



Woman in Development and Politics

Urban Branding through Women's Sports: Exploring the Interplay of Media Representation and City Image

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article	Introduction Urban branding has become a critical component of a city's identity, and it is playing a more significant role in shaping public perception, attracting tourism, and promoting economic development. In this context, women's participation in sports has garnered attention as a critical component of social and cultural development in societies and as an effective instrument. Female athletes have become symbols of empowerment by transcending traditional barriers and challenging gender stereotypes, symbols that have the potential to elevate the status of a city on both a national and international scale. Moreover, the media is instrumental in this dynamic process. The quantity and quality of media coverage of women's sporting events significantly influence public perception, which in turn enhances the visibility of female athletes and ultimately contributes to the formation of urban branding narratives. Despite its crucial potential, the role of women's participation in sport and its impact on city branding have frequently been disregarded in research. Furthermore, the mediating effect of media coverage in this process—a critical and decisive factor—has been infrequently examined in existing studies. The immense potential of women's sport to attract audiences and establish a positive, dynamic image of a city can be instrumental in the enhancement of city branding and the strengthening of urban identity. Nevertheless, the absence of comprehensive and focused research in this field has resulted in a significant and discernible lacuna in the existing literature. This discrepancy emphasizes the pressing necessity of a study that is precise, comprehensive, and focused. The primary goal of this research is to overcome this knowledge deficit and offer practical strategies for maximizing the potential of women's sport to enhance urban branding.
Article history: Received: 25 June 2025 Received in revised form: 23 July 2025 Accepted: 8 September 2025 Published online: 23 October 2025	Methodology The current research is applied in terms of purpose and descriptive-survey in terms of data collection method. This cross-sectional study employs both field and library research methodologies to collect data. The study population comprises female athletes, sport coaches, sport administrators, and municipal officials in Tehran. Participants were selected through convenience sampling. Following Hair et al.'s (2019) recommendation of requiring 5
Keywords: City Image, Media Representation, Urban Branding, Urban Development, Women's Sports.	

to 15 respondents per item for structural equation modeling, a total of 342 valid questionnaires were collected. The research variables were assessed using standardized questionnaires, with all items being rated on a five-point Likert scale. The face and content validity of the questionnaires were verified by eight sport management faculty members. Cronbach's alpha was employed to evaluate reliability, and all constructs exhibited values exceeding 0.7, which suggests satisfactory reliability. The data was analyzed at two levels: descriptive (using SPSS-25) and inferential (using structural equation modeling in SmartPLS-3, as well as bootstrapping to examine mediating effects).

Findings

The statistical analysis revealed compelling evidence for the pivotal role of women's sport participation in shaping a city's brand identity. The direct path coefficient ($\beta = 0.547$, $p < 0.001$) indicates a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between female sport participation and urban branding. This corroborates the first hypothesis and implies that the manner in which a city is perceived is significantly influenced by the visible and active participation of women in sports, as witnessed by its residents and external audiences such as travelers, investors, and media. Furthermore, the data indicate that the extent of media coverage of women's sporting events is substantially predicted by their participation in sports ($\beta = 0.465$, $p < 0.001$). This supports the second hypothesis and highlights a feedback loop that reinforces itself: media outlets provide more coverage as more women participate, particularly when public interest and policy support are in alignment. The third critical result indicates that urban branding is directly and statistically significantly influenced by media coverage ($\beta = 0.201$, $p < 0.05$). The hypothesis that media serve as a critical mechanism for amplifying the symbolic and social impact of women's sport on urban image is substantiated by this effect, despite its more moderate nature in comparison to direct participation. The quality, tone, and frequency of this coverage shape how cities are perceived—particularly regarding their support for gender equity, social inclusion, and cultural vitality. Most importantly, the statistical validation of the mediating role of media coverage in the relationship between women's sport participation and city branding was critical. The Sobel test produced a significant statistic ($\beta = 3.943$, $p < 0.001$), and the Variance Accounted For (VAF) index indicated that media representation is responsible for 15% of the total effect. This partial mediation suggests that, although direct participation is important, its full branding potential is only realized when achievements are communicated to the public through effective, strategic media coverage.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the role of women's sport participation and its media representation in the urban branding process of Tehran. It provides innovative findings by addressing a gap in the literature, particularly in relation to the role of women's sport in influencing city identity and image. The results of structural equation modeling indicate that urban branding is directly and significantly influenced by women's sport participation ($\beta = 0.547$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, media coverage serves as a mediating variable, enhancing this relationship (VAF = 15%). These findings are consistent with the theoretical frameworks of city branding (Kavaratzis, 2004; Anholt, 2007) and the literature on sport's role in enhancing city image (Chalip et al., 2017; Pan, 2019). However, they broaden them by

highlighting the ability of female athletes to represent diverse, inclusive, and dynamic urban identities. The research clearly demonstrates that women's sport participation, mediated by strategic and purposeful media coverage, has a positive and significant impact on city branding. Furthermore, the results suggest that the brand image and identity of a city cannot be enhanced by solely increasing women's sport participation in the absence of effective media representation. Instead, media coverage plays a key catalytic role—amplifying the influence of women's participation in public perception and, consequently, urban branding—by highlighting their achievements and inspiring narratives. This study demonstrated that women's participation in sports significantly contributes to urban branding, but only when accompanied by strategic and targeted media representation. Media coverage is instrumental in the development of a dynamic and inclusive urban identity by amplifying the accomplishments of female athletes and inspiring narratives. In order to fully leverage the potential of women's sports in sustainable urban development, it is advised that policymakers invest in women's sports infrastructure, develop specialized media strategies, and strengthen intersectoral collaboration between municipalities, sports organizations, and media outlets. In order to enhance the findings and provide a more comprehensive model of the role of women's sports in city branding, future research should broaden the geographical scope and investigate additional mediating variables, such as governmental policies and digital platforms.

Cite this article: Noori Khanyourdi, M., Lotfi Fard Shokarlo, S., Seyyed Ameri, M. H., & Swart, K. (2025). Urban branding through women's sports: Exploring the interplay of media representation and city image. *Women in Development and Politics*, 23(3), 427-470. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22059/jwdp.2025.397591.1008550>



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Publisher: The University of Tehran Press.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22059/jwdp.2025.397591.1008550>
