

THE SOCIETAL IMPACT OF ELITE SPORT: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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Synopsis:

This research aims to develop a conceptual model mapping the societal value of elite sport. Therefore, a state of the art review of the worldwide research evidence was systematically conducted.

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AIM OF ABSTRACT

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The escalating costs needed to achieve elite sport success causes governments to get entangled in an unsustainable, upward competitive spiral leading to excessive spending (Houlihan & Zheng, 2013). When facing the challenge of justifying this prioritization to their public, elite sport policy makers increasingly tend to advocate for elite sport development by stating that it will 'trickle' a wide range of societal benefits (e.g. an increase in its population's sport participation) (De Bosscher, Sotiriadou, & van Bottenburg, 2013). This strategy, however, is being criticized by academics questioning its efficiency and effectiveness and the justification of its investments (Grix & Carmichael, 2012). One could state that elite sport is 'battling' with its societal position in light of the uncertain/unproven influence mechanisms and societal benefits. Indeed, elite sport policy stood in a positive, discursively privileged position for too long and research around this topic is often limited to the so-called 'grey literature'.

METHODOLOGY

Using a systematic literature review different relevant databases (e.g. SportDISCUS) were used to discover the evidence-based research. The Cochrane Collaboration recommendations (Higgins & Green, 2011) have guided the literature review to designate the search key words and track down

and interpret relevant studies. Inclusion and exclusion techniques were applied to control for relevance and quality ultimately aiming for validation through triangulation.

The following questions are answered:

- What are the assumed societal influences, effects and outcomes – both positive and negative – of elite sport? To what extent are these supported by empirical research findings?
- What are the key factors and processes that are required to augment the positive and lessen the negative impacts of elite sport in society?
- How can these effects be listed and classified in a logical and convenient way, in order to holistically frame the societal value of elite sport?

RESULTS

To date, the ongoing analysis of the state of the art in literature reveals that a theoretical model framing the social value of elite sport does not yet exist. After interpreting, labeling and clustering a total of 109 detected influence dimensions, we outlined 10 broader, more abstract 'elite sport value themes': (a) Collectivity, (b) Ethics, (c) Experience, (d) Intrinsic impact, (e) Social empowerment, (f) Lifestyle inspiration, (g) Symbolic attraction, (h) Individual development, (i) Innovation and (j) Consumption. This scope is much broader than what is often considered, especially with regard to elite sport outcomes.

DISCUSSION

It remains a challenge to examine the relationship between elite sport and society due to the vast range of determinants and difficulties to isolate effects in empirical studies. Because of the complicated nature of these influences, the available research has not sufficiently succeeded in finding clear evidence for the full scope of the 109 potential influence domains. This makes it difficult to 'measure the balance' between the positive and negative outcomes of elite sport in society. For example, according to context, elite sport can equally give opportunity for social mobility as represent injustice by inhibiting social mobility). The reviewed research often tends to highlight the discrepancy between the assumptions underpinning the discussion about the positive outcomes of elite sport for society. It thereby assumes the existence of a substantial body of empirical data, which is an overestimation of the evidence that is actually available. Our review shows that despite the high expectations, the cumulative evidence base for elite sport's personal and societal impact remains weak. It almost seems that the majority of the outcomes of elite sport are assumed to be self-evident, so no empirical evidence is required (e.g., Weed et al., 2015). Whether or not the potential benefits of elite sport occurs is strongly mediated by several external factors, for example the social contexts in which it takes place. Therefore we argue that a possible future way forward is to undertake more systematic 'maps' of research activity around a specific elite sporting practice. This will enable to clearly detect and describe the underlying mechanisms of a given topic. Policymakers need this knowledge to judge whether or not elite sport funding can be the answer to a specific goal. Ultimately, the aim of the model is not to make definite categorical statements, but to stimulate debate around this subject and give opportunity to map elite sport policy and research.

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