

The Meaning Of Trust In Sport Actors For Public Opinion Of Elite Sports

Hallmann, Kirstin¹; Breuer, Christoph¹; Ilgner, Michael²; Rossi, Lea¹

¹German Sport University Cologne, Germany; ²German Sport Aid Foundation, Germany

E-mail: k.hallmann@dshs-koeln.de

Aim of the research

Elite sports play an important role in societies as decision-makers believe elite sports convey norms and values such as performance, motivation and discipline. Moreover, success in elite sports provides intangible benefits such as civic pride (Wicker, Prinz, & von Hanau, 2012). However, investments in elite sports are not undisputed. Public opinion on elite sports is important as it serves as justification for public funding (Grix & Carmichael, 2012). Thus, this research aims to identify the determinants of public opinion on elite sports to generate insights for sport managers and policy makers.

Theoretical background

The theoretical model is based on social exchange theory (SET) which has been used to explain favourable public opinion. Public opinion is assumed to be favourable if perceived benefits of elite sports exceed the perceived costs (Homans, 1958). SET suggests that individuals form their attitude toward elite sports based on experiential or psychological outcomes affiliated with elite sports. Perceptions of elite sports differ among individuals based on socio-demographic profiles and having his/her own social relationships with other stakeholders of elite sports (Waite, 2003). Thus, SET explains the individual's motivations for entering into an exchange relationship or the individual's lack of interest in that relationship and therefore of a favourable public opinion.

Costs are primarily defined as alternative activities or opportunities foregone by the actors involved. Benefits can occur either as personal benefits (e.g. the experience of positive emotions through elite sporting success) or as social benefits (e.g. gaining national reputation through elite sporting success). Based on the model by Funahashi, De Bosscher and Mano (2015), it is assumed that trust in elite sport organisations and the function of athletes as role models have a direct impact on public opinion as well as on perceived benefits and risks.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

Data were collected via computer-assisted telephone interviews (n = 2,009). The sample was randomly selected from the German population. Data were analysed using structural equation modelling. A two-step procedure was chosen: first a measurement model was estimated to check for model fit. In a second step, the structural model was estimated to identify causal relations.

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

Mean age in the sample was 51 years. 49.8% of respondents were female while 14.7% had a migration background. A large share of respondents (43.0%) held a university entrance degree.

Model fit was established ($\chi^2(172) = 692.283$; $p \leq .001$; GFI = .997; CFI = .856, RMSEA = .049 (90% CI: .045-.053; $p_{close} = .626$), SRMR = .072). Trust ($\beta = .261$, $p \leq .001$) and the perception of athletes as role models ($\beta = .496$, $p \leq .001$) had significant direct positive effect on perceived benefits, while perceived benefits had a significant positive effect on public opinion ($\beta = .669$, $p \leq .001$). While there is no significant direct effect of both, athletes as role models and trust on public opinion, there is a significant indirect effect using the bootstrap method with 500 re-samples. The indirect effects were significant at standardized bootstrap estimate (bias-corrected), for athletes as role models SBE(BC) = .326; $p \leq .01$ and trust SBE(BC) = .177; $p \leq .01$. 83.3% of the variance in public opinion is explained by the model.

The results are congruent with other studies confirming the impact of trust and the perception of athletes as role models on perceived benefits and their mediation via benefits on public opinion. However, it is surprising that the perception of costs has no impact significant on public opinion. This finding suggests that the items might not adequately reflect the costs of elite sports.

Results have confirmed that practitioners should ensure and communicate a positive and trustworthy world and image of elite sports to increase the perceived benefits for the population and subsequently their favourable public opinion. This is especially important as benefits seem to be the major determinant of public opinion. In addition, managers should make use of successful athletes in their communication strategies as athletes who are perceived as role models further increase the perceived benefits.

Future research is needed to further investigate the relationship between trust, perception of role models and public opinion. Including the concept of involvement as mediator might be of further interest to explore the role of fan engagement in public opinion.

References

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