MAPPING THE POTENTIAL SOCIETAL IMPACTS TRIGGERED BY ELITE SPORT: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

Research question: When nations face the challenge of justifying their elite sport development policies, they tend to state that a wide range of societal benefits will ‘trickle down’. This argument, however, is being criticised by academics who claim that there is a lack of empirical evidence for the way elite sport influences society. In light of the uncertain/unproven positive and negative societal impacts, this study developed an encompassing conceptual framework that integrates the empirically supported potential societal impacts assumed to result from elite sport.

Research methods: An extensive mapping literature review regarding the potential positive and negative societal impacts of elite sport was conducted. Three electronic databases (SPORTDiscus, Web of Knowledge and Google Scholar) were used to identify the variety of research topics under empirical investigation. A total of 362 sources were included in the review and the development of the conceptual framework (see Figure 1). The process of framework development involved interpreting, labelling, clustering and validating of the literature. The resulting framework incorporates ten categories representing 79 sub-categories.

Results and findings: All 79 positive and negative societal impacts that emerged from the literature review were clustered into ten categories: 1. Social equality and inclusion; 2. Collective identity and pride; 3. Ethics and fair play; 4. Feel good and passion; 5. Fans and (media) attraction; 6. International prestige and image; 7. Athletes’ ability and quality of life; 8. Sport participation and health; 9. Sponsors and commercial activity; and 10. Local consumption and living conditions. Figure 1 provides a summary of the end result of the labelling and clustering of the categories.

Quality of evidence

- Since the last two decades, a more detailed body of evidence on the potential of the association between elite sport and social, economic and political spheres has been developed.
- Nonetheless, the overall level of evidence is rather weak across the categories of the MESSI framework. Figure 2 provides a visual summary of the findings for research designs used in extant elite sport impact research.
- The current evidence base fails in developing robust research designs (e.g. shortage of mixed methods studies) that are sensitive enough to detect and isolate certain complex societal impacts. Significant variations in research designs used across the different categories of the MESSI framework are noticeable.
process—the so-called Mapping Elite Sports’ potential Societal Impact (MESSI) model. It was found that, since the turn of the century, a growing number of empirical studies has increased the realisation that elite sport does not automatically initiate positive societal impacts. Moreover, the various ‘dark sides’ of elite sport seem to be underestimated. Thus, it could be argued that a positive framing of elite sport and path dependency informs elite sport policy decisions more than the available empirical evidence.

Implications: The framework and overall empirical picture of the potential societal impacts of elite sport presented in this paper contribute to progress the field as, until now, no mapping review that captures the full scope of this top-down relationship has been conducted. This paper hopes to make a contribution to the understanding of elite sport as a societal phenomenon. It could be argued that the potential societal impacts assumed to be sparked by elite sport have been identified but are still little understood.

Figure 1: Mapping Elite Sports’ potential Societal Impact (MESSI) framework.

Figure 2: Hierarchy of evidence of the included studies (n=391). Overview based on the 10 categories of the MESSI framework.