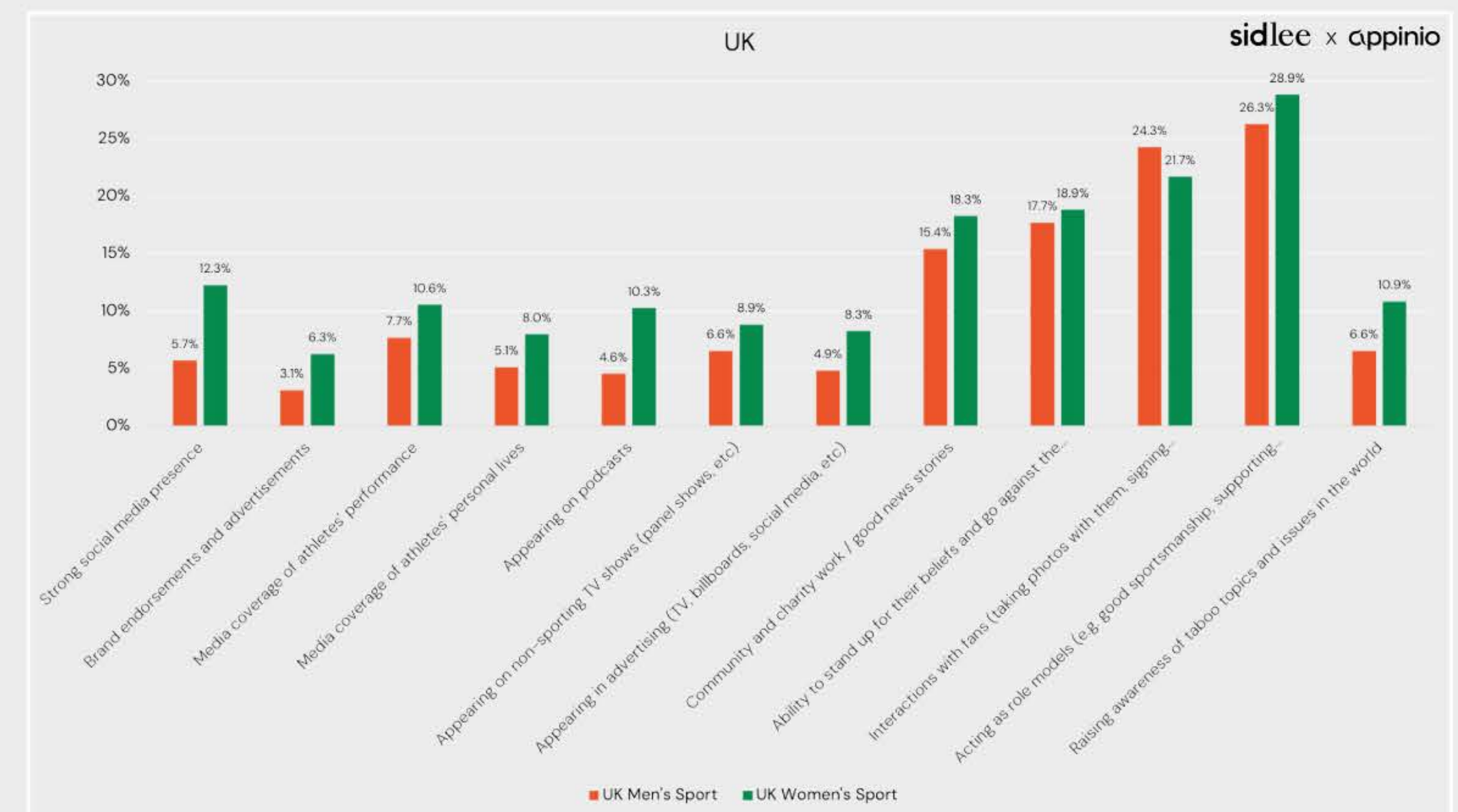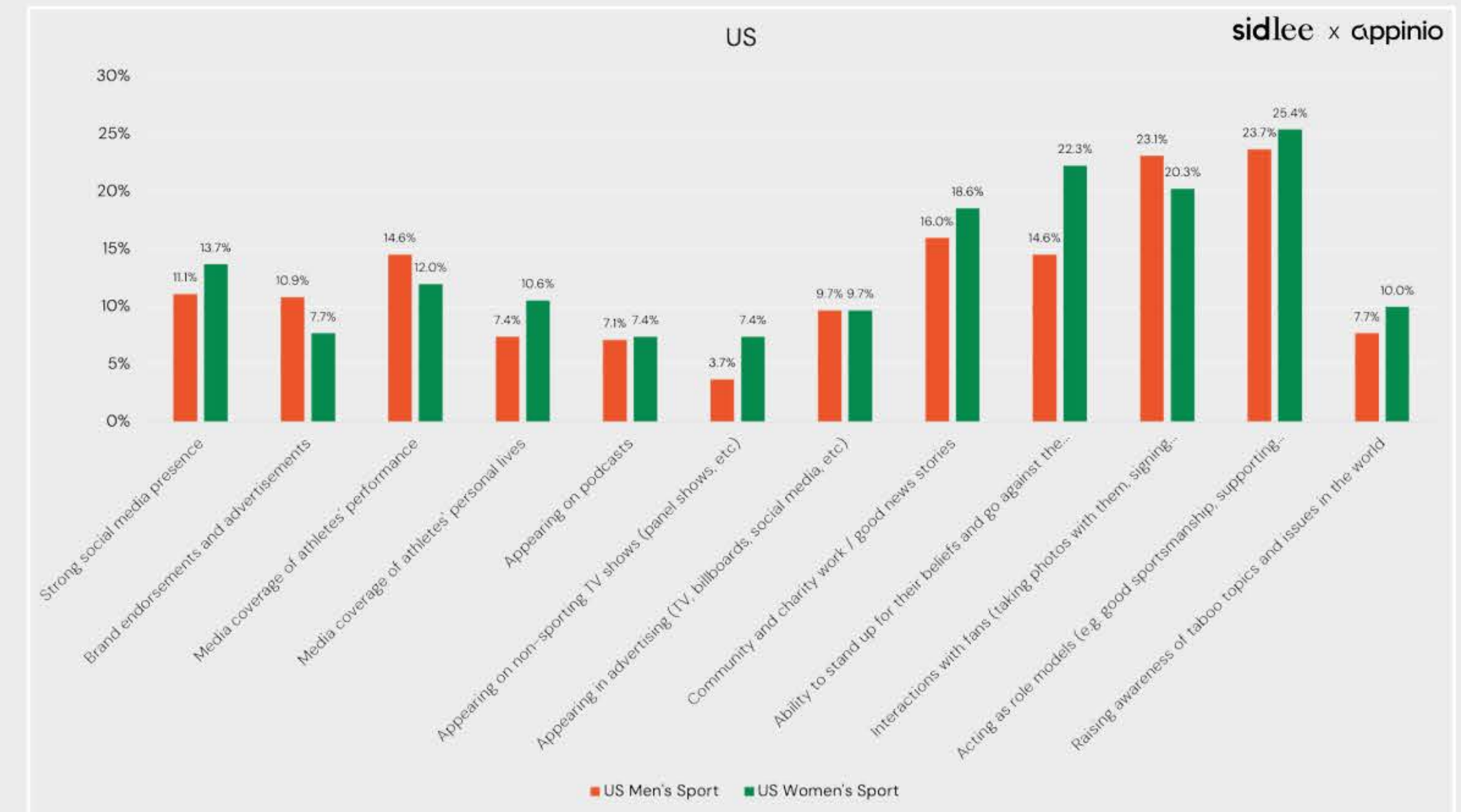
Desired attributes vary by fan gender

The most striking differences are when we look at the difference between male and female fans. Women value athletes acting as role models more than men, which has implications for sport as a whole.

Which of the following factors make someone your favourite athlete?

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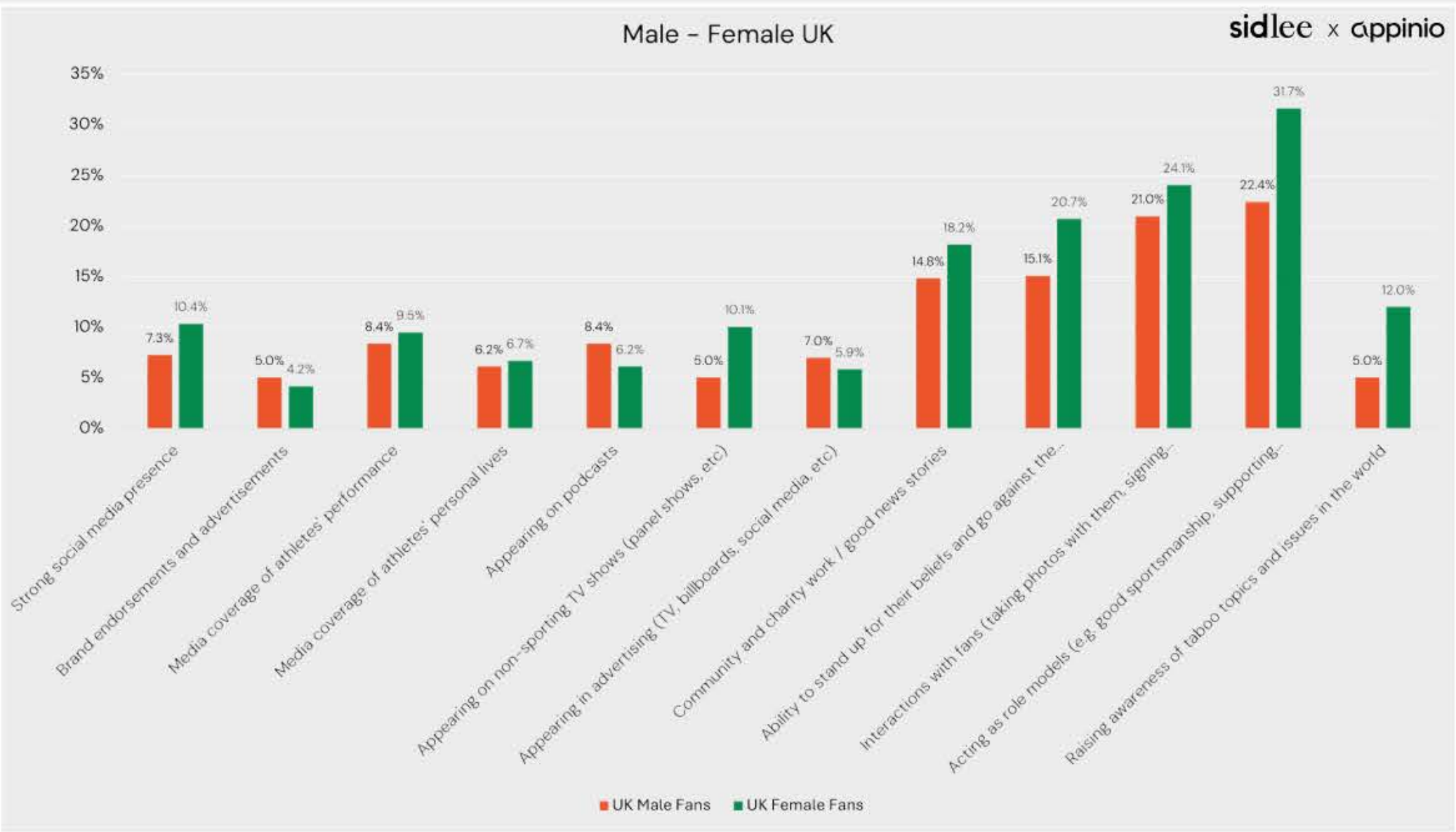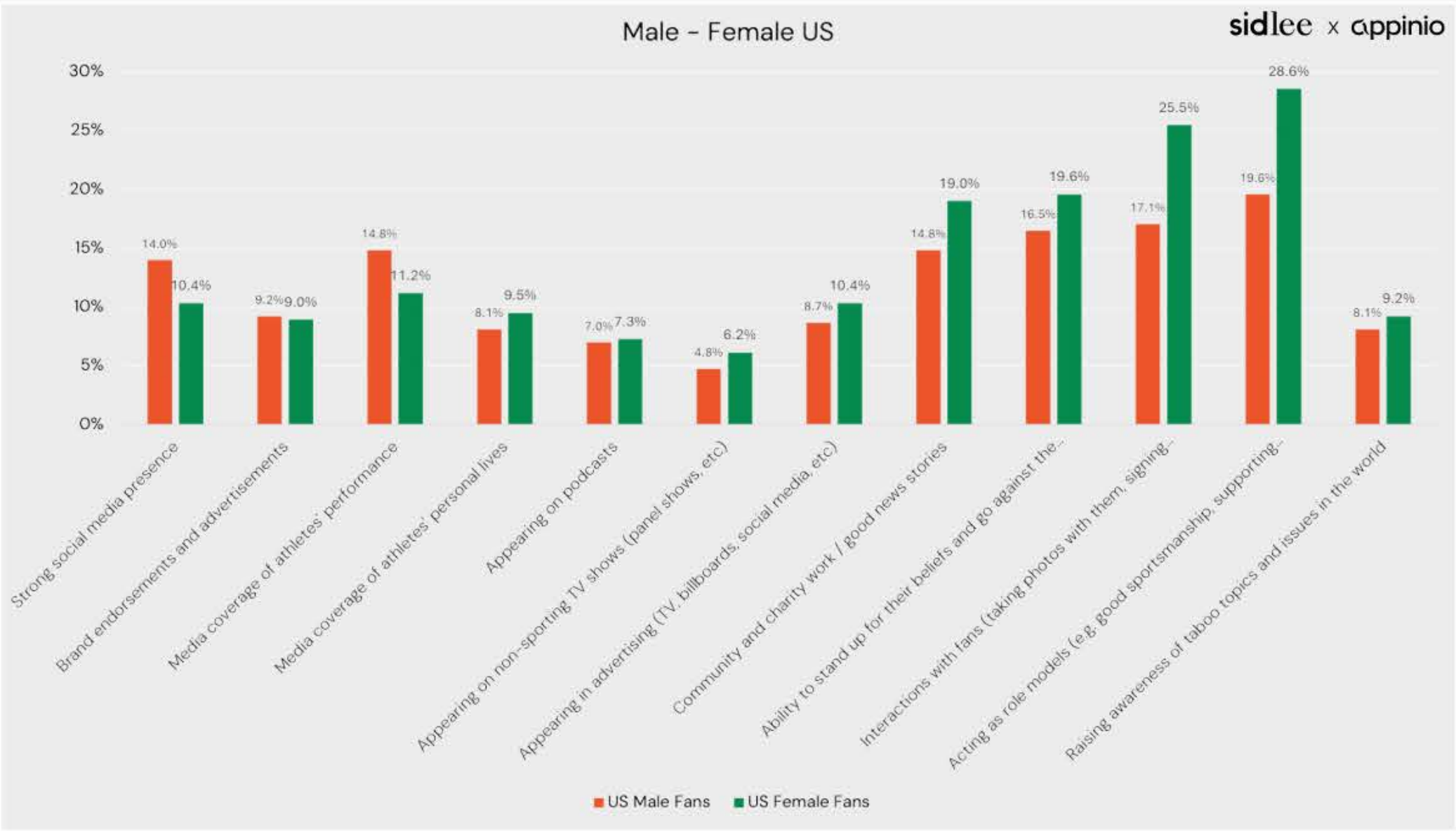
THE
IMPLICATIONS

We believe The Fame Gap has significant implications for rights holders and sponsors in women's sports.

It highlights that women's sports differ both on and off the pitch. Simply replicating the sponsorship and marketing model of men's sports won't suffice.

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1. Put female athletes before team or tournament

Athletes are key to attracting new fans and selling tickets. Whether a rights holder or sponsor, weighting investment of time and resources towards building individuals' profiles can drive long-term growth.

2. Focus on creating fame, not fighting inequality

Many women's sport campaigns directly target inequality. However, our research suggests this is not the best route to audience growth. Fighting inequality is not a reason to start following a sport or to attend a game, but famous athletes are.

3. Understand sport and market dynamics

Our research is by no means globally comprehensive, but we already see that fame plays a different role depending on the sport and market. By understanding the dynamics in your area of sport, you can develop tailored strategies and track fame over time.

4. Foster digital connection

There is a consistent pattern within the research highlighting the increased engagement in digital and social channels among fans of women's sport. The thinking around how online fandoms can be harnessed has evolved significantly over the last five years – this is an opportunity for women's sports.

5. Show the whole person, not just the athlete

The Fame Gap research indicates that fans of women's sport not only value different characteristics in athletes, but also want to see them appearing in adjacent areas of culture such as podcasts and non-sport TV. Highlight the non-sporting aspects of personalities and place them in a range of media to satisfy this need of women's sport fans.

About Sid Lee

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Sid Lee is a leading creative agency working globally from Europe and North America.
Sid Lee London is its centre of excellence for sport, providing a range of sponsorship, creative and event services for brands in sport.

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About Appinio

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Appinio aims to make market research effortless and help companies make better decisions based on data.
It is one of Germany's fastest-growing technology companies and the fastest-growing market research company in Europe.

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