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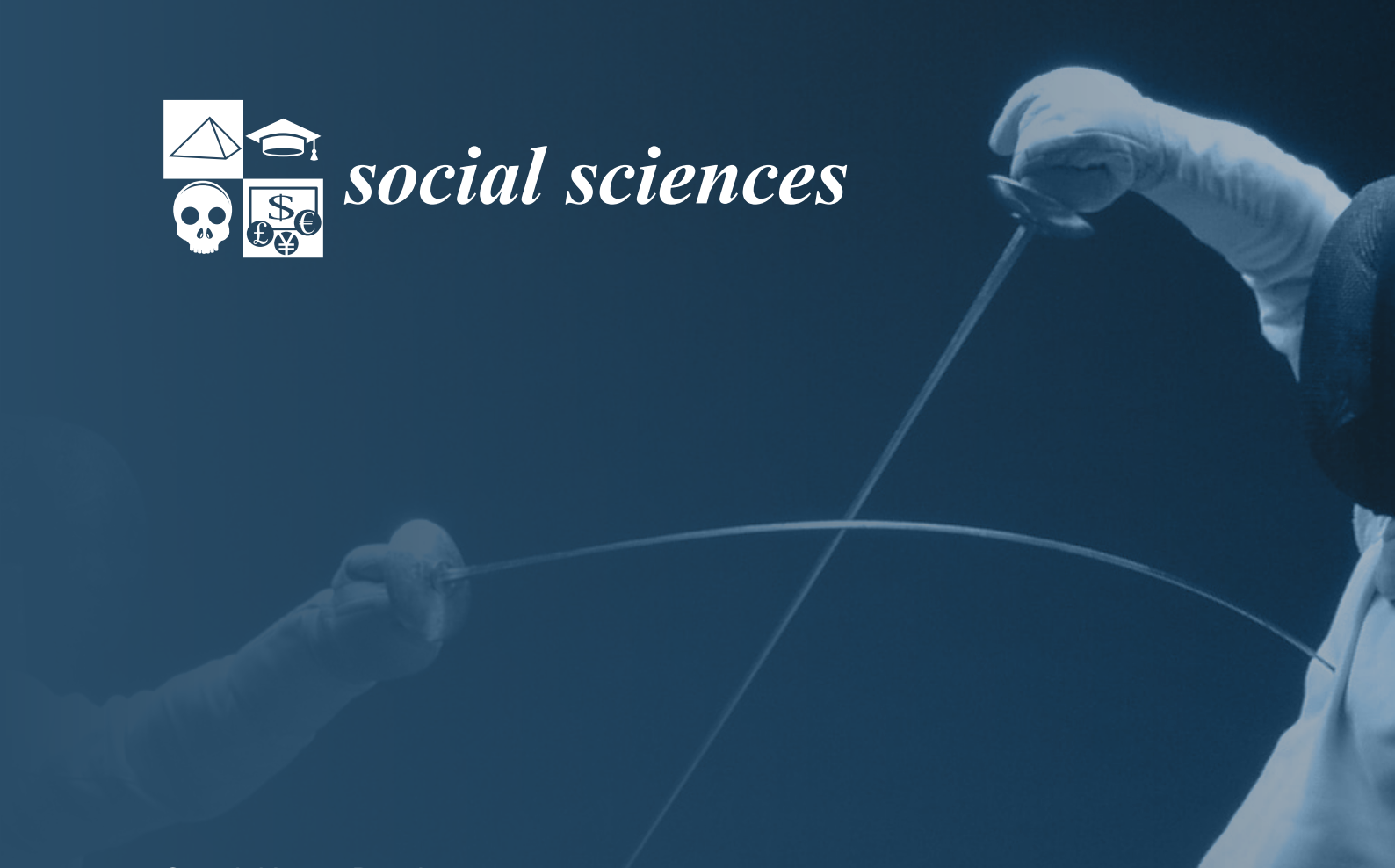

Special Issue Reprint

The Contested Terrain of Sport

Sociological, Political and Policy Perspectives

Edited by
Steven James Jackson and Michael P. Sam

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Guest Editors

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Editorial

The Contested Terrain of Sport: Sociological, Political and Policy Perspectives

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Introduction

Sport, by its very nature, is a "contest" involving physical competition within rules-based structures and organisations. Yet, sport, as a cultural institution and practice, is also a contested terrain of identities, politics, and policies. While debates about whether sport and politics should mix endure, the reality is that they have always co-existed and sometimes collided. A more important question might be why 'sport', given its strategic relationship with other key sectors of society, including health, education, and business, has not been recognised for its inherent political nature. This may be partly due to the powerful and positive halo that surrounds and shelters sport from serious scrutiny and interrogation. In particular, it is important to consider concepts such as the Great Sport Myth (Coakley 2015) and Sporting Exceptionalism (Jackson and Dawson 2021), which underscore how sport holds a privileged and positive position in society. Consequently, it is often, for reasons unexplained and unspoken, treated as outside the rules of society, thus perpetuating the illusion that sport is not only external to politics but inherently *a*political.

However, despite the illusionary halo effect associated with sport, one only needs to look at the complex and chaotic state of the world, including the world of sport, to understand that it influences, is impacted by, and is complicit with wider social and political forces and struggles. Consider the range of interests, actors, institutions, nation-states, and corporations at play in relation to the following examples: IOC and FIFA corruption, sportswashing and human rights, the links between sport and neo-right and terrorist organisations, the saturation of sport with gambling and betting industries, the opportunities and threats posed by genetic editing and artificial intelligence (AI) for sport performance, the politics of transgender athletes, and the impact of sport on the environment. Each presents its own unique set of challenges, but collectively, they can be considered part of the wider "contested terrain" of contemporary sport.

According to Jackson and Scherer (2013),

> "we can think of a contested terrain as a site of struggle not unlike a battlefield, involving key agents, ideas, and beliefs. Sometimes these struggles appear to encompass only small differences of opinions and perspectives but they can also descend into conflict, violence and even war. Ultimately, contested terrains are about who decides how society should work, moral/ethical beliefs, power and inequality." (pp. 888–89).

The concept of contested terrain is certainly not new. Indeed, it has been used across a range of academic disciplines, including work/labour (Edwards 1979), education (Rizvi et al. 2006), the environment (Light and Katz 1996), indigenous identity (Conrad 1999), and 'sport' (Chiang and Chen 2021; Cody and Jackson 2016; Hardin et al. 2005; Harris et al.

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2017; Hartmann 2000, 2008; Jackson 2013; Jackson and Kobayashi 2023; Jackson and Scherer 2013; Messner 1988; Millington and Wilson 2017; Scherer et al. 2005; Scherer and Jackson 2013; Schulenkorf et al. 2014; Skille et al. 2024; Sturm and Kerr 2022). Like all concepts, it has its limitations, but the contested terrain is more than just a strategy or vehicle with which to play devil's advocate to provide counterarguments. Arguably, it offers a useful framework for examining complex phenomena. For example, (a) it challenges dominant and taken-for-granted assumptions and promotes the interrogation of hegemonic structures, systems, and processes; (b) it seeks to identify the key actors and stakeholders involved and when and where they conflict or choose to form alliances; (c) it enables comparisons across different cultures and national contexts as well as between the past, present, and future; and (d) it can be adapted for use in a range of diverse critical theoretical and methodological approaches. Overall, the concept of 'contested terrain' promotes an open approach that candidly declares that nothing is sacrosanct or off-limits. Moreover, it encourages scholars, policy makers, and citizens to ask questions amidst both the noise(s) and the silence(s) that conceal or perpetuate social inequality, discrimination, and human rights violations located within increasingly polarised political environments.

This anthology examines the complexities and contradictions emerging from the intersection of three overarching dimensions of the contested terrain of sport: *sociological*, *political*, and *policy*. Notably, while each chapter tends to be anchored within one of the three themes, inevitably, they are intimately interrelated. This book consists of 10 chapters, each exploring its own unique perspective on the contested terrain of sport.

The first four chapters generally focus on global, large-scale political–economic issues related to sport as a contested terrain. For example, Grix and Brannagan explore the evolving relationship between sport and authoritarianism, tracing a shift from Cold War-era regimes to contemporary 'new' authoritarian states. While traditional authoritarian powers like the Soviet Union leveraged elite sport for ideological and political prestige, today's regimes—such as Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia—invest in global sport for economic gain, soft power, and international recognition. Through ownership of sports teams, sponsorships, and league involvement, these states seek to harness sport's cultural influence. This chapter examines the motivations behind these strategies and the controversies they provoke, highlighting continuities and divergences in authoritarian engagement with sport.

In turn, De Lisio, Silk, and Hubbard examine the complex and contested nature of securitisation in cities hosting sport mega-events (SMEs). Drawing on ethnographic and community-based participatory research conducted in cooperation with sex workers in Rio de Janeiro before, during, and after two SMEs, they explore how securitisation strategies aim to sanitise urban spaces and marginalise "abject" populations. However, as the authors note, these efforts often produce uneven and negotiated outcomes. Rather than creating impermeable, sanitised cityscapes, SMEs reveal a fluid urban topography shaped by formality and informality and resistance and compliance. The findings challenge dominant narratives of SME urbanism and resonate with similar dynamics observed in other global host cities.

Next, Yang critiques the idealisation and mystification of sport and physical culture by engaging two conceptual frameworks: Jules Boykoff's celebration capitalism and Lawrence Grossberg's affective landscape. It examines the Olympics' transformation into the corporatised "Disneylimpics" and introduces the concept of "affective neoliberalism" to highlight neoliberalism's emotional and ideological dimensions. Drawing on Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*, this chapter explores the commodification of the soul following the 9/11 attacks. Through this lens, it interrogates the intensification of societal anxiety and affective isolation, concluding with reflections on the current moment and proposing ways to critically engage with sport's socio-political entanglements.

And, in the final essay for this group, Wallace and Andrews critically explore the meanings and motivations behind sporting consumption through the lens of sneaker customisation. Drawing on interviews with 15 sneaker consumers, their essay highlights tensions between consumer creativity and commercial control. Three core contradictions emerge: sneakers as expressions of individuality versus conformity; customisation as an artistic practice versus profit-driven commodification; and emotional versus utilitarian attachments to sneakers. These tensions reveal how consumers navigate and resist the commercial narratives imposed by the sneaker industry. Ultimately, the essay shows that sneaker culture exemplifies the contested space of late capitalist consumerism, where personal meaning-making both collides with and subverts corporate influence.

The next four chapters are more directly focused on how the contemporary contested terrain of sport impacts those directly involved in sport and the emerging policies and practices that impact sport-participant experiences. Park, Sam, and Jackson examine athlete maltreatment within organised sport through the lens of a "wicked problem," highlighting its persistent complexity despite growing attention and policy efforts. They identify three core challenges: defining maltreatment, understanding its root causes, and finding effective solutions amid embedded stakeholders and unintended consequences. By comparing maltreatment with other sporting issues like doping and match-fixing, their essay argues that valuable insights can be drawn from similarly complex problems. Ultimately, they call for an ongoing evaluation of current research and policies, urging for a more nuanced, multidimensional approach that recognises maltreatment as a deeply entangled and enduring issue in sport systems.

Extending the focus on sport and athlete health and wellbeing, Jackson, Sam, and Dawson offer a conceptual analysis of the rise of 'wellbeing' within global policy, politics, and culture, particularly its entanglement with sport, exercise, and physical activity. While international bodies such as the WHO and OECD champion physical activity for its wellbeing benefits, they bring into question the growing ubiquity and instrumentalization of wellbeing. In particular, the authors introduce the concept of "wellbeing washing" to describe how wellbeing is co-opted for political or commercial gain. Overall, by tracing its historical roots, exploring its neoliberal framing, and examining its manifestations in Aotearoa/New Zealand sport contexts, their essay highlights wellbeing as a contested, complex, and often contradictory terrain.

Moving from the conceptual to the empirical, Richardson, McLachlan, and McDonald explore the impact of increased opportunities for women in Australian Rules Football following the launch of the AFLW in 2017. Focusing on a senior women's team at a community-level club in Melbourne, they draw on semi-structured interviews to examine how women navigate traditionally masculine sporting spaces. Their analysis reveals a complex mix of empowerment and disempowerment, highlighting both transformative potential and persistent gendered barriers. The authors conclude by arguing that simply expanding access is insufficient to fulfil the AFLW's transformative promise, emphasising instead the need to address deeper cultural and structural inequalities within sport.

Reinforcing the previous chapter, Turelli, Vaz, and Kirk examine the embodied subjectivities of women in elite karate, focusing on the Spanish Olympic team. Experts in karate, referred to as 'Karateka', navigate a complex terrain shaped by the sexualisation and masculinisation of female athletes, negotiating femininity and masculinity to construct a distinct habitus tied to their performativity. Drawing on ethnographic and autoethnographic research, including double interviews with athletes and coaches, their study examines themes of authenticity and gendered habitus in the quest to be recognised as true warriors. Their findings highlight the contradictions and challenges women face yet also reveal moments of empowerment, agency, and resistance within a contested sporting environment.

The final two chapters offer more optimistic reflections on the positive and transformative possibilities of sport. First, Theodorakis, Georgiadis, and Hassandra examine the societal impact of the Olympic Movement, highlighting its core values of excellence, friendship, and respect. They explore Olympic education's role in promoting ethics, life skills, and cultural values. In turn, they evaluate recent Olympic Games in terms of addressing health, gender equality, and sustainability. In particular, this chapter discusses sport's role in social inclusion, refugee support, and substance (ab)use prevention. A key feature of the chapter is its discussion of the collaborative efforts by the WHO and IOC to tackle physical inactivity; enduring challenges regarding gender equality and climate goals are also addressed. Ultimately, the authors call for 'actionable' policies that promote physical activity, mass participation, and Olympic values to foster global health, peace, and sustainability.

Finally, Louis Moustakas examines how three European sport programmes conceptualise and promote social cohesion, a term that is often understood as the 'glue' of society but that lacks a clear definition in practice. Through a thematic analysis of interviews, discussions, observations, and documents, his findings reveal that programmes tend to adopt an individual-centred approach, focusing on personal skills, behaviours, and social relations such as tolerance and mutual help. However, the broader impact on community cohesion is left to the participants. Ultimately, he concludes that systemic barriers hinder structural approaches, prompting him to call for researchers to proactively challenge and reshape the systems behind sport-based interventions to enable more holistic, transformative practices.

This modest collection of essays is intended to highlight the conceptual merit of the concept of 'contested terrain' and provide an eclectic set of scholarly analyses to show how it is and can be utilised. We encourage future scholars to critique our analysis in order to refine and expand our collective understanding of the opportunities and challenges emerging from the contested terrain of sport across the dimensions of sociology, politics, and policy.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Article

Authoritarian States and Global Sport: The Contested Cases of Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: Sport and authoritarianism have long been bedfellows, especially during the Cold War era. 'Traditional' authoritarian regimes—most notably the Soviet Union and its satellite states—learnt the art of instrumentalizing sport for political ends from each other. Motives for this included garnering international prestige via excellence in elite sport and showcasing communism as a viable alternative to capitalism. This paper shows how the 'new' authoritarian states are now beginning to impact global elite sport through similar sports investment strategies in an array of sports teams, sports sponsorship and sports leagues. Whereas 'traditional' authoritarian states sought sporting excellence on the playing field and the recognition this brought with it, the 'new' authoritarian states seek to buy into the cultural power and prestige of global elite sport for economic gain, to improve the health of their citizens and for global recognition. We draw on recent examples from Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia to understand why and how 'new' authoritarian states pursue sport policies and why this is contested.

Keywords: authoritarian states; professional sport; Gulf states; sport investment strategies; Qatar; the UAE; Saudi Arabia

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1. Introduction

Politics has long been a central part of sport despite the contestations to the contrary by politicians and sports organizations alike (International Olympic Committee 1968; Houlihan 2000). In the 21st century, the notion that 'sport and politics' do not, or should not, mix, appears ludicrous, especially given the withdrawal of major sponsors at the recent Paris Olympic Games (2024) due to the perceived 'politicization' of the event (InsidetheGames 2024). Sport and authoritarianism have long been bedfellows, with examples going as far back as the Nazi and Italian dictatorships of the 1930s both using sport for non-sporting means, although this practice increased greatly during the Cold War era (Riordan 2002). The Cold War saw hostilities between 'communist' states on the one hand and 'capitalist' states on the other—spearheaded by the Soviet Union and the US, respectively—and these lasted from the late 1940s until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Garthoff 1992). 'Traditional' authoritarian regimes—most notably the Soviet Union and its satellite states—learnt the art of instrumentalizing sport for political ends from each other. Motives for this included garnering international prestige via excellence in elite sport and showcasing communism as a viable alternative to capitalism (Riordan 2002). Since the end of the Cold War, there has been another type of authoritarian regime developing an interest in, and having an impact on, global sport. The 'new' authoritarian regimes (see below) differ in so far as they are less interested in developing their own elite sport systems for sporting success, but are far more interested in investing in sports strategies for economic gain, the health of their populations and global recognition. While there are clearly major differences between 'traditional' and 'new' authoritarian states, a number of factors do overlap. For example, chief among the generic characteristics of such regimes is the fact that they are ruled either by a centralized leading political party (communist during the Cold War)

or by a ruling family which is not constitutionally responsible to the people they seek to govern. There is no democratic election, no legal opposition, the media are generally regime-friendly or state run, citizens are either coerced or co-opted into accepting the ruling elite and there is usually a lack of human rights (e.g., a lack of freedom of speech, or choice of sexuality or religion) (see: Bunce 2001; Friedrich and Brzezinski 1965).

This paper makes two novel contributions to the literature: first, we draw attention to three 'new' authoritarian states by outlining and analyzing their specific sport investment strategies, which are all strikingly similar. Second, we contend that, through these strategies, this group plays a 'disrupter' role in global sport, the consequences of which are likely to be far-reaching. The emergence of the Gulf states and their sports investment strategies has led to contestation in the sporting world. The main dispute is around the notion of 'sportswashing', whereby commentators understand the massive investments of these 'new' authoritarian states to be a deliberate tactic to distract from human rights abuses in Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE (see Ettinger 2023; Grix et al. 2023; Grix and Brannagan 2024; Skey 2022; Fruh et al. 2022; Crossley and Woolf 2024). This contestation is discussed below after each of our case studies. Much more significant than 'sportswashing', we believe, is the 'disrupter' role this group of authoritarian states and their investment strategies play in global sport. That is, these states are already beginning to (re-)shape modern professional sport by accruing the power to decide where it is played, how it is consumed and by whom. The paper unfolds as follows: First, we discuss authoritarian states and the transfer of policy between them by offering an example of how the core characteristics of elite sport development first spread among former communist states during the Cold War and then spread to become the standard benchmark of modern-day elite sports systems. Second, we introduce our case studies and discuss the key 'drivers' of policy that have led to them pursuing similar sports investment strategies. Each state's sport investment strategy is analyzed with a particular focus on the hosting of sporting events for the following reasons: economic gain, health benefits for the nation and global recognition. Finally, we conclude the paper by assessing the impact of the findings on the future development of global, professional sport.

A key purpose of this paper is to highlight the trend of using sport for non-sporting aims by three important authoritarian states in the Gulf region and to understand how they perceive their sports strategies, what they set out to enact and why. This exercise affords us an opportunity to unpack the influence on global sport that wealthy authoritarian states have and will have.

2. 'Transferring' Sport Policy?

In this paper the term 'traditional' authoritarian states denotes former Soviet satellite states or other long-standing states, such as Egypt, Russia and Singapore, on which most studies of policy transfer focus; 'new' authoritarian states, on the other hand, relate here to Qatar (1971), the UAE (united in 1971) and Saudi Arabia (established in 1932), that is, relative newcomers to the authoritarian table. The vast majority of studies on policy transfer between states has been carried out on democratic nations (Hall and Ambrosio 2017). The concept of policy transfer has been defined by the academics who coined the phrase as 'the process by which knowledge about politics, administrative arrangements, institutions, and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, and ideas in another political system' Dolowitz and Marsh (2000, vol. 13, p. 5). While it is very difficult to prove that policy transfer has taken place between countries, the end result does often point to a clear set of factors that have led to similar policy outcomes. There is evidence that it is not just democracies that copy one another; authoritarian states too—both 'traditional' and 'new'—appear to borrow and emulate policies from one another.

We use an example of a 'traditional' authoritarian state to show how 'policy transfer' can occur. It seems clear that elite sport policy and development offers one of the few relatively straightforward examples of 'policy transfer', that is, a transfer of a policy or

idea, whether intentional or not, from one sports system and context to another. During the Cold War (1946–1991), many Soviet satellite states (Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Poland and Romania) were very successful at elite sport. Putting systematic, state-led drug use to one side (effective only from the mid to late 1970s), the core structural elements of these sports systems all learnt from, and, in part, resembled, the extremely successful East German sports 'miracle' (Dennis and Grix 2012). That is, most communist countries transferred core parts of the East German system into their own, leading, for example, to four Soviet satellite states, East Germany and the Soviet Union being ranked in the top 10 in the 1976 Summer Olympics medal table (Olympic Museum (Germany) 1976) on the influence of communist states on modern-day elite sport. (See Green and Houlihan 2005; Houlihan and Green 2008; Grix et al. 2024). The key 'ingredients'—and their integrated nature—that made up the East German sports system have gone on, through policy transfer, to provide a blue-print for the foundational development of elite sports systems globally today (the factors taken from East Germany include a government-driven sports policy; the professionalization of coaching; government funding and full-time, professional athletes; systems of talent identification and advanced sports science and medicine) (Dennis and Grix 2012). Mike Carlson, who wrote Manfred Ewald's obituary (East Germany's sports minister) for the Guardian newspaper on his death in 2002 (The Guardian 2002) made the valid point that 'despite being disgraced, in the end he (Ewald) had won, because the entire sporting world followed down the path he had blazed' (Carlson 2008; our emphasis). This does seem to be borne out by states emulating East Germany's sports system with, for example, the well-regarded Australian Institute of Sport is, in part, being based on it (Hoye and Nicholson 2009).

Soviet satellite states all faced the pressure of striving to excel at elite sport in order to showcase their regimes (Houlihan and Green 2008). They also faced another pressure—that of domestic political legitimacy, thus, elite sport success was part of a social contract that appeased citizens and ought to be understood as part of the wider notion of 'bread and circuses' that helped keep these states together (Fulbrook 1995). Such a practice benefited both rulers and the ruled, as sport served as a source of pride for citizens in the majority of Soviet satellite states, while food and (alcoholic) drink was subsidized. Such an arrangement led to an acquiescence of citizens to the regime(s) over a long period of time (Ibid.).

While there is evidence of countries' awareness of policy developments in different jurisdictions, it is often the case that the need for learning from abroad is precipitated in times of 'crisis', that is, a poor performance at an Olympic Games, or failure to win a Test series, or a major international championship in a culturally significant sport, such as cricket (Australia), rugby union (Wales, New Zealand) or skiing (Norway). For example, there are many 'critical junctures' in elite policy development that spur on national reflection on elite sport investment. The 1996 Atlanta Olympics was the site of a number of poor national performances that went on to kick-start the UK's, Japan's and Australia's journey towards an elite-focused sport policy. All three states recorded dismal performances that led to policy re-calibration. Norway experienced a similar disappointment during the 1980s and Netherlands in the 1970s. All of these experiences—coupled with the external success of the Eastern Bloc—prompted a major rethink in sport policy priorities. In these instances, national sports 'crises' acted as 'disrupters' to normal sport policy and set nations on a similar path—or 'convergence' of attempting to achieve elite sport excellence (Grix et al. 2024).

3. The 'New' Authoritarian States and Sport

Our historical case has a number of parallels with the 'new' authoritarian states we analyze below. Both groups of 'traditional' and 'new' authoritarian states are subject to similar external and internal pressures to adapt. The key difference is that the Gulf states are not first and foremost interested in sports performance on the field of play. Whereas 'traditional' authoritarian states sought sporting excellence on the playing field, and the

external recognition and domestic political legitimacy it engendered, the 'new' authoritarian states seek to buy into the cultural power and prestige of ('Western') global elite sport, a practice wrongly termed 'sportswashing' (see Grix et al. 2023; Ettinger 2023). We focused on the three largest and most active nations in the Gulf region in relation to sport. While the small state of Bahrain punches above its weight in terms of hosting sporting events, the scale of its sports investment strategy is yet to reach that of the following cases.

Heavy investment in 'Western' sport brings with it external recognition (not always positive, initially) and goes some way to contribute to the specific kind of social contract at play in the authoritarian states of the region. In terms of 'authoritarian transfer', our case studies of Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia appear to be responding to very similar internal and external 'drivers' or 'pressures', pushing them towards specific investment strategies that include professional sport. While the reasons for sport investment outlined in the state strategy documents below must be viewed as aspirational and long-term (especially given that many of the causal links between sport and physical activity promotion remain unproven), they accompany another set of broader motives. These have more to do with image politics, influence and power. Buying into 'Western' sport is one way of attempting to accrue just that (see Grix et al. 2023).

Each case study state has produced a 'vision' document that discusses their strategy for future development and investment in detail; each of these documents contains the words 'Vision 2030'. We now turn to our three case studies, briefly outlining their core socio-economic data before analyzing their respective 'visions' where they relate to the hosting of sporting events.

4. Qatar

The first of our case studies is Qatar. With a population of just over 3 million, Qatar is a small state located on the Arabian Gulf peninsula. Despite its size, Qatar is nonetheless one of the wealthiest states in the world: the latest figures show that Qatar's nominal GDP per capita is currently the eighth highest in the world, standing at $71,568, while it wields the world's fourth-highest GDP per capita by purchasing power parity, at $115,075 (International Monetary Fund 2024). Such wealth derives from Qatar's abundance of natural resources: Qatar is the world's largest exporter of liquified natural gas, and the world's 15th largest exporter of crude oil, producing on average 1.9 million barrels per day (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2023a). Qatar's significant sums of capital reserve have supported its 'National Vision 2030' (henceforth 'QNV'), which documents the state's ambition to develop into 'an advanced country by 2030, capable of sustaining its own development and providing for a high standard of living for all of its people' (Qatar National Vision 2008). Guided by three iterations of the (Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–2016 2011; Qatar National Development Strategy 2018–2022 2018; Qatar National Development Strategy 2024–2030 2024) (henceforth 'QNDS'), the state's blueprint for achieving the National Vision, Qatar's nation-building project is built on the advancement of four pillars: economic development; human development; social development and environmental development.

A crucial facet of Qatar's attempts to achieve its National Vision has been engagement with global sport. Indeed, like many of its Gulf neighbors (see: Reiche and Brannagan 2022), notable here has been Qatar's desire to bid for, and stage, multiple sport events. Key highlights include the state's staging of the 2006 Asian Games, the 2011 Asian Cup, the 2015 Handball World Championships, the 2019 World Athletics Championships and the 2022 FIFA World Cup (see: Reiche 2015; Al Thani 2021). The staging of such events serves, we argue, three core objectives that are shared across each of our three case studies. The first is the desire to use sports events to achieve the economic development pillar of its National Vision, and, in particular, to assist the state with diversifying its national economy away from a heavy reliance on the sale of hydrocarbon resources. It is estimated that 70% of Qatar's total revenues, 85% of its export earnings and 60% of its gross domestic product are derived from the sale of oil and natural gas (see Brannagan and Reiche 2022a). For the state,

the staging of major sports events, such as the World Cup, help move Qatar away from such a reliance on hydrocarbons by taking advantage of 'the thriving sports tourism sector' (Qatar National Development Strategy 2024–2030 2024, p. 17). Notable in this regard is the belief that such events provide Qatar with an unrivalled opportunity to showcase to the world its cultural amenities, heritage sites and other tourist-related industries, and in doing so, to significantly raise its 'attractiveness and competitiveness' as a global sport and tourism hub (ibid., 17).

Second, is the evidential need to use sport events to inspire Qatar's population, and in doing so, attempt to meaningfully address a national health concern linked to high rates of obesity and diabetes. The Qatar Public Health Strategy 2017–2022 identifies how 70% of Qataris are 'overweight', 41% of whom can be classified as 'obese', while 17% of Qatari adults suffer from diabetes; additionally, amongst Qatar's under-18 population, 32% of boys and 33% of girls can be categorized as either 'overweight' or 'obese' (ibid). According to the World Health Organization (2024) these figures situate Qatar as the world's 11th most obese nation per capita. To address this national health crisis, the state's staging of multiple sports events provides 'exceptional circumstances to make sport a public activity' (Qatar National Development Strategy 2018–2022 2018, p. 6; see also Brannagan and Grix 2023). The central notion here, therefore, it that by raising Qatar's 'sporting excellence', in terms of both the state's hosting of prestigious sports events, and the performance of Qatari athletic achievement, this will, in turn, help to 'develop [a] national commitment to a healthy and active lifestyle', the lack of which has been identified as one of the key drivers underpinning the state's high obesity and diabetes rates (ibid., p. 251).

Third is the desire to use sport events to help place Qatar on the world stage and increase its influence and soft power overseas. As one of the smallest states in Asia, the staging of sports events such as the World Cup help Qatar punch far above its weight in soft-power terms (Brannagan and Reiche 2022b; Brannagan and Rookwood 2016). A common problem faced by small states, such as Qatar, is the continuous 'need to differentiate themselves from their [larger] neighbours who are often culturally similar' (Houlihan and Zheng 2015, p. 334). This is exactly what Qatar has sought to achieve through its staging of sports events: to carve out for itself an independent foreign policy, one that helps it separate itself from the foreign policy of its much larger neighbor, Saudi Arabia (see also: Khatib 2013). For Qatar, sports events thus help in the state's attempt to achieve what Chong (2010, p. 386) calls 'audience socialization': that is, increasing visibility and separating oneself from larger neighbors by educating global audiences on one's existence, individuality and, most importantly, right to sovereign rule and authority. This is something alluded to by the Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–2016 (2011, pp. 19–196) which acknowledges how 'Qatar has enjoyed unprecedented global recognition' through sport, with events such as the World Cup greatly enhancing 'the nation's regional and international image'.

Ironically, while events such as the World Cup have raised awareness of Qatar, so too have they dealt a significant blow to the state's soft power, acting as highly contested events in and of themselves. Notable here has been the wide-spread critique—led by the global media and international non-governmental organizations—of Qatar's human rights record, and specifically the state's treatment of its blue-collar construction workers (see Brannagan and Giulianotti 2018, 2023). Accusations have centered on the poor living and working conditions faced by expatriate workers in Qatar, some of which have been directly linked to World Cup-related projects, leading to groups such as Human Rights Watch (2013, 7 February) labelling Qatar a 'crucible of exploitation and misery'; elsewhere, Amnesty International (2020, 27 January) has argued that the situation in Qatar equates to one where foreign workers were literally 'being subjected to forced labour'.

5. UAE

With a population of just over 9 million inhabitants, the UAE is larger than Qatar, but nonetheless still qualifies as a 'small state'. Like Qatar, the UAE holds significant wealth: it currently has the 21st highest nominal GDP per capita in the world, at $49,550,

and the 14th highest GDP per capita at purchasing power parity standing at $77,251 (International Monetary Fund 2024). Like its wealthy Gulf neighbors, the UAE economy benefits from significant hydrocarbon sales: the UAE is, for example, currently the world's 9th largest exporter of crude oil, exporting on average 3.3 million barrels per day (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2023b). In 2023, the UAE launched its 'We the UAE 2031', the state's vision for the future. The vision has four key pillars: forward society; forward economy; forward diplomacy and forward ecosystem.

Unlike Qatar, the UAE has yet to stage what we may term a 'first-order sport event', that is, a FIFA World Cup or Summer Olympic Games. However, the UAE has staged a number of smaller events, such as the annual Abu Dhabi Formula 1 Grand Prix, the 2019 Asian Cup, the annual Dubai Rugby Sevens, the annual PGA European Tour of professional golf and the seasonal ATP and WTP Dubai Tennis Championships (Swart et al. 2021). The UAE's economy is far more diversified than that of Qatar: in 2022, for example, only 27.6% of the UAE's GDP came from the sale of oil and natural gas (UAE U.S. Embassy 2022). Crucial in the UAE's diversification of its national economy has been the role of tourism: at present, the UAE is the world's 18th most visited tourist destination, and the top destination in the Middle East and North Africa (see: Travel and Tourism Development Index 2024). Crucial in this regard are the two major cities of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, which have positioned themselves as vital global hubs for leisure, culture and business tourism (see: Bodolica et al. 2020). It is here where the regular staging of sports events help ensure the UAE remains economically diversified. The staging of sports events not only creates added forms of inbound sports tourism, but the range of sports and leisure activities on offer also help the cities of Abu Dhabi and Dubai remain 'attractive destination[s] for global talent' and a 'powerful magnet for [international] entrepreneurs and innovators' (We the UAE 2031 n.d., p. 31). In doing so, sport plays a key role in continuously improving and maintaining the UAE's 'economy and the nation's competitiveness' (ibid., p. 47).

Furthermore, like in Qatar, sport also plays a key role in the UAE's desire to address issues linked to the health and well-being of its national citizens. Previous research has demonstrated that 42% of the adult population of the UAE are 'overweight', with 28% considered 'obese' (see: Mamdouh et al. 2023). Currently, the UAE is the world's 46th most obese nation (World Health Organization 2024). For UAE authorities, sport arguably plays an identical role to that of Qatar: that is, to produce a national society that includes 'physically and mentally healthy, active individuals that positively contribute to their communities and the economy' (We the UAE 2031 n.d., p. 23). Furthermore, a key objective is to foster a society which 'enables individuals to prosper mentally, physically, socially and economically, and strengthens social cohesion through community building activities, cultural events and sports' (ibid., p. 23). Sport thus plays a pivotal role in the physical, mental and human capital development of the UAE's 'forward society' aspirations.

Finally, there is the role sport seeks to play within the UAE's diplomatic and soft power ambitions. For the UAE, the desire to position the country as a 'leading global dialogue on diversity, tolerance and peace', and as 'a role model for adopting ecofriendly best practices in economy and society' is key (We the UAE 2031 n.d., p. 39). In relation to the latter, sport plays a vital role in this regard; note, for example, the Dubai Sports Council's 2024–2030 strategic plan, a key tenet of which includes the use of the sports sector 'to contribute to Dubai's ambitious sustainability targets, including a 50% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030' (Government of Dubai 2023, 14 December). Such an attempt has included the 'use of renewable energy and effective waste management in stadiums', as part of 'Dubai's dedication to making sports events more sustainable', and to 'elevate sustainability within the UAE's sports ecosystem' (Government of Dubai 2024, 22 October). The need to present the UAE as an environmentally aware country is, arguably, paramount given the state is currently the world's seventh largest per capita producer of carbon dioxide emissions (European Commission 2022).

In the realm of sport, it has, however, been in the area of human rights that the UAE has received, arguably, its greatest level of international scrutiny. Like Qatar, the

contested nature of sport can be found in accusations that the UAE has sought to use sport to divert attention away from its human rights abuses at home. Human Rights Watch (2024, 3 October), for example, has argued that the decision by the U.S.'s National Basketball Association (NBA) to stage several pre-season matches in Abu Dhabi equates to an attempt by the latter to project an image of 'openness', whilst failing to meaningfully address its ongoing human rights violations, nor sufficiently protect its large segment of migrant construction workers. Similarly, so too have sports such as Formula 1 received criticism for their decision to stage races across the Arabian Gulf states; in 2020, seven-time world champion, Lewis Hamilton, for example, publicly critiqued the 'consistent and massive problem' F1 has in awarding states with poor human rights records the opportunity to partner with the sport (see: The Guardian 2020, 12 December). Despite this, the sport's governing body has since extended its partnership with the Gulf states, now including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE as established destinations within the F1 calendar (see: Financial Times 2022, 18 November).

6. Saudi Arabia

Our final case study is Saudi Arabia, officially known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is one of the most important states in the Gulf region. With a population of 33 million, Saudi Arabia is the largest state in the Gulf with a GDP per capita by purchasing power parity of $63.12 (International Monetary Fund 2024), similar to that of the UK. However, Saudi has the second-largest number of oil reserves in the world, amounting to some 17% of the world's petroleum (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2023a). This has led to Saudi building up immense levels of wealth, which it invests via its sovereign wealth fund (Public Investment Fund, or PIF), which is among the largest in the world (Reuters 2023). The significant sums of capital reserve have, like Qatar, formed the bedrock of Saudi's 'Vision 2030', which, according to the official Government website '. . . is a blueprint that is diversifying the economy, empowering citizens, creating a vibrant environment for both local and international investors, and establishing Saudi Arabia as a global leader' (Vision 2030 2016). Similar to Qatar, Saudi's 'Vision' is built on three 'pillars': 1. a 'thriving society' that will continue Saudi's leading role 'as the heart of Arab and Islamic worlds' (Vision 2030 2016, p. 13); 2. creating a sustainable and more diverse economy through investment and 3. leveraging Saudi's strategic location to develop its role 'as an integral driver of international trade and to connect three continents: Africa, Asia and Europe' (ibid.).

As with the two cases above, Saudi Arabia has chosen professional sport as an investment to achieve many of the aims set out in the Vision 2030, starting immediately after the document's publication in 2016. The Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, was behind both the publication and articulation within the 'Vision' document and has spearheaded the Kingdom's investment in European sport, making a number of major investments in sports, sports events and sports sponsorship, often for eye-watering sums. (See Ettinger 2023, for an overview of all sports-related investments). The Crown Prince, who is also the Prime Minister of Saudi and effectively the ruler of the Kingdom, is the Chair of the state's PIF and has also set about hosting a myriad of sporting events in the Kingdom. The majority of academics and commentators have focused their attention on the external aspect of Saudi's sports investment strategy—especially the cases of their controversial investment in England's Premier League football club, Newcastle United (see: Black et al. 2024; Roslender 2024; Ettinger 2023; Crossley and Woolf 2024), and the massive investment in shaking up professional golf by launching the LIV Golf tour to rival the Professional Golf Association tour (Davis et al. 2023; Johnson 2024; Jephson et al. 2024), two entities which have since 'merged'. More striking, perhaps, has been the Kingdom's investment in bringing sport to their state, including recurring F1 events, golf, tennis, football—including hosting other states' national 'cups' in Saudi—World Wrestling Entertainment events and, increasingly, global boxing matches (see Ettinger 2023; Brannagan et al. 2024).

The first reason for Saudi's investment in hosting major sporting events is economic. After witnessing Qatar's successful staging of the FIFA 2022 Football World Cup, Saudi

Arabia sought to attract the most-watched sporting spectacle in the world to its country. After FIFA announced it was seeking prospective hosts for the 2034 version of the World Cup (and allowing just 25 days for a response), Saudi Arabia was the only party interested. Thus, this global event with upwards of 4.8 billion cumulative viewers (FIFA 2023) will now be held in the Gulf for a second time. This is the pinnacle of a sport-hosting strategy that began prior to the launch of the nation's 'Vision 2030' with the World Wrestling Entertainment events in 2013, part of a 10-year deal costing the Saudis some $500 million (Ettinger 2023).

A second reason for sustained investment in sports is seen as improving the health of Saudi citizens. Currently, the average life expectancy is 74 (Vision 2030 2016, p. 31), which is far lower than the 81.5 average in the European Union in 2023 (Eurostat 2024). Similar to Qatar and the UAE, rising levels of prosperity have been accompanied by decreasing levels of physical activity and a rise in sedentary behavior (Al-Hazzaa 2018). For this reason, the Saudi Government launched the 'Quality of Life' (QoL) program as part of its Vision 2030 stating that a 'healthy and balanced lifestyle is an essential mainstay of a high quality of life' (Vision 2030 2016, p. 22). The task of helping Saudi citizens become more physically active is clearly an urgent one, for, according to Albujulaya et al. (2023), the 'latest national survey conducted by the Saudi General Authority for Statistics in 2019 concluded that 78% of Saudis were inactive'. As with most countries, there are specific cohorts in Saudi society who fare worse when it comes to levels of physical activity. Whereas in the UK some minority groups record the lowest levels of activity, in Saudi Arabia it is schoolgirls who are among those least active (ibid., pp. 5–6), in part due to a severe lack of sports facilities and teachers.

The third reason for investing in the hosting of events is to put Saudi Arabia on the map. Quite apart from the key investment in Newcastle Football Club in 2021, which caused a stir in the media among cries of 'sportswashing' (see above), the Saudis have been investing heavily in football—both in hosting the Italian and the Spanish 'Super Cup' (in the Saudi capital Riyadh), paying around EUR 30 million for each year the games are played (Reuters 2022) and in buying up top-class footballers (many coming to the end of their careers) to play in the domestic Saudi Pro League. In 2022, Cristiano Ronaldo signed a 2.5-year contract with Al Nassr FC, and the hope is his presence will increase attendance at games (The Guardian 2021). There followed a number of other big-name signings, including Neymar, Karim Benzema and N'Golo Kante (BBC Sport 2023). All of this created a great deal of publicity for the Kingdom, the majority of which was (initially) negative.

Saudi Arabia's sports investment strategy is among one of the most contested of all our cases, especially after Jamal Khashoggi, a US-based journalist and critic of Saudi Arabia's government, was murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul (BBC 2021). His murder has been linked to the Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, by US intelligence agencies (The Guardian 2021). This, and a number of issues with human rights in Saudi Arabia, has led to an avalanche of criticism of the state's investment in European sport, led mostly by international organizations, such as Amnesty International, which described FIFA's awarding of the 2034 World Cup to Saudi as 'blatant sports washing' (Amnesty International 2023). The continued contestation inherent in the 'sportswashing' debate obfuscates more than it clarifies. By reducing the above sports investment strategies to an attempt to cover up human rights abuses at home, there is a risk of losing sight of what is actually happening, that is, a long-term shift in who owns and controls professional sport.

7. Conclusions

This paper identifies a group of 'new' authoritarian states that each pursue similar sports investment strategies in response to similar external and domestic impetuses—a process that has a number of parallels with the 'traditional' authoritarian states during the Cold War in relation to their reliance on sport for external recognition and domestic political legitimacy. All three of the cases introduced above are (in their own words) investing in sport for economic gain, to improve the health of their populations and to gain global

recognition. Although this development is relatively new and the consequences of these state-led sports investment strategies are only beginning to come to light, it is clear that the impact on shaping modern professional sport, including how and where it is played and how it is consumed, is likely to be profound. The contestation that has accompanied the massive financial investments in sport by Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and, above all, the 'sportswashing' accusations and debate, has, we believe, led to a lack of understanding of how and why these investments are taking place.

If Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia continue to invest in global professional sport at the same rate as at present, it is very likely that these three authoritarian states will, in the long-term, extend their influence and power in global sport. Thus, such sport investment strategies as outlined above are neither simply an attempt to 'wash' a country's image (there is little evidence that this actually works), nor is it just an economic decision with which to secure the future. Rather, there is much more at play here for the long-term development of professional sport if it is funded and shaped by the resource-rich, authoritarian Gulf states.

A limitation of our paper is the fact that the authors offer a 'Western' lens on the three authoritarian cases; we have mitigated this somewhat by attempting to show their sports investment strategies via their own materials and sources.

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Contested Terrains: Mega-Event Securities and Everyday Practices of Governance

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Abstract: Sport mega-events (SMEs) remake cities as global brandscapes of leisured consumption; reliant in part upon securitization designed to create an atmosphere free from disturbance and render invisible those "abject" populations who might puncture the tourist bubble that surrounds stadia and fan-zones. Yet, such "shiny" cityspaces are not devoid of complexity, contestation, and compunction. In this paper, we draw on extensive ethnographic- and community-based participatory research in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (prior to, during, and after two SMEs) collected in collaboration with sex workers, working in areas of SME intervention. Our focus is on the contingent nature of securitization amidst the contested terrains and trajectories of SME urbanism. Our analysis resonates with observations from other host cities, challenging dominant myths that the sport mega-event creates impermeable securitized cityscapes by revealing the fluid topography of formality and informality, contestation and negotiation, and oppression and power.

Keywords: sport mega-event; securitization; host communities; sex work; Rio de Janeiro

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1. Dialectics of Security: "Security" as Practices of Governance

We are increasingly governed through security or under the guise of security. The term "security" carries significant weight across diverse domains. From ensuring food security and human security to cybersecurity and "securities" as a tradeable financial asset, through to the type of surveillance security within public streets and in spaces such as malls, stadiums, and airports, there exists a noticeable trend wherein state agencies, private security firms, and even non-state actors increasingly utilize a growing variety of technologies to monitor, militarize, and "secure" spaces and activities. With its proliferation and popular deployments, security is hardly considered the realm of experts, their machinery, or their cavalry, but has become an expectation bestowed upon ordinary people. As Valverde (2011, p. 4) earlier writes, "Neighbours, teachers, parents, bank tellers, air travellers and numerous other groups are constantly exhorted to watch for security breaches or risks and do their part".

Despite, or perhaps due to, their widespread implementation, security initiatives frequently express internal contradictions and inconsistencies. One notable example is the supposed "modernizing" of policing practices, which continue to exacerbate historical patterns for marginalized, mostly racialized groups. Efforts aimed at ensuring security persistently grapple with its complexities and adverse consequences, exhibiting its internal contradictions. Indeed, Beck (1992) contended that while modern societies have made considerable strides in managing traditional risks such as those stemming from natural disasters and infectious diseases, they concurrently introduce new risks through technological innovations and industrial processes. For instance, surveillance technologies, ostensibly designed to bolster security, often encroach upon individual privacy rights and engender new vulnerabilities, such as data breaches and cyber assaults. Beck introduced the concept of "manufactured risks" to delineate these novel hazards, which are frequently obscure,

intricate, and resistant to prediction or control. His argument that technologies developed to enhance security often inadvertently generate new risks emphasizes the *objects* of security without acknowledging the internal contradictions of security. Ultimately, irrespective of the latest devices or technological advancements—characteristic of so-called modern societies in a globalizing world—security remains inherently conflicted.

Valverde (2011) underscores the inherent paradoxes of security, viewing it not as a static concept or tangible entity, but as dynamic and internally contradictory practices of governance. Valverde (2011, p. 5) argues that while the term "security" is grammatically employed as a noun, caution is needed against assuming its concrete existence—it is dangerous to assume that "security actually exists, even as a fuzzy concept" (2011, p. 5). Valverde posits that security is contingent, concluding, "all that we can know about security is what people do in its name, and that therefore our focus should be on practices of governance that in fact appeal to 'security'" (2011, p. 5). Consequently, she advocates for a shift away from generalized theories of security towards an adaptable, content-neutral framework conducive to empirical investigations into security governance, with the aim of elucidating its practical manifestations. We follow her work in this paper as we unpack the messy, localized contestation of security practices in Rio de Janeiro before, during, and after two sport mega-events—the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Through a focus on local actors, our emphasis is on understanding security as a practice, or set of governance practices, that are performed with full knowledge that an actual objective condition of security is "probably unattainable and at best impermanent" (Zedner 2009, p. 19).

2. Security and the Sport Mega-Event

Security practices at sport mega-events have attracted considerable attention, particularly in a post-9/11 era. As suggested by Whelan (2014), surveillance and security studies of the sport mega-event (namely the Olympics and FIFA World Cup) tend to focus on three overlapping issues: (i) security "legacies" of sport mega-events; (ii) security risks and the infrastructures and technologies used in attempt to manage those risks; and (iii) the overall "security spectacle" that characterizes sport mega-events. Each theme is briefly overviewed now.

Giulianotti and Klauser (2010, p. 54) call attention to six security legacies: security technologies; new security practices; governmental policies and new legislation; externally imposed social transformations; generalized changes in social and trans-societal relationships; and urban development. Whelan (2014) notes that security technologies such as surveillance systems are often the focus of most critical sport mega-event security studies, yet, increasingly, legacies of newly adopted governmental policies and legislative reform are considered in analyses—particularly the legislative powers bestowed to police and security agencies. For example, the influx of federal funding and resources for the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles bolstered the capacity of law enforcement agencies, enabling widespread surveillance capabilities and newly enacted militarized policing strategies. This militarization of policing, coupled with racial biases and discriminatory practices, contributed to the erosion of trust between law enforcement and Black and Brown communities in Los Angeles. A recent investigation of such legacies demonstrates that "much of the [1984 Olympic] security budget went towards more personnel and weapons that would go on to normalize extreme, violent practices and the idea of a fully militarized police department as the new reality" (NOlympicsLA 2020, para. 13). One egregious legacy is Operation Hammer, which expanded upon the "gang sweeps" that occurred across Los Angeles in preparation for the games, and targeted young Black and Brown men—the use of excessive police force was eventually captured on camera with the violent, forceful arrest of Rodney King.

Security risks at sport mega-events are identified by three categories: (i) terrorism; (ii) spectator and political violence; and (iii) poverty, social divisions, and urban crime. Collectively, these categories are used to rationalize the enormous investment in infras-

tructures and technologies. For example, Fussey et al. (2011) describe the "total" security model implemented at the 2012 London Games that (i) involved intense planning for "resilience" should a terrorist attack eventuate; (ii) the development of "island" security and the transformation of public and private space through "defensible space" techniques at key sites; and, finally, (iii) the deployment of advanced surveillance technologies, which were intended to monitor people and space and expanded the existent network in host communities. Atkinson and Young (2012) further extrapolate from such studies of risk and its infrastructures to argue that the omnipresent risk of terrorism has transformed the organization and experience of sporting events, influencing public perceptions of risk and associated policy.

Overall, event securities and the intense militarization of host cities is thought to contribute to a "security spectacle" rather than deter or remedy actual security risks. In host cities, it is typical to witness RAF fighters soaring overhead, long-range surface-to-air missiles stationed at various points, portable missiles visibly positioned on buildings near Olympic sites, drones hovering above, parked tanks, docked aircraft carriers, and the strategic deployment of tactile teams and snipers near venues (see especially Manley and Silk 2014). Boyle and Haggerty (2009) argue that security spectacles are largely about providing the illusion of "absolute security" or the appearance of control despite uncertainty. Such enormous displays of security, whilst increasing feelings of "security" for some exacerbate feelings of "insecurity" in others familiarly forced into its theatre (Zedner 2009).

Few studies have complicated the "totalizing rhetoric" of mega-event security (Muller 2015, with notable exceptions such as Cornelissen 2011; Pauschinger 2020; Paton et al. 2012). Indeed, whilst mega-event securities might be overdetermined by "exclusive corporate territorial enclaves within the Olympic city" (Duignan and McGillivray 2019, p. 709), there exists little work on the contingent nature of securitization and how city spaces are indeed far messier, *contested* terrains. Through ethnographic work during the 2016 Rio Olympics, (Duignan and McGillivray 2019; Duignan et al. 2020, 2022) attended to these in-between spaces—the physical, spatial, and imagined borders, boundaries, barriers, and buffers between the allegedly "formal" and the "informal" city. Their work reveals moments of disorganization in which microentrepreneurs reimagine "official" corporate merchandise and exploit gaps to secure their own livelihoods, noting that exceptional legislation was inconsistently applied by law enforcement, and that efforts to securitize visitor flows and mobility are never guaranteed. With Pavoni (2015, 2017), this paints a more complex picture than any totalizing rhetoric, instead recognizing the internal contradictions, frictions, and resistances—however fleeting, dangerous, necessary, or indeed mundane—inherent to security. This type of approach invites us to strip back the "urban macula" (Silk 2010), and understand the dispossessive tendencies of mega-event development, its convergence with broader nodes and modes of neoliberal capitalism, and—given our focus—the creative capacities of people laboring in popular economies. In so doing, we add to the literatures on "contestation" at the sport mega-event, furthering understandings of what Horne (2015) terms the three main sites of political contestation—rights, legacy, and labor. Specifically, we can begin to gather a more nuanced recognition of the localised and diverse impacts of the sport mega-event on host communities, popularly figured as victim or vulnerable, and the continued innovation needed to harness urban interstices and exceptions (De Lisio et al. 2019b; De Lisio and Sodre 2019).

Despite advancing our knowledge of security planning, infrastructures, surveillance technologies, and their ongoing legacies, there remains something of a scholarly lacuna that examines how local contexts both enable and constrain entrepreneurial action generally and in the context of sport mega-events (see Duignan et al. 2020). The work alluded to in this section mostly focused on tourist experiences—albeit supplemented with some fascinating observational/visual insights—with little-to-no voice or perspective from local actors. Indeed, Duignan and McGillivray (2019) point to the need for longer periods of ethnographic engagement that extends from the "live staging" focus of their work.

They suggest the need for extended ethnographic work that can examine lived spatial transformations in the build up to and in the legacies of mega-events. Thus, we aim to both complement and extend work to date through an extended longitudinal exploration with groups in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, prior to, during, and after the 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games. Through long-term engagement with host communities, this work advances sport mega-event security studies through a particular focus on how sport mega-event "security" is coordinated by actually existing practices and systems of governance. While virtually all analysts recognize that "sporting mega-events involve a level of organization unmatched outside of wartime and planning that requires significant alteration to the governance of the host city or country" (Fussey and Coaffee 2012, p. 2), very few have sought to examine how security agents actually negotiate and mediate established practices amongst and within host communities. For this reason, an analysis of security logics, scope, and techniques that is attentive to security's inherent everyday contradictions and dynamics is needed.

3. Methodological Approach: Everyday in/Securities in Event Cities

The data discussed herein were drawn from an integrated methodological approach that included (i) document analyses of "official" development plans and policing strategies for the sport mega-event; (ii) the collection of observational data (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019; Markula and Silk 2011); and (iii) context-building conversational interview data (both formal and informal) with over 100 interviewees (mostly ciswomen and *travesti* sex workers). Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Toronto (ID: 29538, 12 March 2013), Bournemouth University (ID: 12427, 10 August 2016), and the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (ID: 55633816-8-0000-5699, 1 July 2016). Data collection occurred across two studies centred on the preparation for, the staging of, and the "legacy" of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Rio Olympic Games respectively.[1] Potential concerns with access, risk, power relations, and trust were mitigated through the longevity of the data collection period, which led to familiarity and integration. Furthermore, to counter such concerns, we worked in collaboration with the Prostitution Policy Watch at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) and were present in the field at various stages between April 2014 and August 2018[2]. One author, De Lisio, lived in Rio de Janeiro for one year and continues to work with respective collaborators and community groups, virtually, especially during the pandemic, and in-person, returning in December 2022 for an additional month of research. Time not spent in Brazil is used to leverage opportunities for knowledge mobilization, translation of relevant Brazilian sex worker-authored material, and the writing of various applications to financially support the continuance of partnered research activities. Data analysis focused largely on urban mobilities and creative (socio-spatial) opposition to, and contestation of, everyday insecurities in mega-event Rio de Janeiro.[3] Our intent was to learn from the often-silenced stories of event hosting, and our integrative dataset, which included document analysis, interview, and observational data, allowed us to do so. We now analyse a small subset of this larger dataset to illustrate security practices in 2014/2016 host contexts. Analyses thus homed in on one particular concern: the consequence of mega-event "security" on sex workers in Rio de Janeiro.

4. Practices of Governance in Mega-Event Rio de Janeiro

A dominant discourse of urban insecurity is often mobilized to rationalize mega-event investment in securities—i.e., the deployment of expansive personnel, technologies, and hardware. In this section, we speak to the collision of practices of governance in Rio de Janeiro and the extent to which the sport mega-event attempted to intervene. We argue that, despite the enormous investment and façade of newly militarized host communities, insecurities remained, and "security" as a practice failed to be guaranteed. In order to discuss the particularities of mega-event securities in Rio de Janeiro, it is important to offer an abbreviated overview of the different technologies, policies, and personnel that frame geographies of in/security in Rio de Janeiro—to which a complex assemblage of military

strategies, surveillance technologies, favela pacification, and armed *milícias* (militias) offer a unified impression (de Certeau 1984) of security yet mask lived and living realities of urban insecurity. For example, security preparations for the 2007 Pan/Parapan American Games, an event that initially sought to secure subsequent mega-event bids, involved Civil and Military Police violently invading Complexo do Alemão, resulting in the killing of 19 people. In October 2009, less than a month after Rio de Janeiro was named host of the 2016 Summer Olympic Games, a large-calibre weapon shot down a police helicopter one mile from the Maracanã football stadium. With stories of urban violence internationally spotlighted, Brazilian authorities made a public commitment to enhance state security. Specifically, the 2016 Olympic Bid Committee promised to resolve urban insecurities before 2012 and noted investments in personnel, equipment, and technologies as priorities. Rodrigo Pimentel, former police captain for the Military Police in Rio de Janeiro, stated in an interview to the New York Times: "Now the cost of security will be very high, but it will be worth it. Let's be honest, one more helicopter that falls down in Rio de Janeiro or another slum invasion could seriously raise the chances of the Olympics and World Cup pulling out of Brazil" (as cited by Barrionuevo 2009). Authorities also installed biometric and genomic technologies: such as an integrated camera circuit controlled by the Integrated Command and Control Centre (CICC). The Israeli firm International Security and Defense Systems (ISDS), contracted for the 2007 Pan/Parapan Games, allegedly signed an additional BRL 2.2 billion contract to coordinate future event securities (Desai and Sykes 2019). The imperious instalment of networked surveillance technologies, personnel, and international expertise was combined with strategies framed as more peaceful or friendlier, such as the widely criticized UPP (Pacifying Police Unit/Programme). The installation of pacification police targeted urban geographies historically occupied and maintained by Afro-Brazilian people (Ystanes and Salem 2020) and combined a racialized discourse of anti-Blackness with a public health discourse of hygienization to rationalize the eviction of people deemed contagious, diseased, and/or harmful to social order. Hygienization and pacification are entrenched in the colonial logic of Black disposability in Rio de Janeiro (Alves 2018) and render the widespread displacement of Black communities from the downtown/tourist core as a predictable outcome of mega-event reform.

Understanding practices of mega-event security in Rio de Janeiro also requires understanding the work of *milícias* (militias). Historically, militias emerged to provide a temporary fix to violent inequalities, structural insecurities, and the imminent threat of drug-related violence in communities without adequate investment. In 2006, ahead of the 2007 Pan/Parapan American Games, the Mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Cesar Maia, enthusiastically embraced militias as a form of "community self-defence" thought to prevent the spontaneous violence associated with drug trafficking gangs (namely Comando Vermelho, Terceiro Comando Puro, and Amigo dos Amigos) and maintaining relative calm across host communities (Benmergui and Gonçalves 2019, p. 381). Yet militias' modus operandi involves the coercive control of territories and communities by an illegally armed group that communicates the notion that it is the only faction capable of citizen safety and protection (Cano 2013). The ability of militias to act violently with degrees of impunity is due to the integral involvement of elected and appointed authorities in their leadership. Indeed, Marielle Franco, the first Black, feminist, bisexual favela resident elected to Rio de Janeiro City Council (murdered in March 2018 in an attack linked to militias) documented the presence of militias in 171 communities and detailed their intricate connection with state authorities. Her investigation led to the indictment of 218 people—67 were military police, 8 civil policemen, 5 city councilmen, some were linked to other public agencies, and another 879 were notified without sufficient evidence for an indictment (Misse 2018, p. 75). Of the 171 communities, 119 never belonged to a drug faction and, thus, complicated the notion that militias occupy communities to combat drug-related violence. The scholarly work and political advocacy of Marielle Franco illuminates the intricate involvement of Brazilian state and municipal authorities throughout Rio de Janeiro and their consolidation of a parallel state structure and alternative rule of law within urban peripheries.

Critical urban scholarship, not necessarily invested in analyses of the sport mega-event, is attuned to the various systems and practices of governance that construct everyday in/securities. With unreliable state involvement and rule of law, criminal gangs assume multifaceted roles beyond mere involvement in illicit trade. Drawing from insights of critical geographer Jennifer Tucker (2023) and her exploration of outlaw capital, these groups are enlisted to address grievances of everyday life—they are called upon to right the wrongs—thereby garnering tolerance and, at times, even reverence. Moreover, by offering assistance and aid amid sporadic and multiple crises, they acquire the perception of "good" or "benign" bandits. While studies on sport mega-event securities acknowledge this complex terrain, the emphasis on totalizing plans and strategies can only superficially account for, at best, or entirely obscure the synchronicities that unfold at the local level. With special attention focused on Rio de Janeiro, Duignan et al. (2022, p. 72) noted the following:

> There are multiple Rios, and it is dangerous to summarize the complexity of such a complex city, but Rio is associated with social inequality and inner-city conflict. It is a polarized city, where decadent lifestyles coexist with destitution (Gaffney 2015), a so-called splintering urbanism (Graham and Marvin 2002) where tourist-zones and local-neighbourhoods are juxtaposed and clearly separated.

We aim to highlight some of the various systems and practices of governance in Rio de Janeiro, challenging dominant discourses that justify heavy investments in "official" security forces, by revealing persistent insecurities. Overall, we argue that the security strategies implemented in mega-event Rio de Janeiro not only failed to guarantee security but also masked deeper practices of governance and power dynamics within and across host communities. In analyses of mega-event securities, there is a need to understand the "multiple Rios" which converge to create in/securities. In the next section, we prioritize the voices, experiences, and perspectives of sex workers, so often forced to contest and negotiate state practices of security, used to militate against so-called criminal or "abject" populations, and more recently converging with religious and feminist forces to "rescue" women.

5. Managing in/Securities in Mega-Event Rio de Janeiro

Whilst global in nature, (mega-event) securities designed to secure tourism and associated capital are constituted and consolidated at a highly localized level. As Simone (2004, p. 407) insists, the "incessantly flexible, mobile and provisional" human activities that contour urban infrastructure—the delicate dance to secure Rio de Janeiro for an international audience—were reliant upon host communities and their interaction with newly installed urban hardware (e.g., networked CCTV, video surveillance, etc.), as well as the existent plurality of social order (Arias and Barnes 2016). The contested nature of (mega-event) securities in Rio de Janeiro, on the one hand, depended upon the "aesthetic of security" (Caldeira 1996, 2000) that is familiar across FIFA/IOC host cities: pacified favela or "slum" communities fortified for tourist consumption, spectacular militarism (see Figure 1, Copacabana Palace, the official home of FIFA/Olympic executive), and the introduction of so-called rescue industries for women and children (Mitchell 2022). On the other hand, it involved the routine work of women who are made to navigate local authorities that also benefit from their labor. Their realities reflect a framework of securitization that is manufactured and realized in the street through women and their bodies—not political, legislative, or even technologic processes.

Urban insecurities were a regular and mundane topic of conversation amongst sex workers. Indeed, this was seen as a condition of their labor and precarious status within Rio de Janeiro, yet this seldom resulted in the widespread erasure of sexual commerce.

> *Everyone wanted to end prostitution in Copacabana. But they need to understand that will never happen. When they close one bar, another one opens up. They close one, the girls move to another. If they close it, the girls will go somewhere else. They're never going to leave. They'll never get rid of the prostitutes—because they'll never end the demand.*

> *Todo mundo queria acabar com a prostituição em Copacabana. Mas eles precisam entender que isso nunca vai acontecer. Quando fecham um bar, outro abre. Fecham um, as meninas se mudam para outro. Se fecharem ele, as meninas vão para outro lugar. Elas nunca vão embora. Eles nunca vão se livrar das prostitutas–porque eles nunca vão acabar com a demanda.* (author translated, personal communication, 22 September 2016)

Figure 1. Copacabana Palace.

Hubbard and Wilkinson (2014, p. 610) argue that sex work is inherently important to the touristic offer of all global cities, albeit this is seldom acknowledged in official urban redevelopment policy or rhetoric. With the sport mega-event, there is still interest in the maintenance of sexual economies, even if visibilities are transformed. The closure of a well-known beachfront restaurant in Copacabana that was famous for prostitution, Balcony Bar, reinforced this account. With the restaurant ordered to close, due to an allegation of forced sexual exploitation of women and children which remained unfounded, women relocated to the adjacent piazza and harnessed the still-active wireless internet to contact clientele. The ideological debate on prostitution (and the resultant lack of clear legislation) benefitted women and their establishment of cross-class solidarities (see Blanchette and da Silva 2011). The synchronicities required to orchestrate popular economies (see especially Gago 2017) are reflective of the false division between formal and informal. One woman who worked in privé nearest Porto Maravilha explicated as follows:

> *Did you ever think this establishment would be closed by the police?*
>
> *Never. Because when you work in these places, you see that there is a bribe paid to the police. As soon as you don't pay then it could happen, but the owner/Madame would never want to risk that, especially at a time when there is more money to be made. So, there was no risk of that.*
>
> *Você já pensou que esse estabelecimento seria fechado pela polícia?*
>
> *Nunca. Porque quando você trabalha nesses lugares, você vê que tem uma propina sendo paga pra polícia. Assim que você não pagar, isso pode acontecer, mas o pro-*

> *prietário/Madame nunca ia querer arriscar isso, principalmente num momento em que tem mais dinheiro pra ser ganhado. Então, não havia risco disso.* (author translated, personal communication, 4 July 2014)

Another woman traveled from São Paulo to work in the tourist-oriented South Zone of Rio de Janeiro for the duration of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympic Games. With her knowledge of Brazilian cities, she provided further insight into the intimate and complex network between government authorities, law enforcement, militia, and other criminal entities that maintained the businesses she traveled to for work:

> *Let me tell you something about these supposedly illegal clubs. Every day there are judges, prosecutors, police officers, sheriffs, magistrates, etc. in there. Most (sex) businesses would never work if it were not for those men. They create a kind of buffer. They make it work. So, we don't really fear the cops. No one will arrest you . . . We work inside with security. It is exactly like I told you: For a business to function, for any brothel to work, there must be this buffer.*
>
> *Deixe-me dizer-lhe algo sobre esses clubes supostamente ilegais. Todos os dias têm juízes, promotores, policiais, delegados, magistrados, etc. lá dentro. A maioria dos negócios (sexuais) nunca funcionaria se não fossem esses homens. Eles criam uma espécie de proteção. Eles fazem funcionar. Então, a gente não tem muito medo dos policiais. Ninguém vai te prender. . . Trabalhamos lá dentro com segurança. É exatamente como eu te disse: para um negócio funcionar, para qualquer bordel funcionar, tem que haver essa proteção.* (author translated, personal communication, 4 July 2014)

In conversation, she expertly illustrates the work of Alba Zaluar (2000) and José Cláudio Souza Alves (1998, 2020) with respect to organized crime, which crosses all social classes and is integrated—however perversely—with organized "legal" business. Zaluar (2000, p. 654) argues poignantly that organized crime cannot survive without institutional support from state authorities. The arbitrariness of prostitution legislation in Brazil opened possibilities for people to create a separate realm for arbitration (see also Zaluar and Conceição 2007). This buffer—as described by a project participant—tightly comprised elected and appointed authorities and afforded women some assurance. José Cláudio Souza Alves (1998, 2020) details the mutually beneficial connection between organized crime and state agencies wherein access to registries of publicly owned land was shared with militia to request title. Through extensive fieldwork within communities in Rio de Janeiro, Alves narrates the institutional supports that made possible the "militia tax" added on properties (approximately BRL 1000) listed for sale. Land irregularly tallied, measured, and registered added opportunities for men to practice their own entrepreneurialism.

Similarly, across from the newly privatized port area of Rio de Janeiro sat the sister municipality of Niterói, which served as the backdrop for Porto Maravilha and de facto destination for much of the event-related tourist traffic. Event-prompted development in downtown Rio de Janeiro rippled across the Guanabara Bay to stimulate an urban facelift in the adjacent port area here (de Queiroz Ribeiro and Corrêa 2017). One particular site of contention—threatened due to heightened real estate speculation—was an 11-storey condominium above a bank (the Caixa) that served as the largest sex zone in the area ever since it emerged in the aftermath of the second dictatorship (1964–1985) (Figure 2). Women worked in the Caixa semi-autonomously, backed by militia; some pocketed BRL 8000/month (approximately USD 4000), but most made well over minimum wage (BRL 880/month or BRL 228/month). As one noted, "In a week you could make R$2000 or R$1500 [approx. USD$500 or $390]. It was good there, really" (personal communication, 24 September 2016). Slightly melancholic, she seemed keen to elaborate. We sat in silence a minute more, and then she resumed speaking:

> *Now I'm going to tell you this: the Caixa Econômica [as it was commonly referred] was different because of the security we had. The music wasn't too loud and there were three security guards on every floor. If anything happened, the guy would have to pass them. If something happened with a girl, they would beat him up and throw him down the stairs.*

And there was no way he could rip you off because he had to pay to go up to the room, so the money was already there. And during the sessions, the manager would go there and knock on the door to ask if everything was cool.

Agora vou te dizer o seguinte: a Caixa Econômica [como era comumente referida] era diferente por causa da segurança que a gente tinha. A música não era muito alta e tinha três seguranças em cada andar. Se acontecesse alguma coisa, o cara ia ter que passar por eles. Se algo acontecesse com uma menina, eles espancavam ele e jogavam ele escada abaixo. E não tinha como ele te passar pra trás porque ele tinha que pagar pra ir até o quarto, então o dinheiro já estava lá. E durante as sessões, o gerente ia lá e batia na porta pra perguntar se estava tudo legal. (author translated, personal communication, 24 September 2016)

Figure 2. The Caixa.

In addition to hired security, women explained that they also maintained a collegial relationship with the nearby Civil Police precinct. Some policemen acted as regular clientele at the Caixa Econômica, while the division collected a generous monthly stipend—a standard arrangement for businesses marked with irregularities (further discussed below). With the launch of Olympic militarism/urbanism, a new territorial war ensued between the militias and newly empowered state agencies (see especially Murray 2014), which caused the violent eviction at the Caixa Econômica. Even though the eviction was marred by illegalities and brute violence, media focused on the women and their supposed (im)moralities.

Centred yet neglected, voiceless yet constructed as a threat, the official narrative rationalized the eviction of women reliant upon sex work and typified the culture of machismo moral impunity. The media coverage and broader public reaction, although not the focus of our analysis, validated the action and celebrated the infiltration of a supposed crime ring, obscuring the intricate involvement of state authorities in such businesses.

At home, as with at work, women routinely spoke of the need to invent and invest in their own security strategies—despite the massive state investment in event securities. To do so, women maintained their own network of well-connected businessmen—an allegiance that was appropriately compensated. Most referenced was the arrangement with Civil Police, who routinely collected an *acerto* (settlement) or bribe.[4] One worker/manager of a privé in Centro/downtown explained as follows:

> *The house I work in, every house I have ever worked in, pays the police to stay open. If not, for sure, they would be closed. Everyone coughs up the money for police to leave them alone. Not for protection. Just to stay away. The government will never help us. And that is fine. But if we could have some kind of security . . . Not like a private-paid bodyguard [which is technically illegal under pimping laws] but something else. Because we encounter violence at work—whenever you deny someone, they occasionally demand more. Men feel entitled because they are paying for a service. So, we definitely encounter violence, but we can never report it. If I said, "Look, this is happening at my work, and I would like to file a BO [Boletim de Ocorrência or police report]", and then say it happened at a brothel, no one is going to care. They will laugh and tell me to deal with it or say, "Sorry sweetheart, I am busy." Mock us hard-core, you understand? So, there is no security even though we pay bribes. All that money is just a provision. Money so that we will not be shutdown. But if anything happens, no way they would help.*
>
> *A casa que eu trabalho, todas as casas que eu já trabalhei, pagam a polícia pra ficarem abertas. Senão, com certeza, iam estar fechados. Todo mundo dá dinheiro pra polícia deixar eles em paz. Não pra proteção. Só para ficar longe. O governo nunca vai nos ajudar. E tudo bem. Mas se a gente pudesse ter algum tipo de segurança. . . Não como um guarda-costas pago por particulares [o que é tecnicamente ilegal sob as leis do lenocínio], mas outra coisa. Porque a gente se depara com a violência no trabalho—sempre que você nega alguém, eles às vezes exigem mais. Os homens se sentem no direito porque estão pagando por um serviço. Então, definitivamente, nos deparamos com a violência, mas nunca podemos denunciar. Se eu disser: "Olha, isso está acontecendo no meu trabalho, e eu gostaria de registrar um BO [Boletim de Ocorrência ou Boletim de Ocorrência]", e depois dizer que aconteceu em um bordel, ninguém vai se importar. Eles vão rir e me falar pra eu me virar com isso ou dizer: "Desculpe, querida, estou ocupado". Zomba da gente pra caramba, entendeu? Então, não há segurança mesmo com a gente pagando propina. Todo esse dinheiro é apenas uma precaução. Dinheiro pra que a gente não seja fechado. Mas se algo acontecer, de forma alguma eles ajudariam.* (author translated, personal communication, 10 January 2017)

On one afternoon, a plain-clothed policeman suddenly appeared in the brothel amid an interview. The man showed little apprehension as he requested to see the manager as though he were a regular client. The manager of the business interrupted our interview to explain:

> *Excuse me, did you see who came? That man came to collect. He came to collect. I told you it would be today. There's nowhere to run. Either you do it or you don't, and if you don't do it, you don't work. I mean, this is not a super fancy establishment. I would be ashamed to knock on the door if I were a police officer—to collect money from a place that is so small-time. Such small fish. I would be embarrassed. But they have no shame. And I doubt I can even blame them now. It is a long time for someone to not be paid their salary, right. So now they want to double the bribe, but I refuse. Sometimes they come at me with, "Ah, we have to change this or that" but I never indulge them.*

> *Desculpa, você viu quem veio? Aquele homem veio cobrar. Ele veio pra cobrar. Eu falei que seria hoje. Não tem para onde correr. Ou você faz ou não faz, e se você não faz, você não trabalha. Quero dizer, este não é um estabelecimento super chique. Eu teria vergonha de bater na porta se fosse policial—de cobrar dinheiro em um lugar que é tão pequeno. Peixes tão pequenos. Eu teria vergonha. Mas eles não têm vergonha. E duvido que eu possa até culpar eles agora. É muito tempo pra alguém não receber seu salário, né. Então, agora eles querem dobrar a propina, mas eu me recuso. Às vezes eles vêm para mim com um "Ah, a gente tem que mudar isso ou aquilo", mas eu nunca dou bola pra eles.* (author translated, personal communication, 10 January 2017)

Such an arrangement with local authorities is possible due to the ambiguous nature of prostitution legislation in Brazil.[5] One-month prior to the 2016 Olympic event, several policemen organized a strike in Galeão International Airport with a sign that read, "Welcome to Hell. Police and firefighters don't get paid; whoever comes to Rio de Janeiro will not be safe" (cited in Mohan 2016). At the time, women speculated that the *acerto* [bribe] subsidized salaries halted amid the 2016 recession. Despite their payment to local authorities, women still received little direct benefit. As one woman explained: "Look, if men refuse to pay, I call the police. And the police resolve the situation but keep half the money" (personal communication, 14 October 2016). Another woman, newer to the profession, added, "Our money is their money too, and money makes the world go around! Tax us, and then take our bribe. We always have to pay" (personal communication, 15 March 2017). This echoes the ethnographic work of Cabezas (2009) in Cuba and the Dominican Republic which found that state authorities benefitted from the coercive capabilities of law within and around sexual commerce. As with our work in Rio de Janeiro, Cabezas (2009) argued that legal ambiguities empower state authorities to demand financial compensation or threaten violence with impunity.

To the extent that law enforcement and the broader judiciary system is delegitimated, women are forced to also hire their own private security. Within the context of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games, economies of securitization thrived. "I made friends with a moto-taxi boy to act as my bodyguard. I would get money from the client, pretend to give it to him, and he would wait. I mean, I would pay him a little and he would wait a bit and then, leave. But the client thought he was there the whole time" (personal communication, 22 September 2016). Such a (panoptic) technique was thought to pre-emptively deter or dissuade violence—yet without guarantee:

> *On my first day in Copacabana, I made R$800. I was really happy, but that same day, a Brazilian guy took me to his apartment, locked the door, and threatened me with a knife. He said was going to have his way with me. And if I screamed, he would slit my throat. I had to protect myself. So, I smashed his head with a lamp. It is the law of survival. You learn it quick.*
>
> *No meu primeiro dia em Copacabana, eu ganhei R$ 800. Fiquei muito feliz, mas naquele mesmo dia, um brasileiro me levou para o apartamento dele, trancou a porta e me ameaçou com uma faca. Ele disse que ia fazer o que quer comigo. E se eu gritasse, ele cortava minha garganta. Eu tinha que me proteger. Então, bati na cabeça dele com uma lâmpada. É a lei da sobrevivência. Você aprende rápido.* (author translated, personal communication, 22 September 2016)

Women argued that the perceived threat of closure of local businesses (e.g., the Balcony Bar; the Caixa Econômica; Lido, an hourly hotel in Copacabana; and CasaNem, a shelter and political occupation for trans* and LGBTQ+ communities) never deterred or curbed demand but disrupted established orders and rendered feminized bodies more vulnerable:

> *Now that Balcony Bar is closed, it is more dangerous. There were security guys that respected us, never robbed us. But without that, we are all exposed, the girls and the clients. I even heard there were 12-year-old girls around here now. Before you had to show ID. Sure, maybe it was fake, but to work in a club, you needed to show an ID.*

> *Agora que o Balcony Bar está fechado, é mais perigoso. Tinha seguranças que respeitavam a gente, nunca nos roubavam. Mas, sem isso, nós estamos todos expostos; as meninas e os clientes. Cheguei a ouvir que tinha meninas de 12 anos por aqui agora. Antes você tinha que mostrar a identidade. Claro, talvez fosse falso, mas para trabalhar em uma boate, você precisava mostrar a identidade.* (author translated, personal communication, 22 June 2014)

> *[After a violent confrontation with a client in Copacabana, a woman explained] That is why I had problems, I had to go to his apartment. Before I always went to [Hotel] Lido, where they have a door guy, cameras in the corridors, and it is close to police. Now going to apartments, we end up being robbed, assaulted. Many times, really many times.*

> *Por isso que eu tive problemas, eu tive que ir para o apartamento dele. Antes eu sempre ia ao [Hotel] Lido, onde tem um cara na porta, câmeras nos corredores, e é perto da polícia. Agora indo para apartamentos, a gente acaba sendo roubada, assaltada. Muitas vezes, sério, muitas vezes.* (author translated, personal communication, 22 June 2014)

Rather than provide a "solution" to urban violence, women demonstrate that mega-event security disrupted the established order and created new opportunities for (armed) private personnel to profit from women and their precarity (see also Sampaio 2021). Critically aware of the performative nature of security—security as inherently contradicted and never guaranteed—women sought avenues through its inconsistencies and interstices:

> *To be honest, I would change nothing. If the law were different, there would be a brothel on every corner. I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't do drugs. All the money I make is to support my family, my daughters, you understand. Their school is R$800/month, each. If I made less money, they would never be able to study at a good school or have a decent health plan. If it were not for this job, no way could I afford this life. So, it is like that, unfortunately.*

> *Pra ser sincera, eu não mudaria nada. Se a lei fosse diferente, teria um bordel em cada esquina. Eu não bebo, não fumo, não uso drogas. Todo o dinheiro que eu ganho é para sustentar minha família, minhas filhas, entendeu? A escola custa R$ 800/mês, cada uma. Se eu ganhasse menos dinheiro, elas nunca iam conseguir estudar em uma boa escola ou ter um plano de saúde decente. Se não fosse esse trabalho, de jeito nenhum eu poderia bancar essa vida. Então, é assim, infelizmente.* (author translated, personal communication, 1 September 2016)

Indeed, from the perspective of women involved in this project, violence was routine and, in turn, necessitated thoughtful strategies, as risk was normalized. Dispossession and displacement were approached as mere occupational liabilities—and, for some, served to mitigate competition. Ironically, that unease, palpable across host communities, fueled an entire network of economies which promised security yet further perpetuated unease. The State of Rio de Janeiro, which declared a state of fiscal emergency in July 2016, allocated BRL 2.9 billion (USD 895 million) for mega-event security. This included the deployment of an additional 85,000 police personnel—nearly double that deployed at the 2012 London Olympics. Nevertheless, through the lived realities of women involved in sexual commerce—an occupation officially recognized by the Brazilian Ministry of Labor and Employment since 2002—the façade of security is indisputable. Despite the enormous investment in event security, women still required their own independently contracted projection, networks, and contingent safety measures.

6. Conclusions

Within this paper, we highlight how, despite enormous security investments and newly militarized/pacified communities, insecurities remained. Understanding security as a set of governance practices rather than a definitive outcome, we drew on Valverde (2011), arguing for the importance of more nuanced analyses of sport mega-event security, so as to better account for its contested nature, complexities, and unintended consequences. Our approach

is one that highlights the need to take seriously the diverse impacts of mega-event securities on local communities, emphasizing and prioritizing research methods that offer long-term engagement with local actors. We use our ongoing research collaborations with sex worker and trans* rights groups in Rio de Janeiro to challenge prevailing narratives that justify enormous investments in "official" security forces by highlighting ongoing insecurities that persist despite these efforts. To do so, we offer a discussion of security practices that centres the voices, experiences, and perspectives of sex workers to demonstrate the ways in which mega-investments in event securities actually reshaped rather than eliminated host insecurities.

Through this collaborative and longitudinal approach, we reveal dialectics of "security" that, on the one hand, create a sanitized image of fortified favelas and militarized public spaces for international consumption and, on the other hand, create new or relaunch familiar security risks, particularly for sex workers. Empirical evidence outlines some of the ways that sex workers navigate the ambiguous legal landscape surrounding their profession, highlighting the strategies needed to maintain security amidst fluctuating enforcement and societal attitudes, as well as the deeply embedded nature of sex work with the social reproduction of cities. Indeed, closures and spatial displacements disrupted established safety measures, shifting (without eliminating) geographies of sex work that necessitated new opportunities for partnered activities and networks. There remains a need—in different contexts—to engage with groups that are often made the target of security practices in order to better understand sources and causes of insecurity in host cities and create security practices that respond accordingly. Ultimately, the insights drawn from this paper are suggestive of a shift in academic focus on the securitization of sport mega-events from a totalising rhetoric (Muller 2015) towards an exploration of the localized and contested nature of security.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The studies were conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Boards at the University of Toronto (ID: 29538, 12 March 2013) and the Ethics Review Committee at Bournemouth University (ID: 12427, 10 August 2016). In line with ESRC guidance on international collaboration, ethical approval was also obtained via the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (Case: 55633816-8-0000-5699, 1 July 2016).

Informed Consent Statement: As per ethical approval, informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Full datasets are available at UK Data Service. These data are safeguarded and require permission from the data owner (Silk).

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Notes

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[2] For a more comprehensive account of the methodologies deployed across these studies, we direct the reader to De Lisio and Fusco (2019), De Lisio et al. (2017), and the report from the ESRC funded project (De Lisio et al. 2019a; available here: https://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/sites/default/files/asset/document/BU-01%20Sex%20Report%205_1.pdf). (accessed 25 May 2024).

[3] In line with UKRO funder requirements, the full datasets are available under restricted access at the UK Data Archive.

[4] Since 1831, the police in Brazil have been divided into a civil and military force—which usually compete—with progressive dominance afforded to the militarized force in street patrol. The 1988 democratic constitution identified civil police as responsible for judiciary and administrative activities and the military police for ostensive and uniformed patrol, serving as a reserve auxiliary force to the army that is subordinate to state authorities (Caldeira 2000, pp. 146–50).

[5] Legislation related to prostitution in Brazil is notoriously vague: simultaneously abolitionist, regulationist, and prohibitionist. Through international treaties, Brazil is committed to the abolition or elimination of prostitution. Brazilian law has maintained this commitment via the criminalization of third parties, the establishment of certain businesses, and the recruitment of people into the profession. However, law in Brazil has never criminalized the sale of sex. The consequence is that those involved in sexual commerce are locally regulated via municipal authorities and law enforcement, who decide to whom the vaguely worded legislation is applied. Historically, those able to allocate a portion of their salaries to police either legally through a licensing agreement or illegally through a bribery system avoid the legitimate or extrajudicial violence (see also Santos et al. 2020).

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Rethinking Sporting Mystification in the Present Tense: Disneylimpics, Affective Neoliberalism, and the Greatest Transformation

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Abstract: While questioning the universalization, naturalization, neutralization, and idealization of sport and physical culture, this paper examines the ultimate mystification process of sport and physical culture by expanding upon two conceptual frameworks: Jules Boykoff's celebration capitalism and Lawrence Grossberg's affective landscape. It first analyzes the evolution of the Olympics into a corporatized, commercialized, spectacularized, and celebritized "Disneylimpics" that can consistently evoke an affective reverberation. It then introduces the idea of "affective neoliberalism" to highlight neoliberalism's affective and ideological aspects. With Grossberg's concept of affective landscape, this paper explores the internalization and intensification of anxiety and affective isolation within society. Additionally, the paper utilizes Karl Polanyi's analysis in his influential book, *The Great Transformation*, to investigate the historical expansion of affective neoliberalism. By highlighting the 11 September 2001, attacks in the United States, it points out provocative militarization and (re)organization of the soul into a fictitious commodity, in addition to labor, land, and money, which triggers the greatest transformation. Lastly, summarizing central arguments, this paper concludes with modest suggestions, mainly focusing on two questions: (1) where are we now? and (2) how can we more effectively respond to the present context?

Keywords: affective neoliberalism; celebration capitalism; mystification; militarization

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1. Introduction

Stuart Hall ([1981] 2019a)—one of the most prominent scholars in the field of cultural studies—once famously described culture as "a sort of constant battlefield" (p. 354). While this analogy can be interpreted in multiple ways—especially considering Hall's lifelong contextualist and interventionist mentality—he clearly aimed to underscore that culture is not static or vacuous but affected by complex power dynamics intertwined in the context of "a continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle" (Hall [1981] 2019a, p. 354). Thus, he persistently demanded that scholars identify new possibilities within this "continually contested terrain" (Andrews 2002, p. 112) to reformulate the status quo into a different and better place.

Despite Hall's urging for academic scrutiny, sport and physical culture may be one of the most "rarely questioned" (Jackson and Matheus 2023, p. 127) inter- or transnational battlefields in the diverse world of popular culture. Grainger et al. (2022) described this trend of invisibility as follows:

> The politics of physical culture frequently go unseen (or are willfully denied) in part because sport and physical activity are seldom seen to have anything to do with life's "big" or "important" issues. Physical culture is often thought to have little or nothing to do with the public institutions responsible for the collective organization and running society, like governments, the courts, the police, the military, and so forth. We may also view sport and physical activity as nonpolitical simply because this is the way we would like them to be. (p. 15)

Similarly, Jay Coakley (2015)—one of the founding figures of the sociology of sport—proposed the concept of "the Great Sport Myth" (p. 403). In his view, the public believes that sport is naturally pure and good by adopting two fundamental assumptions: "(a) the purity and goodness of sport is transmitted to those who participate in or consume it; and (b) sport inevitably leads to individual and community development" (Coakley 2015, p. 403). In short, sport and physical culture have been subject to universalization; naturalization; neutralization; idealization; and, thus, mystification processes that eventually led people to view it as an uncontested, transhistorical entity (Beamish and Ritchie 2006; Brohm 1978; Kidd 1984).

On this basis, this study aims to dissect a socially prevalent sporting belief by embracing two unique concepts: Boykoff's (2014) celebration capitalism and Grossberg's (2018) affective landscape. While elucidating and extending each concept, the study focuses on the macro- and micro-level mechanisms and configurations involved in the myth construction of sport and physical culture. More specifically, it adopts the Olympic Games as an empirical site and examines how this mega-level sporting event could remain outwardly innocuous amid longstanding resistance and opposition by creating an unbalanced relationship between the privileged and the underrepresented. After reporting the main implications of the findings, this paper concludes with several modest suggestions regarding how to more effectively contest sport and physical culture and its dominant myth within a popular cultural realm.

2. Have the Modern Olympic Games Ever Taken Place?

2.1. From the Modern Olympics to "Disneylimpics"

Perhaps Pierre de Coubertin is the most integral historical personality, maintaining an inextricable connection with the Olympic Games. This French notable is now commonly regarded as a progenitor of the modern Olympic Games who resuscitated the most beloved sporting event that used to exist in ancient Greece (Kidd 1984). However, as Kidd (1984) pointed out, there were different corporeal competitions all dubbed "Olympic Games". For instance, a person named Robert Dover regularly held the so-called "Olympick Games" in England during the seventeenth century (Kidd 1984). The main distinction between Coubertin and others was that he strategically reshaped the ancient Greek Games by highlighting "the image of antiquity" (Kidd 1984, p. 72). That is, he particularly emphasized "a universal character" (Kidd 1984, pp. 71–72) pertaining to Olympism—the central ideology of the Olympic Games: "humanism, universalism, internationalism, rationalism, and modernism" (Persson 2013, pp. 76–78). However, Coubertin's Olympics was not the event people today know and enjoy as "the most important, influential and visible force in modern sport" (Beamish and Ritchie 2006, p. 6). It was the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games that contributed to the reorganization of the somewhat "shaky antiquated-sounding ideal" (Tomlinson 2004, p. 148) of the Games into an entirely different direction. Due to successive failures—such as the Munich massacre in 1972 and a huge economic loss after the 1976 Montreal Games—Los Angeles was the only candidate to host the competition in 1984 (Boykoff 2014; Tomlinson 2004). Nonetheless, this crisis became a strategic opportunity for the International Olympic Committee (IOC), ultimately even turning into a "pivotal moment" (Tomlinson 2004, p. 148) in its history. While openly welcoming the commercialization process, the IOC established its exclusive sponsorship project entitled "The Olympic Program" or "The Olympic Partner Programme" which has allowed a direct penetration of transnational corporate juggernauts into the Games, such as Airbnb, Coca-Cola, and Samsung (Allison 1998; Boykoff 2014; IOC n.d.).

Consequently, given that Coubertin is now arguably recognized as a person who initiated the modern Olympic movement, two former IOC presidents—Juan Antonio Samaranch (1980–2001) and Jacques Rogge (2001–2013)—can be regarded as "contemporary Coubertins". By underlining intensified "kitsch and commercial, bland and banal" (Bale and Christensen 2004, p. 2) features, they redesigned the arrangement of the Games, underpinned by the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics (Boykoff 2014; Kidd 1984). Put more radi-

cally, it is questionable whether the modern Olympic Games ever occurred (Karamichas 2013)—particularly after the 1980s—given that (1) Coubertin cannot be seen as their "father" and that (2) they have rapidly leaned towards "a largely clandestine, elite-driven process with significant impacts on host cities, and all of it coming with an exorbitant price tag" (Boykoff 2016a, p. 1) while increasingly distancing themselves from Coubertin's initial model. Thus, I argue that present-day Olympic Games are neither what one generally knows as having originated from ancient Greece nor Coubertin's appropriation of this. Instead, they mirror heavily "corporatized-commercialized-spectacularized-celebritized" (Andrews 2019, p. 10) "Disneylimpics" (Tomlinson 2004) that provoke a repeated affective reverberation, including but not limited to "individualism and optimism; escape, fantasy, magic and imagination; innocence; romance and happiness; good's triumph over evil" (Tomlinson 2004, p. 151). In this sense, although the event appears to stimulate "the apparently innocent world of the Disney imagination" (Tomlinson 2004, p. 150), it precipitates the enforcement of unequal power relations that reinscribe the mystification of the event in particular and sport and physical culture in general.

2.2. From Celebration Capitalism to Affective Neoliberalism

To illuminate the mystification process of Disneylimpics in particular and sport and physical culture in general, I first consider Jules Boykoff's (2014) concept of celebration capitalism. Considering that he advanced this notion while explicating other scholars' ideas with his viewpoints—mainly Naomi Klein's disaster capitalism—I propose my concept of *affective neoliberalism* while expounding celebration capitalism with relevant ideas from other scholars to justify my main arguments. However, I would like to stress that this reconceptualization is not about criticism but rather stems from a great admiration of his remarkable contributions to Olympic studies.

2.2.1. From Celebration Capitalism

To understand celebration capitalism, it is vital to first illustrate disaster capitalism. According to Boykoff (2014), Klein suggested this concept to explain how "neoliberal capitalists unabashedly capitalize on catastrophe" (p. 3). Specifically, disaster capitalism refers to a conceptual device used to describe how corporate forces reap benefits during a disastrous moment. This socially disorganized and tumultuous period usually cements a particular societal atmosphere during which they can more readily collaborate with the government and then implement illogical policies and regulations without encountering strong public antagonism. This arbitrary control is plausible because "[d]isasters create collective states of shock" (Boykoff 2014, p. 3) from which people cannot quickly recover. On the contrary, Boykoff's (2014) celebration capitalism explicitly spotlighted "moments of celebration, at least from the perspective of profit-seeking capitalists" (p. 4). However, celebration capitalism and disaster capitalism are not mutually disconnected as the former (i.e., celebration capitalism) can be seen as the "affable cousin" (Boykoff 2014, p. 3) of the latter (i.e., disaster capitalism). While these concepts highlight "social euphoria" (i.e., celebration capitalism) and "social traumas" (i.e., disaster capitalism), respectively (Boykoff 2014, p. 4), they share similarities by mainly focusing on "the state of exception as an alibi to justify sidestepping normal democratic processes in the name of expediency, exigency, and urgency" (Boykoff 2014, p. 4). In short, a distinct contextual condition should proceed to facilitate the development of these two interconnected situations.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to point out one major contrast between disaster capitalism and celebration capitalism. Under the circumstance of disaster capitalism, "private corporations view the state and nonprofits as competitors to be outmaneuvered" (Boykoff 2014, p. 4). In other words, cooperation between the private and public sectors is rarely feasible under disaster capitalism since the enlargement of market-centered doctrines is its ultimate goal, accomplished by overriding both the government and the public. Celebration capitalism, on the other hand, can forge relatively solid "public–private partnerships" (PPPs) (Boykoff 2014, p. 3) through linked allyship between the public and private. However,

it would be remiss not to mention that this union is inherently unequal (i.e., "lopsided" in Boykoff's terms) in most cases. That is, "the public takes the risks and private groups scoop up the rewards" (Boykoff 2014, p. 3) in that the former is responsible for what the latter commits, mainly concerning financial extravagance and blunder of the private, by exploiting public funds that the citizen should eventually benefit from as a primary taxpayer. Consequently, the Olympic Games are an exemplary space for expanding celebration capitalism as nations on different continents regularly host them while prompting a transnational convivial ambiance. However, Boykoff (2014) added several details by applying the concept to this gigantic sporting site, which requires further clarification.

2.2.2. To Affective Neoliberalism

Before exploring additional details of celebration capitalism within the Olympic space, it is necessary to elucidate Boykoff's (2014) interpretation of neoliberalism as it relates to celebration capitalism. He insisted that "the Olympics are less about neoliberalism and more about the dynamics of [celebration] capitalism in general" (Boykoff 2014, p. 3) in that "[t]he tenets of neoliberalism, as relevant as they are in some respects, do not take us the entire way in illuminating the five-ring juggernaut" (Boykoff 2014, p. 3). He described what he believed to be the reasons for the Olympics being more applicable to celebration capitalism instead of neoliberalism as follows:

> Rather than full-blown privatization we get public–private partnerships where taxpayers pay sizable sums to fund the Games. Rather than the relaxation or abandonment of regulations, we get a strict, tight-fisted regime of rules from the International Olympic Committee. Rather than economic financialization, where capital and assets are squirreled away in abstract constructions like collateralized debt obligations, thereby defraying responsibility and staving off economic judgment day, we get real-deal debt, payment schedules and all. (Boykoff 2014, p. 9)

In other words, the Olympic space does not let "the market decide" everything (Boykoff 2014, p. 8) by promoting perfect "privatization, deregulation, individualization, marketization, trade liberalization, and financialization" (Boykoff 2014, p. 8). Instead, the public bears unwanted burdens primarily due to disproportionate PPPs. Furthermore, direct controls always exist from the IOC, which prevents the complete freedom of capital movement.

Although I acknowledge that neoliberalism is "a contested and unstable term" (King 2012, p. 76) to elicit a lucid definition, Boykoff's (2014) depiction of neoliberalism seems to place greater emphasis on the economic aspect of the concept by unintentionally furthering "a kind of economic reductionism" (Grossberg 2013, p. 33) that supposes that neoliberalism "can be explained by an economic bottom line" (Grossberg 2013, p. 33). It is indisputable that the economic aspect is crucial to understanding neoliberalism. However, this point cannot solely determine everything about the idea due to its important affective and ideological features developed from its economic aspect (Andrews 2019; Andrews and Silk 2018). This consideration is relevant because the ultimate goal of neoliberalism is to cultivate not only a neoliberal structure but also neoliberal individuals "driven to maximize the freedoms (reduced personal tax burdens) and opportunities (expanded privatized employment and consumption sectors)" (Andrews 2019, p. 69). Fostering "responsibilitized neoliberal subjects" (Andrews 2019, p. 70) may not sound problematic as it appears to maximize individual freedom. However, it also means that people should "operate solely in her or his own self-interest and therefore will succeed or fail based on her or his own merits" (King-White 2018, p. 5), without connecting themselves with the broader societal conditions around them. Thus, it is easier for people to perpetuate "a marker of [a] lack of moral responsibility, fortitude, and/or a sign of pathological inferiority" (Andrews 2019, p. 70) by "blaming [themselves] for systematic problems" (King-White 2018, p. 6) if they encounter unavoidable setbacks originating from structural/institutional issues, such as gender-, race-, disability-, and/or class-based social problems. Put another way,

neoliberalism offers a useful pretext for there being "no need to improve upon the system" (King-White 2018, p. 6) because all of the problems are "always the individual's fault" (King-White 2018, p. 6). Hence, it ultimately disseminates an affective inclination towards hyper-individualization and the criminalization/demonization of receiving public/government assistance by reducing complex socio-historical, cultural, and political problems into merely personal issues and, therefore, consolidating the status quo (Andrews 2019; Andrews and Silk 2018; King-White 2018).

Thus, I assert that neoliberalism maintains "a contingent, complex, and, sometimes, contradictory formation" (Andrews 2019, p. 64) "depending upon the contingencies of the national context" (Andrews 2019, p. 65). To circulate its affective and ideological mantra more effectively, it strategically adjusts itself before merging with different forms of national philosophies, including but not limited to developmentalism, nationalism, Confucianism, and authoritarianism.[1] Hence, to illuminate further the affective and ideological aspects of neoliberalism, I do not regard celebration capitalism and disaster capitalism as "distinct phenomena" (Boykoff 2014, p. 4) but as one unit under "affective neoliberalism" given that (1) Olympic sites are not merely celebratory but also always a condensation and coexistence of celebration and disaster, and that (2) "affective capacities" (Andrews 2006, p. 270) are the "most unique characteristic" (Andrews 2006, p. 275) of sport and physical culture—including the Olympic Games—as one of the representative domains of popular culture. In other words, it would be imprudent to claim that Boykoff (2014) completely discounted the operation of neoliberalism within Olympic sites, as he stated that celebration capitalism can spawn a "discursive space for neoliberal policies to follow in its wake" (p. 109). Nonetheless, I believe that celebratory features cannot fully depict the Olympic space because this event simultaneously produces direct and indirect repression (Boykoff 2014, 2016b).

Although the IOC purports to advocate for the creation of the most equitable space by accepting the most outstanding athletes worldwide, it discriminates against "the type of athletes who could take part in its Games and the practice it would allow" (Beamish and Ritchie 2006, p. 7; Petersson and Vamling 2013). For example, when the South African athlete Oscar Pistorius, who has "two prosthetic limbs" (Howe 2011, p. 868), attempted to compete in the 2012 London Olympic Games, the main focus was arguably on the question of "whether his impairment offers an unfair advantage compared with 'able' athletes" (Howe 2008, p. 133). Illustrating his assistive prostheses as "a 'techno-doping' device" (Wolbring and Tynedal 2013, p. 178), certain groups deemed his participation at the Olympics "cheating" (Wolbring and Tynedal 2013). Similarly, although the IOC has placed "explicit importance" (Geeraert and Gauthier 2018, p. 19) on environmental issues and sustainability since the 1990s—even designating them as its "third pillar" (Boykoff 2014, p. 40; Geeraert and Gauthier 2018, p. 19), with the other two being sport and culture—this rhetoric does not accurately reflect the reality (Boykoff 2014; Müller 2015). For instance, the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics is now commonly viewed as "the most expensive Olympic Games, Summer or Winter, ever" (Müller 2015, p. 191), accompanied by massive ecological destruction (Boykoff 2016b; Geeraert and Gauthier 2018; Petersson and Vamling 2016). However, prior to the Olympic Games, the organizing committee confidently proclaimed that the committee is "environmentally aware and will therefore ensure that the environment will not be damaged" (Jönsson 2013, p. 55). Moreover, due to the constant suppression from the government, the public's actual opinions and the related protests were curbed (Boykoff 2016b).

Taking these factors into account, I would like to "intentionally complicate" Boykoff's (2014) explanations of PPPs with affective neoliberalism by highlighting "his somewhat contentious uncoupling of PPPs from neoliberalism" (Andrews 2019, p. 84). I argue that the relationships within the Olympic Games are lopsided not only between the public and private spheres but also between the privileged and the underrepresented, including (dis)abled bodies, (non)humans, and nature. Furthermore, as Boykoff (2014) identified, multiple types of supporters of the IOC and the Olympics assist the continuation of this unequal linkage by contributing to perpetuating the state of exception. These include

the government; security-, military-, and construction-related industries; the organizing committee; and, most importantly, the media. While expanding the jubilant corporatization, commercialization, spectacularization, and celebratization of the Olympic Games (Andrews 2019), its close accomplices' dissemination of diverse affective effects in cooperation with widespread media sources quells seemingly unfavorable representation of the event by amplifying positive stories. Examples include "festive feelings of goodwill, peace, and internationalism" (Boykoff 2014, p. 5), "the feel-good claims of environmental and social sustainability" (p. 5), and "emotion-generating advertisements from corporate sponsors" (p. 101). Thus, "[t]he 'feelgood factor' is [affective neoliberalism's] justificatory crutch" (Boykoff 2014, p. 116) which subsequently promotes an extensive "washing" (Skey 2023) process of the Olympic Games that diminishes it to only one image—the positive aspects of the event. Consequently, affective neoliberalism ultimately triggers the mystification of the Olympic Games and thus Disneylimpics by simplifying the complex configurations within the event. While constantly stimulating affective leaning toward positive storylines, it objectifies the event and thus successfully augments "upward and downward shifts in scalar narratives that both highlight the pivotal role of the IOC as well as the uniqueness of place that the host city proffers" (Boykoff 2014, p. 102). In other words, affective neoliberalism within Olympic spaces downplays perceived negative, localized, and *ubietous* heterogeneities while emphasizing more positive, globalized, and *ubiquitous* homogeneities (Andrews 2019). Hence, it engenders the reductionism and essentialism of the Olympic Games without considering its multilayered realities (DeLanda 2016) entangled with numerous dominant, overlooked, and unseen forces.

3. The Greatest Sporting Myth Ever

3.1. From Lawrence Grossberg to Karl Polanyi

Although previous sections delineated an operation of affective neoliberalism within the Olympic Games, it remains unclear how its multi-dimensional movement is possible across and even beyond Olympic space. In this respect, I would like first to reconsider Boykoff's (2014) theoretical interpretation of the state of exception in relation to three associated scholars—Carl Schmitt, Giorgio Agamben, and Naomi Klein:

> While the state of exception can often help preserve governmental structure (Schmitt), galvanize the squelching of political rights (Agamben), or install disaster capitalism (Klein), it can also take the form of celebration where rather than fear we get fête, rather than the bare life we get the beer life, rather than disaster we get spectacle. (p. 11)

To reiterate, Boykoff's concept of celebration capitalism emphasized the festive aspect of the Olympics. Specifically, under the comprehensive influence of celebratory conditions, it is rather difficult to fully recognize the rapid enlargement of lopsided power dynamics. While affective neoliberalism also acknowledges the sweeping continuation of the state of exception—following Grossberg (2018)—I argue that not merely the celebration aspect but another affective factor—anxiety—is one of its core components contributing to the consolidation of the state of exception. Thus, this section first elucidates the swift inflation of anxiety and its outcomes, inspired by Grossberg's (2018) concept of affective landscape. Then, it investigates the historical rise of affective neoliberalism, referring to Polanyi's (2001) explication in his seminal book, *The Great Transformation*.

3.1.1. From Lawrence Grossberg: The Internalization of Anxiety

Although anxiety as a concept appears to share similarities with the idea of fear, it retains one conspicuous difference. Whereas fear is usually transitory and stems from obvious causes, anxiety is prolonged "in a perpetual state of virtual 'angst'" (Grossberg 2018, p. 99) without a clear beginning or end. As Grossberg (2018) noted:

> Always experienced in the present, anxiety is yet always a futurity, operating in a future tense. It renders crisis banal, a new normal, a never-ending normalization

> of the state of emergency as it were. The sense of perpetual emergency becomes ordinary, everyday experience. (p. 99)

As noted in the previous sections, the main goal of affective neoliberalism is to publicize more positive, transnational, and uncontested understandings of the Olympic Games by trivializing seemingly negative, domestic, and contested stories. However, expanding upon Grossberg's (2018) conceptualization of affective landscape, an escalation of anxiety, which leads one to embroil oneself in extreme frustration by eliminating any opportunities to reflect on the past, present, and future status, is another influence that traverses society. In other words, affective neoliberalism normalizes a state of "omnipresent anxiety" (Grossberg 2018, p. 100) by internalizing "the terror of the humiliation of being a victim" (Grossberg 2018, p. 98) in the public frame of mind.

More specifically, affective neoliberalism advances a profound sense of detachment from reality that, in turn, induces three levels of affective isolation from society. First, it promotes "an increasing self-consciousness" (Grossberg 2018, p. 95) associated with heightened relativism. While facilitating "the inability to judge the comparative value or merit of anything" (Grossberg 2018, p. 94), it leads to a fixation on what one perceives as important due to individual efforts. Moreover, an elevated sense of personal certainty allows one to cultivate "an absolute sense of partisanship" (Grossberg 2018, p. 96) that justifies a strong binary perception of society, such as dichotomic formations of superiority versus inferiority, good versus evil, and us versus them (Grossberg 2018, p. 97). As a result, affective neoliberalism heightens anxiety, leading to "an organization of passive nihilism" (Grossberg 2018, p. 92) that concretizes temporal and spatial separations from reality. Hence, widespread affective neoliberalism formalizes "a radical personalization of everything" (Grossberg 2018, p. 101) or "an increasing sense of personal omnipotence" (Grossberg 2018, p. 101) that appears to offer the exclusive freedom of private choices. However, it bears two representative paradoxes: (1) this "choice is necessarily constrained by the range of goods and services on offer" (Andrews 2019, p. 17) and (2) it overlooks "the lack of freedom, or agency, experienced by those incorporated into the bonded labor relations enacted by debt-financed consumption" (Andrews 2019, p. 17). More specifically, the choice assigned to the public cannot originate from its authentic discretion. Rather, it stems from artificial packages of the privileged groups utilized to reinforce the existing social formation by concealing the complexities of diverse processes intertwined with unequal power relations.

Therefore, the repercussion that evolved from the multi-scaled movement of affective neoliberalism is that it leads people to believe that "the problem is simple" (Grossberg 2018, p. 31) and, eventually, renders "people increasingly feel[ing] incapable of making a difference" (Grossberg 1992, p. 65). However, it simultaneously triggers

> replicative *corporatization* (institutional and management reorganization designed to realize profit-driven structures and logics); expansive *commercialization* (sport brand diversification and non-sport brand promotion across multiple sectors); creative *spectacularization* (entertainment-focused delivery of popular sport spectacles, realized through a combination of structural reformation and cross-platform mass mediation); and intensive *celebritization* (sporting contests constructed around, and a site for the embellishment of, specific public persona). (Andrews 2019, pp. 8–9, italics in original).

Consequently, the mystification of sport and physical culture prevails due to the divergent forms of sporting spaces—including Disneylimpics—being consistently conceived of as "some sort of escape" (Silk 2012, p. 6) from the extensive influence of both the state of exception and societal/personal anxieties by popularizing their "entertainment-oriented, and superficially benign" (Andrews 2019, p. 75) appearances as their core quality. Hence, while minimizing deeper, (un)noticed complexities, the affective neoliberalization of sport and physical culture creates the "setting for responsibilitized neoliberal citizen-consumers"

(Andrews 2019, p. 81) who are not able to actively debunk this (un)intentional distraction and ultimately contribute to the depoliticization of a collective public response.

3.1.2. To Karl Polanyi: The Greatest Transformation Ever

Despite its illustrations of the multilayered impact of affective neoliberalism across different dimensions, its accurate origin remains debatable, given that affective neoliberalism is never prearranged and passive but rather contingent and complex. While accepting this inherent limitation, Polanyi's book *The Great Transformation* can provide a probable exposition. According to Polanyi (2001), the economic system was initially embedded in a social matrix in that the domination of social relations over economic benefits was a fundamental societal rule. In other words, it was impossible to argue that pursuing financial gain was "the governing principle" (Maertens 2008, p. 134) because strict society-based rules initially "absorbed" (Polanyi 2001) the economy. Instead, reciprocity and redistribution were two core tenets confirming solid social relations among various groups (Isaac 2005; Maertens 2008). That is, although economic actions were pursued to fulfill basic human needs, their main purpose was not to seek economic achievement but rather social connection. To illustrate this prioritization of non-economic relations over economic factors, Polanyi (2001) invoked Kula trade as a representative example, a gift exchange based on mutual trust. If a particular group of people first gives a cherished item to another group, the receiving group then once again grants what they have received to another tribe. After continuous circulation, the first group eventually regains what it initially provided by (re)affirming a firm trust foundation among disparate groups. As a result, such consistent reciprocal exchanges, as well as the redistribution of certain valuable items among particular groups, imply that the "price-setting market principle" cannot override social relations (Isaac 2005, p. 18).

However, while highlighting "the impact of the Industrial Revolution" (Polanyi 2001, p. 79) and the consequent development of "elaborate machinery and plant[s]" (Polanyi 2001, p. 78), Polanyi (2001) also asserted that the economy had "been disembedded from the social and political matrix" (Polanyi Levitt 2020, p. 35). In consequence, "institutional transformation" (Thomasberger 2020, p. 137) that occurred in the nineteenth century led to a "socially disembedded" (Thomasberger 2020, p. 138) "capitalist (market) economy" (Isaac 2005, p. 15). In other words, the self-regulating market system eventually diminished diverse activities to their "exchange value", solely intended for sale (Polanyi Levitt 2020, p. 22). Moreover, this vast transformation led to the commodification of land, money, and labor as the fundamental elements of machine-based production (Maertens 2008). That is, the three essential elements of society that previously never existed for sale were also affected by a rapid shift. As Polanyi (2001) noted:

> *Labor* is only another name for a human activity which goes with life itself, which in its turn is not produced for sale but for entirely different reasons, nor can that activity be detached from the rest of life, be stored or mobilized *land* is only another name for nature, which is not produced by man; actual *money*, finally, is merely a token of purchasing power which, as a rule, is not produced at all, but comes into being through the mechanism of banking or state finance. None of them is produced for sale. The commodity description of labor, land, and money is entirely *fictitious*. (pp. 75–76, italics added)

To rephrase, following the Industrial Revolution, labor, land, and money became fictitious commodities, meaning that all social elements, including components that "were either not produced at all, or not produced for sale" (Desai 2020, p. 78), became goods for purchase. Ultimately, the development of a self-regulating market transformed society into "an accessory of the economic system" (Polanyi 2001, p. 79), representing a total reversal of the relationship between the social and the economic.

Furthering Polanyi's (2001) claims, I argue that the September 11 attacks of 2001 are a particular event that incited the rapid rise of affective neoliberalism. As Butterworth (2017) pointed out, "the lens of 9/11 is decidedly US-centric" (p. 3); it is also indisputable

that simply depicting it and its aftereffects as "massive" is still not adequate. As Silk (2012) noted:

> This was a moment, then, in which the banal, the sporting popular, was harnessed, politicized, and, as an affective public pedagogy, deployed as soft-core weaponry in a hard-core militarized industrial complex, fighting wars on both a domestic and national stage. (p. 3)

In other words, after the 9/11 attacks, provocative militarization "further capitalized on sporting narratives" (Silk 2012, p. 3) that "centered around fear, terror, the military and an attack on democracy and civil liberties" (Silk 2012, p. 10)—not just inside the United States but also across the globe. Specifically, "the combined forces of globalization, neoliberalism, and militarization have profoundly affected both formal institutions and everyday popular culture in all regions of the planet" (Butterworth 2017, p. 3) as a central aftermath of this (trans)national incident that has constantly sparked a wide range of affective (re)actions, including but not limited to the internalization/normalization of anxiety in addition to an enduring internal/external state of emergency.

Consequently, if Polanyi identified the influence/evolution of the Industrial Revolution and more sophisticated machinery as the prime facilitator of the great transformation that launched the development of initial industrial capitalism, as described in Figure 1, I argue that the September 11 attacks and their far-reaching consternation sparked *the greatest transformation ever* that safely settled the "'there is no alternative' (TINA)" philosophy (Andrews 2019, p. 71) in relation to affective neoliberalism. More radically, "[w]hat gets destroyed is the capacity to be human in any other way than that which [affective neoliberalism] requires and dictates" (Harvey 2014, p. 262). In addition to three fictitious commodities of labor, land, and money, which were never designed for sale, affective neoliberalism, especially after 11 September 2001, has led to the *soul*—one of the most pristine affective entities in the world—being constantly regulated by the "satanic mill" (Polanyi 2001, p. 77), and consequently disembedded from both society and the public, as illustrated in Figure 2.

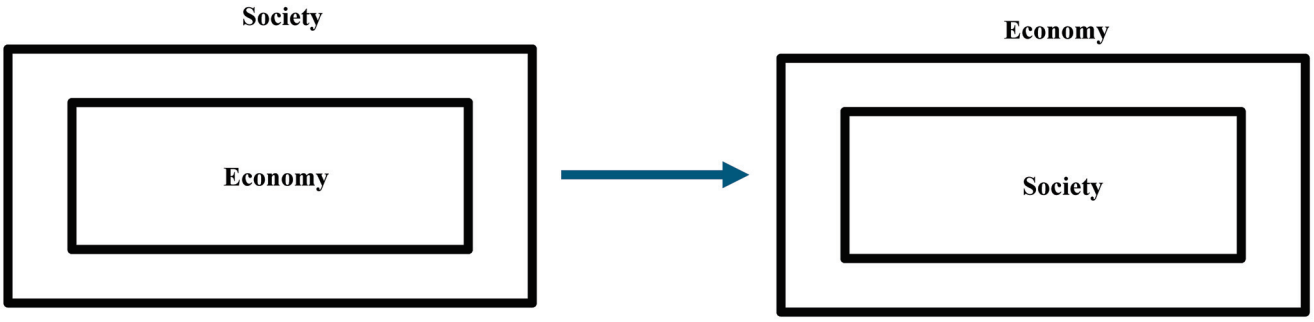

Figure 1. Karl Polanyi and *The Great Transformation*.

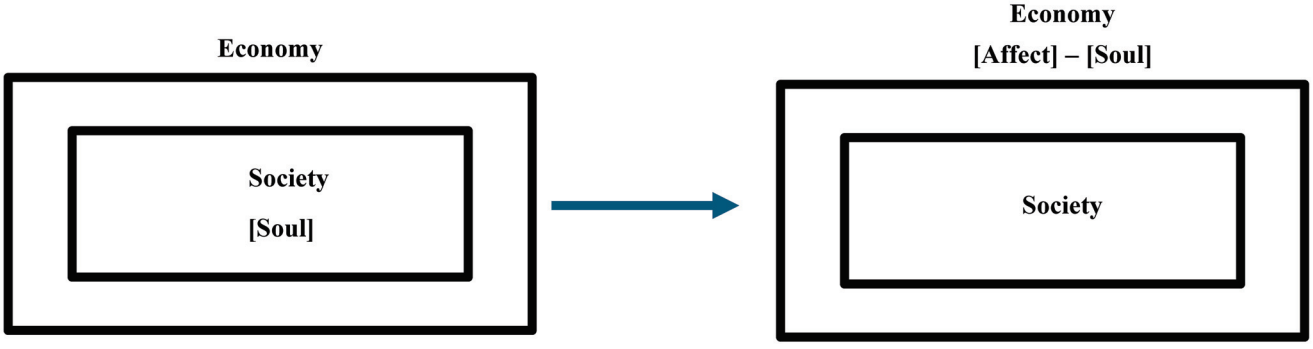

Figure 2. Affective neoliberalism and *The Greatest Transformation*.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper explored the ultimate mystification process of sport and physical culture. It proposed a concept called affective neoliberalism while expanding upon two innovative conceptual frameworks: (1) Boykoff's (2014) celebration capitalism and (2) Grossberg's (2018) affective landscape. It first investigated the evolution of the Olympic Games—which was initially appropriated by Pierre de Coubertin—into the widely known Disneylimpics that has prompted an international proliferation of corporate forces across the event. This study applied Boykoff's (2014) concept of celebration capitalism to examine the distinctive, Disney-like, affective circulation prevalent within the contemporary Olympic Games. While shedding more light on neoliberalism's affective and ideological operations, it captured the condensation/coexistence of affective reverberations within the Olympic Games, including both celebration and suppression. Additionally, this paper highlighted Boykoff's (2014) humanist perspective on the imbalanced nature of public and private partnerships (PPPs). It purposefully blurred the lines of these unequal relationships by broadening their scope. This expansion covered the interaction between public and private domains, the dynamics between privileged groups and underrepresented communities, and between various business sectors and the environment. Thus, affective neoliberalism is a complex combination of various affective reflections in response to celebratory and repressive contextual conditions, primarily disseminated through extensive media coverage. However, it reinforces unequal power relations between the privileged and underrepresented by selectively amplifying positive and generalized images that support its ongoing enlargement. In short, affective neoliberalism employs strategic "washing" (Skey 2023) techniques throughout various aspects of the Olympic Games. This approach aims to preserve the status quo by preventing the potential spread of negative representations.

In addition to the multi-scaled movement of affective neoliberalism within the Olympic Games, this paper addressed how affective neoliberalism can exude its impact beyond this gargantuan sporting competition by embracing Grossberg's (2018) notion of affective landscape and his interpretations of the state of urgency concerning anxiety. While distinguishing anxiety as one of its main targets, affective neoliberalism intensifies an affective desolation by normalizing three predominant individual tendencies that are difficult to contradict: (1) self-consciousness and relativism, (2) a twofold conceptualization of society, and (3) temporal and spatial estrangement from reality. Consequently, affective neoliberalism causes individuals to objectify complex socio-historical, technological, and political issues, which may initially encourage individual agency but eventually preserve a deep sense of helplessness. Hence, the mystification process of sport and physical culture can persist because various sporting spaces offer people ostensibly harmless affective havens from prevailing macro- and micro-level senses of failure. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that this affective propensity arises from a multilayered movement of affective neoliberalism that simultaneously rationalizes replicative corporatization, expansive commercialization, creative spectacularization, and intensive celebritization of sport and physical culture. Ultimately, these factors contribute to the depressive depoliticization of society (Andrews 2019).

This paper also delved into the historical development of affective neoliberalism by referring to Polanyi's (2001) account in his influential book, *The Great Transformation*. His examination of the significant societal changes in the nineteenth century focused on the emergence of a self-regulating market economy by scrutinizing the (dis)embeddedness of the economy within society. Under the influence of the Industrial Revolution and the development of increasingly advanced machines, massive institutional-level conversion emerged by transforming three major societal essentials—labor, land, and money—into fictitious commodities that society never deemed available for sale. Consistent with this description, the rapid inflation of affective neoliberalism was probable due to the 11 September 2001, attacks (Butterworth 2017; Silk 2012). This process amplified feelings of emergency and mistrust by intensifying the provocative militarization beyond sport and physical culture. It also cemented the "'there is no alternative' (TINA)" tenet (Andrews

2019, p. 71), leading to the greatest transformation ever and restructuring the soul into an additional fictitious commodity alongside labor, land, and money.

In contemporary society, sport and physical culture are enormous enterprises "too serious to be taken seriously" (Allison 1998, p. 2) or "*too big to fail*" (Andrews 2019, p. 7, italics in original) as a result of a longstanding mystification process. My main concern is that introducing a new idea about neoliberalism in relation to sport and physical culture might deepen "neoliberal fatigue" (Andrews 2019, p. 63) in academia. This condition reflects "an 'enough already' sensibility" (Andrews 2019, p. 63) toward discussions on this topic, suggesting that scholars have already completed sufficient studies. Although I believe this is a fallacy because sport, physical culture, and neoliberalism-centered projects still share a determinate relationship with "the dominant, *yet evolving* political ideology" worldwide (Andrews 2019, p. 63, italics added), I acknowledge that the research should not be meaninglessly determined by adopting "an essentialized and universalized notion neoliberalism" (Andrews 2019, p. 64). As Grossberg (2017) stated:

> Sometimes these labels simply describe new practices or logics, and sometimes they are more radical claims about the changing essence of the epoch, as if, for example, "neoliberalism" described a new totalizing logic that has reshaped the entire field of life. (p. 138)

Following Grossberg, neoliberalism, as an academic concept, should not be "understood as a singular and global phenomenon" (Clarke 2023, p. 64) by underestimating its "historical variations" (Clarke 2023, p. 64). Indeed, neoliberalism has strategically modified its presentation by aligning itself with various forces in society. Clarke (2023) aptly identified a current transnational trend in this regard as follows:

> What may be distinctive about *this* conjuncture is the way it foregrounds one of those spatial formations—the nation—as both the focus and setting of political-cultural contestation. The idea of the nation emerged as a focal point for conflict and mobilisations, not least in the proliferation of imaginings of the 'way forward' that demand the restoration of the nation—making X great again. (p. 30, italics in original)

Neoliberalism in general and affective neoliberalism, in particular, sways its extraordinary clout in present-day society by eliciting various affective effects, including those of "giving voice to 'rage' against the elites, expressing 'loss' in relation to ways of life, asserting 'pride' in personal, community and national histories, and announcing a condition of 'righteousness' (about almost everything)" (Clarke 2023, p. 56). In short, they operate alongside and amplify established (trans)national doctrines, such as populism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, androcentrism, militarism, and totalitarianism.

Thus, I argue that a subtle but, at the same time, "palpable shift" (Silk and Andrews 2012, p. 6) is in the process—following Hall ([1979] 2019b, [1998] 2017)—as "the great moving right show" or, put more succinctly, "the great moving nowhere show", as it steadily loses its relevant controlling directions across different countries. For instance, the seemingly progressive but conservative, transnational geopoliticization of sport and physical culture is now conspicuous. This phenomenon is predominant in Gulf nations, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, where their oil-based, abundant resources are utilized as a central power to magnify their authority (cf. Burton and Naraine 2023; Chadwick 2022; Chadwick et al. 2023). Given this unique context, it is crucial to critically discern both individual and collective positionality because "[r]ecognizing what is now ending and what is beginning can help us respond to the predicament of living in the fissures between one epoch and another" (Davies 2018, p. 2). Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge that "there is complexity everywhere and at every level" (Grossberg 2018, p. 31) by regarding sport and physical culture "as being connected to society, culture and business, though as a part of much wider networks of interconnecting relationships" (Chadwick 2022, p. 695). That is, the question of how to more effectively confront complexity, contingency, contestation, and multiplicity, while persistently wrestling with the temptations of falling

into fundamentalism, simplification, essentialism, and reductionism, should be the primary focus (Grossberg 2010, p. 54; Grossberg 2020).

Hence, studying sport and physical culture can commence by focusing on specific domains within the field; however, I do not believe that this intellectual process should simply end within them. Specifically, by using Braidotti's (2013) term, the research can stem from a personal "epistemophilic yearning" (p. 11) for sport and physical culture. However, the ultimate destination should be critically concerned about different; new; and, hopefully, better possibilities. Assorted struggles could be ongoing; they are "almost never in the same place, over the same meaning or value" (Hall [1981] 2019a, p. 357). More importantly, "[b]etter stories open new possibilities. Better stories create more spaces. Better stories make [them] more seeable and sayable. [Thus], [b]etter stories narrate the overwhelming complexity of a present stitched together from way too much" (Behrenshausen 2019, p. 69). However, it appears that affective neoliberalism is boundless even in academia as the "sense of urgency is intensified by the combined and ugly pressures of contemporary academic life, of career making and of the increasingly commodified processes of publishing" (Clarke 2017, p. 79). Many scholars "have bitten, vampiristically, into endless necks" (Atkinson 2023, p. 775) of "an unyielding and enduring publish or perish culture" to survive (Atkinson 2023, p. 780). In short, typical scholarly responsibilities have become unusual nonsense in contemporary intellectual work in concert with affective neoliberalism.

Consequently, following Atkinson (2023, p. 793), the initial fundamental step in countering affective neoliberalism is to contemplate how to reorient oneself toward "unapologetically theoretical, artistic, expressive, thought-provoking, conceptually unsafe, philosophical, and experimental research" while simultaneously rethinking the most pertinent positionalities that we should take within the present context. Hence, a modest anticipation of this paper is to engender a continuous rumination of two interconnected questions: (1) where are we now? and (2) how can we more wisely respond to this particular present context at this particular present moment?

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Notes

[1] For example, South Korea is now in a rapid neoliberalization process with established national creeds, including Confucianism, nationalism, and developmentalism (cf. Cho 2008; Lee 2021; Kim and Park 2003; Song 2024).

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Article

The Contested Terrain of Sporting Consumption: Navigating Meaning, Identity, and Late Capitalist Marketing through Sneaker Customization

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Abstract: This discussion critically examines and questions assumptions about the meanings and motivations of sporting consumption. We argue that the practice of sneaker customization demonstrates the contested terrain of sporting consumption, wherein contemporary consumerism is characterized by a dynamic interplay between top–down structural determination (by mass commercial forces) and bottom–up creative agency (by everyday consumers). Based on in-depth interviews with 15 sneaker consumers, we narrate the complexities of late capitalist consumer culture through three overlapping "tensions" between the commercial sneaker industry and everyday sneaker consumers: (1) Sneakers as a vehicle to express individuality versus to demonstrate conformity; (2) Sneaker customization as a means of artistic expression versus being a commodity rationalized to maximize profit; (3) An affective versus instrumental attachment to sneakers. Overall, the analysis illuminates how the cultural and affective meanings that consumers attach to sneaker consumption operate; sometimes in conjunction with, more often in opposition to, but always in tension with the meanings that the sneaker industry attempts to embed through its ever-expansive means of marketing and advertising.

Keywords: sporting consumption; contested terrain; sneaker customization; sneaker culture; sports advertising

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1. Introduction

Considering the centrality of consumption to our everyday lives and identities—not to mention its accelerating role as the engine of elite commercial sport (Andrews 2019; Grainger 2021)—the cultural politics of sporting consumerism continues to represent a germane focus of critical intellectual inquiry (Giulianotti and Numerato 2018; Horne 2006). The grand narrative that the era of hyper-commodification and technological advancement has rendered sport (and its various sites, products, and services) as a mere site of capital accumulation by the sporting industry is complicated by the creative individualism and agency expressed by sporting consumers (Free and Hughson 2006; Willis 1990). In light of what are rapid changes to the cultural and technological landscape of sport, the critical and contextual (re)consideration of sporting consumption needs to move beyond dichotomized, and seemingly unresolvable, structure or agency understandings that previously held sway. For example, as the culture industries have evolved to (at least ostensibly) incorporate more cultural and technological consumer input (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010), the meanings and motivations of consumption are still constrained, by structural forces and relations. Similarly, even as every crevice of sporting culture is appropriated and exploited for commodity value (Andrews 2019; Jameson 1991), sport consumers are still far from zombies mindlessly following late capitalist marketing and advertising directives.

Hence, within this discussion, we advance a messier ontological model that positions sporting consumption as simultaneously shaped by and manifested through both agentic

and structural forces. According to this approach, the moments of consumer agency are enabled/constrained/augmented by contingently manifest structural forces, which are always already (re)made, (re)shaped, and transformed by micro-agentic responses. In other words, we argue that sporting consumption should be considered a *contested terrain* between necessary co-constitutive structural and agentic forces. As our data will demonstrate, a contested terrain model of sporting consumption harbors three central assumptions. First, the meanings and motivations attached to consumption are never guaranteed; they reject simple explanations and can never be assumed in advance. Second, consumption is an expression of cultural and political communication through which everyday individuals respond (in a variety of potential ways) to the socio-structural forces framing their existence. Third, consuming is never preordained or final; the initial act of consumption is the first step in a longer process of identity construction, meaning-making, and navigating image-based late capitalist culture (Kearney 1989; Lury 2011; Willis 1990).

This project explores the complex, and at times contradictory, contested terrain of sporting consumption through an illustrative product of late capitalist consumer culture: the athletic sneaker (see Coleman 2013; Miner 2009; Turner 2019). While originating in the context of sport (Turner 2019), the sneaker's polysemic character extends its reach into realms far beyond sport, i.e., occupying important material and symbolic spaces within music, fashion, street culture, and even representative politics. Importantly, as scholars have noted, sneakers are not only "a potent and emotive subject, laden with cultural meanings, associations and stereotypes" (Sherlock 2012, p. 2), they also display an "agentic capacity" to "contribute to individuals' everyday embodied processes of social differentiation and identification" (Hockey et al. 2015, p. 22). Building on these notions, our analysis further explicates the practices and meanings of contemporary sneaker consumption, but also gives voice to what happens after the initial purchase of the sneaker. Hence, we examine the phenomenon of *sneaker customization* as a practice incorporating—even if in exaggerated form—the vast possibilities of commodity consumption more generally. We define sneaker customization as any form of alteration, re-design, or intentional manipulation of material and/or aesthetic dimensions of a sneaker, carried out in order to transform a sneaker's physical/material form and, thereby, its cultural/symbolic signification. This can be performed pre-consumption (ordered specifically in a customized way), but most often, sneakers are customized post-purchase by grassroots artists or professional sneaker customizers. Customization is a generative site for scholarly inquiry, as it allows for the more direct expression of consumer desires while simultaneously unleashing new possibilities for the process of consumption.

Perhaps more than any single commodity, the sneaker is the culmination of late capitalist consumer culture, wherein culture and economics have merged onto a single plane (Jameson 1991), such that "mass-mediated 'cultural forms' have thus become a 'central focus and expression of economic activity'" (Connor 1989; quoted in Andrews 2006, p. 90). Our analysis builds on decades of scholarship on the cultural politics of consumption, including (but not limited to) Douglas and Isherwood's (1979) analysis of the communicative role of goods, Baudrillard's (1983) analysis of the role of sign-value in consumption, Miller's (1995) anthropological theories of consumption, Lefebvre's (2014) critique of the inauthenticity of consumer society, and De Certeau et al.'s (1980) analysis of the transgressive potential of "everyday" consumer practices. While our analysis is based on a particular understanding of cultural studies and critical sport literatures, shoes/sneakers, in particular, have also been an object of analysis in fashion studies (Benstock and Ferriss 2001; Sherlock 2012), anthropology and material culture (Hockey et al. 2013, 2015), and other related fields. While retaining this contextual focus, scholars such as Featherstone (2007) and Willis (1990) urge for a more grounded "everyday" approach to studying late capitalist consumerism, which encourages scholars "not to just read the signs but look at how the signs are used by figurations of people in their day-to-day practices" (Featherstone 2007, p. 62). As such, we follow Willis' (1990) theoretical framework of symbolic creativity—the open-ended process by which people use commodities to negotiate meaning and express identity on

an everyday level—for a more comprehensive and, indeed, agentic portrait of sporting consumption in late capitalism.

Expanding upon these scholarly conversations is especially pertinent given the evolutions of the culture industries, wherein advertising has extended not only across media broadly construed but increasingly to the mundane and previously uncommodified corners of everyday life (Lury 2011). We are now living in a consumer culture in which meaning is infused into every product we buy and each advertisement with which we are bombarded (Syfret 2021). This condition of existence begs the questions that frame sneaker consumption and customization: is advertising effective in creating meaning for us (and even presenting meaning as another item to be consumed), and to what extent do consumers play an agentic role in formulating their own meanings? Which "meanings" are winning, and what are the stakes?

2. Locating Sneaker Customization in Late Capitalism

Inspired by these general questions, our specific research questions for this study are twofold. First, how and why do individuals engage in sneaker consumption and customization? Second, what meanings do individuals attach to the process and products of sneaker customization? What emerges is neither a simple tale of an exploitative mass commercial culture devouring and determining a vulnerable "low" culture, nor is it a triumphant story of a low culture perceiving and operating in a unified resistance against a domineering sneaker industry (constituted by companies such as Nike, Adidas, Reebok, and Under Armour). Instead, we find that sneaker consumers generate alternative and negotiated meanings for sneaker consumption that are not completely determined by structural forces yet are not entirely free of them. Sneaker customization, then, is utilized as a popular grassroots project which, in some ways (although never conclusively) challenges the corporate dominance of both the athletic sneaker and the culture that surrounds it.

This project is part of a larger study, with projects previously published that elaborate in detail some key contexts and processes of sneaker customization to which this piece only alludes. We have written about the history of sneaker industry marketing, arguing that the sneaker industry's shift toward racialized marketing was effective in situating the sneaker as an emblem of urban Black America, even as it did so in ways that materially and ideologically exploited and harmed the Black community (Wallace 2022). Additionally, we have written about Black sneaker consumers' contradictory attitudes toward the sneaker industry and how they used sneaker customization as a political and philanthropic response (Wallace and Andrews 2022). We also outlined how consumers were conscientious about how *The Industry* (sneaker producers such as Nike, Adidas, and Reebok) utilized and exploited *The Culture* (a proto-community organized around the interests, aesthetics, and embodiments of urban Blackness expressed in and through a common passion for sneakers). With the political functions of the sneaker explained (with a special focus on race), this data expands upon the intercultural dynamics of sneaker consumption and customization. Specifically, whereas these previous publications detail the sneaker industry's historical practices of sneaker marketing, advertising, and community engagement (i.e., the "industry" side), this project aims to identify how everyday individual sneaker customizers resist/decode/counter the commercial positioning of sneakers, and how they use sneaker consumption and customization to negotiate/encode/express meanings at an everyday level (i.e., the consumer side). We analyze how the symbolic and affective meanings that consumers attach to sneaker consumption operate, sometimes in conjunction with, more often in opposition to, but always in tension with, the meanings that the sneaker industry attempts to embed through its ever-expansive means of marketing and advertising.

With data derived from interviews with 15 sneaker customizers, we narrate the contested terrain of the sneaker through three interrelated tensions expressed by the participants. The first is the tension between those who customized sneakers to express their individuality and those who, in doing so, effectively conformed to dominant trends within corporate sneaker culture. This was linked to the second tension between those who cus-

tomized sneakers because they appreciated artistry and those who viewed sneakers as a commodity and vehicle for profit. Both trends reflected, in more concrete terms, elements of the third tension, which was that between those customizers exhibiting an affective (emotional) attachment to sneakers and those with an instrumental (economic) attachment. Participants spoke of these self-proclaimed dichotomies in hierarchical terms, in which the individualistic/artistic/affective approach to sneakers was viewed as more legitimate and more authentic to grassroots sneaker culture. Conversely, those whose attachment to sneakers was conformist/entrepreneurial/instrumental were viewed less favorably since they were perceived as being externally driven and as the corollary of the sneaker industry's manipulative marketing tactics.

However, while sympathetic to this hierarchy presented by participants, we argue that neither side of the tension is as consistent or straightforward as it seems. In doing so, we demonstrate how, through recourse to multifarious practices of sneaker customization, acts of consumption are neither totally structurally determined nor acts of unfettered agency. The artistry of sneakers may be in tension with the commercialism of sneakers, but the two motivations are more intertwined than participants readily acknowledged. Overall, the contested terrain of sporting consumption is a complicated interplay between mass commercial domination and symbolic consumer creativity (Willis 1990), emblematic of the equally entangled interplay between late capitalism and everyday agency within the current moment. Consumers ascribed their own autonomous meanings to sneakers and the act of consuming them, in ways that resembled dominant (acceptance), oppositional (rejection), and negotiated (mixed) perceptions of sneaker industry narratives (see Hall 1980; Wilson 1996). In general, though, we found that consumers *spoke back* to the industry through the act of customization. Through the commodity of the sneaker, we thus present a story of how marketing and advertising in late capitalism is powerful but far from totalizing, and how its top–down symbolic manipulation is susceptible to bottom–up challenges from consumers.

3. Methods

This study is part of a larger project that uses a qualitative, social constructivist methodology to understand the meanings, motivations, and cultural politics of sneaker customization (Wallace 2019; also see Denzin and Lincoln 2011). The main method of gathering data was in-depth semi-structured interviews with individual sneaker customizers. Interviews are a useful way to facilitate personal communication and provide rich illumination of personal experience, meaning, values, context, motivation, and behavior (Smith and Sparkes 2017). The first author utilized what Patton (2002) calls homogenous criterion sampling to recruit the 15 participants who were interviewed. All participants met the criteria of being 18 years or older, having customized shoes in the past 10 years, and having lived in the United States for at least 5 years. Of the 15 participants in the sample, 13 were men, and two were women (which, despite our preference for a more equal gender disparity, roughly reflected the proportion of men and women at the sneaker conventions where data were collected). Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 38, with eight participants in their 20s and seven participants in their 30s. All participants were born in the United States. 10 of the 15 participants identified as Black/African-American, three identified as mixed (two were white and Black, one was white and Filipino), one identified as Latino, and one identified as Pakistani. Eight of the participants customized sneakers with the intention of selling them, five of the participants customized only for themselves, and two of the participants customized as part of organizational initiatives. To find individuals who met the sample criterion, the first author attended two local sneaker conventions where he met 13 of the 15 participants. Participants who appeared to be wearing or selling customized sneakers were approached and asked if they had experience with sneaker customization. All of the 13 participants who answered affirmatively and agreed to be interviewed preferred to conduct the interview at that moment during the sneaker convention.

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the first author conducted one interview with each participant. Interviews ranged from 15 to 45 min, with the average being around 30 min. Interviews were transcribed after they were conducted. Once transcriptions were complete, data were de-identified, and pseudonyms were given in place of participants' names. Transcriptions then were systematically coded twice to identify themes, which are presented below. We used thematic analysis as a method of data organization and expression. Broadly, thematic analysis aims to identify or interpret patterns or "themes" within qualitative data (Clarke and Braun 2006). A data point qualified as a theme if it constituted a "general pattern of meaning" (Clarke and Braun 2006), which we defined as a point that was semantically or latently present in three or more participants' responses, corresponded in some way with pre-existing theoretical frameworks and were relevant to our research questions. As presented below, in order to convey the interplay between consumer agency and the broader social structure, we present our themes as a series of tensions.

4. A "One-of-One" vs. "What's Hot": Individuality vs. Conformity

By far, the most common meaning of customized sneakers for participants was as a symbol to express their individuality. Many viewed custom sneakers as a mode of distinct self-expression amidst what they perceived as the monotony and homogenization bred by the sneaker industry. Shane summarized the notion best in response to being asked why he chose to customize his sneakers: "Just to stand out. Just to have a one-of-one, a shoe that no one else has". The majority of participants customized sneakers that differentiated themselves from their peers. Echoing the claims made in previous literature on sneakers (Miner 2009; Turner 2019; Wilson 1996), participants expressed their reasons for customizing sneakers in the following pattern:

> *Thomas: They really express who I am as a person. . . I like to have my shoes pop out just like I like to pop out.*
>
> *Brett: Just a way of expression. [My sneakers] are something I haven't seen before so I decided to make it myself. . . I was tired of wearing what everyone else was wearing. So I decided to be different for a little bit.*
>
> *Ken: Just to change it up. To be different from everyone else walking around.*
>
> *Charles: Well for the Nike IDs [customizations through Nike's website], they're my own thing. They're my own creation. Obviously someone else did it, I didn't do it with my own hand but it's still something unique to my own self. It's something personal and something that nobody else would have. Something that would kinda turn heads.*

These comments support Sassatelli's (2007) argument that the consumers of late capitalism wield commodities as means of constructing identity through difference, in an attempt to "ground their humanity in being different from the 'objectivity' of things . . . they have sought to distinguish themselves from the perceived passivity, docility, and transience of the many objects that surround them" (quoted in Lury 2011, p. 206). The pursuit of difference as an end in itself was evident and exemplified through the practice of sneaker customization. The custom sneaker, first and foremost, signified the individuality of the one who designed and adorned it, even if, in Charles' case, customization still benefitted Nike.

However, while the pursuit of individuality was the most common theme, all participants acknowledged that *conformity*—here defined as consuming or customizing in order to impress others and "fit in"—was prevalent within sneaker culture. Ironically, most participants commented that *others* demonstrated conformity with their consumption habits, but they *themselves* were not concerned with fitting in. Not all, however, viewed conformity with the pessimism common to a late capitalist consumer culture that fears and admonishes similarity (Featherstone 2007). Brett, an individual customizer, could not conceptualize sneaker culture without conformity, stating, "I think shoes always start with the self, but the main purpose is for everyone else to admire them. That's why we do it".

Similarly, Thomas, an individual and professional customizer, stated that the reception of his custom sneakers from others gave him a form of validation:

> *I love that look when you're walking around and you got some heat on your feet and somebody double-takes. If they're in that culture, they're gonna look at you and they're gonna know what it is. Sneakers mean a lot for that.*

Although Brett and Thomas' comments support Douglas and Isherwood's (1979) view of goods as communicative to others within groups, nonetheless, the idea of considering the thoughts or opinions of others was discussed pejoratively among most participants. All other participants stated that they only made sneakers for themselves without regard to how they would be perceived by others, yet they all believed that *others* within sneaker culture were overly mindful of what others thought. Participants alluded to an interesting and almost paradoxical tension, in which those who consumed and customized sneakers to express their individuality were perceived as most authentic to the sneaker subculture, whereas consumers who were thought to be outwardly focused on fitting in and blindly following trends in the sneaker industry were perceived as inauthentic. This dynamic clearly complicates this spectrum, creating an ironic twist wherein the hyper-pursuit of individuality (for its own sake) becomes, in and of itself, a signification of conformity.

Although taking into consideration others' opinions on sneakers was generally stigmatized, even those who stated they only customize sneakers for themselves implied that the reaction of others was meaningful. For example, Charles, an individual and industry customizer, stated that "no sneakers I make are for anyone else. They're for myself because I like them. I don't care what the hype is or what others think". Yet, Thomas also pointed out that he only wears customized sneakers at sneaker conventions and other settings where he thinks they will be appreciated. Similar to Thomas, Charles judged their originality by how much the sneakers "turned heads" as well as the regularity with which people commented that his sneakers were "one-of-ones" that they had not seen before. To Charles, as well as other participants, the originality of their sneakers was judged by the extent to which *others* identified them as original.

Aware or unaware of the inherent contradictions, the majority of participants positioned conformity as the enemy of originality and a perpetual detriment to the sanctity of sneaker culture. Justin, a professional customizer, stated, "the way the sneaker game is now, a lot of people are just here for show. Here for whatever's hot, or whatever has a label on it or a brand name on it. Like that's all people wanna wear". Also alluding to the pervasive influence of social media on contemporary sneaker culture, Ken, an individual customizer, stated the following:

> *I think everyone really does it for other people to see. I think that's the nature of sneakers. I mean hopefully it expresses a part of you, but you definitely show it off. And the validation comes from the "like" button on Instagram or Twitter or whatever.*

These two comments reflect the above admissions of external influence from Thomas and Brett, although Justin and Ken stated them with a tone of condemnation that indicated clear disapproval.

This sentiment that some within sneaker culture were only in it "for show"—common among participants—was often paired with negative attitudes toward popular sneaker industry brands and those who are thought to consume them. Yet, it was also acknowledged by some participants that blind consumption of the latest "hot" brand was due to the prevalence of the advertising of that brand. In other words, many participants—especially those who viewed themselves as immersed within the grassroots sneaker culture—viewed sneakers whose popularity was constructed from the bottom–up (from authentic subcultural engagement) as more legitimate than sneakers whose popularity was infused from the top–down (via rapacious industry marketing). Put more directly, meaning that was given to a sneaker organically was more likely to be adopted and respected than meanings that were circulated through the sheer blunt force of money. For example, Taylor, a Black

male professional customizer, was willing to admit that he previously consumed sneakers in order to fit into what he perceived as his place in society. He stated the following:

> *I was raised in the 90s, so that's pretty much when sneaker culture popped off, when larger companies realized that they could, you know, use prolific athletes to help influence the masses. So, you know, as a young kid not knowing anything about that, I just saw my favorite athletes, like Michael Jordan, playing and wanted those. . . So I kind of, by default, felt like that was a way of life. Like sneakers. . . it was the way to be fresh. It was the way to be respected. All the ladies and everybody near me was like, 'oh he always fresh. He always got the J's [Jordans]'. So it was like when you walk through, you feel like it feeds that male ego or something. Like yeah, I'm the man.*

In this case, Taylor discusses the ways in which he was interpellated by the messages emanating from Nike's advertising that, as documented at the time by Wilson (1996), positioned Jordan sneakers as a way to not only "Be Like Mike" but as an essential symbolic commodity in the construction of a hegemonic Black masculinity. Now, after two decades of becoming more reflexive about his attachment to sneakers, Taylor shared that he encourages Black youth to not formulate their sense of identity and self-esteem through sneakers and to instead focus on expressing individuality through academics and community service.

Darren, an African-American professional street customizer whose upbringing was similar to Taylor's, also echoed the notion of sneakers being crucial for acceptance into his peer group and, subsequently, a vital object of self-esteem. Darren stated the following:

> *[I] came up in the inner-city where, you know, having the flyest kicks is part of your day-to-day. If you ain't got on some clean shoes or at least something that, you know, people are notable of, your status level or even your security level—when it comes to insecurity and confidence—it's a little stagnant. You needed them.*

Though certain groups would be quick to misconstrue the comments of Taylor and Darren as evidence for pathological Black consumption habits, their comments more closely reflect Gilroy's (1993) argument that Black racial identity is often formulated by a complex attachment to certain brands and styles. Put differently, perhaps customization demonstrates the racial and spatial elements to the practices of "symbolic creativity" that Willis (1990) detailed as a working-class phenomenon, a stylistic subversion of the White mainstream (typified by the sneaker industry) by those excluded from it and marginalized by it. In other ways, however, industry marketing is more effective than ever, as both individuality and conformity through sneakers are realized through (branded) consumption.

Some participants even took small but significant personal actions to combat what they perceived to be the ascendance of conformity. Paul, a high-profile professional street customizer, took a stance by denying any customization requests that were related in some way to the latest "hot" brands. Tracing the shifts in sneaker customization over the past decade, Paul stated that previously, people solicited him to create something brand new. Now, people increasingly want him to create copies of what they have seen others wearing, or what the industry has created but they could not afford. He argues the following:

> *the custom shoe game has been butchered into something that's not so custom anymore. The word custom—making something unique to the individual—has been lost. Now, there's a lot of "I like this, can you make it for me?" Or "I saw this guy do this, can you do it too?" It's just a lot of conformity.*

Paul said that unless there is some sort of artistic or original twist to it, he turns down requests that he views as mimicry, despite losing a considerable amount of business for having this approach. He argued that it is necessary, though, in order to stay true to what his business' stated mission is and his vision of what should be at the foundation of sneaker culture, what he calls "true customs. . . one of ones, pieces of art". For Paul, signifying individuality and upholding sanctity was worth the potential loss of business.

Paul took his critique even further, extending it not just to sneaker consumers but to his fellow street-level customizers. He argued that it was not just that consumers follow the

latest "hot" trends, but the very act of customizing shoes has itself become a "hot" trend. Paul noticed a slow evolution that resulted in a contemporary sneaker culture in which the design or the meaning of the custom sneaker was not the primary component. The fact that a sneaker was a custom, and people acknowledged it as so, was enough. It was not so much that consumers customized certain designs to be signifiers of some part of their identity (which, for Paul, was the only legitimate reason to customize); the fact that the shoe was a custom was its own signifier, regardless of how it looked. Somewhere along the way, according to Paul, the various sneaker blogs and magazines that derided the trend of customization as detrimental to sneaker culture reversed course. At some point, they abandoned their disdain and began to use custom sneakers as a source of viral content for increased digital clicks and subscriptions. Paul viewed this transition as the impetus not only for everyone wanting customized sneakers but also for a plethora of people thinking that they can create customized shoes to sell. He states the following:

> *You know, when I first started. . . everything that was being put out was really a one of one. But then, it just became a fad. It became where every Tom, Dick and Harry was a customizer. As long as you own the airbrush or some markers or some paint, you're a customer now.*

Whereas once, only "true" artists and professionals were providing high-quality customs at the street level, Paul perceived the market as currently being diluted by those who customize just to make "a quick buck" through trendy designs. Paul concludes as follows: "This used to be a way to get something outside of the norm. And now, it's almost become a way to fall in line with what everybody else is doing". Paul's comments exemplify the ways in which creative grassroots labor is contemporaneously commodified by late capitalist culture industries, just to be subsequently "diffused" and "defused" (Clarke [1976] 2007) of its original subversive character.

5. "True Artistry" vs. "A Quick Buck": Art vs. Business

Building from Paul's previous comments, another tension about which participants spoke passionately was that between those who used sneakers as an artistic outlet and those who used sneakers as a business venture. For some participants, these two uses worked in tandem. For others, the two were dichotomous, the belief being that customization was *either* true artistry *or* a calculated means to make money. Participants who believed art and business could co-exist often viewed custom sneakers as pieces of art that could also be bought, sold, and overall reduced to their economic value.

Many participants identified sneaker customization as a form of art, and by extension, those who customized sneakers were considered as artists. Three participants described their sneakers as a blank canvas to be shaped, decorated, and enhanced as they saw fit. Charles viewed customization as an artistic expression that was not only a challenging and exciting experience but was unique in that the artist can wear and show off the finished product throughout their entire day. Charles's comments place sneakers as an example of Featherstone's (2007) aestheticization of everyday life, in which individuals apply style and flare to items that have traditionally lacked distinguishable qualities. Wayne also viewed custom sneakers as a form of art that was distinctively enmeshed with the identity of the artist. Echoing the transcendence of sign-value over use-value (Baudrillard 1983), Wayne stated the following:

> *You can't separate sneakers from art. It's not any different from taking a canvas and painting your ideas and writing a message on it or making a statement. It's the same thing with shoes. It's just now, it goes beyond protecting our feet, it's part of our outfits and part of who we are.*

Cody described the joy of the experience of customizing sneakers as follows:

> *Being able to take a blank canvas and do whatever you want with it, it's the same thing with shoes but just a three-dimensional form. So to be able to have your moment of*

> *freedom to do what the other designers did and just see what you can create, it's pretty dope. It's a different medium for art, it's beautiful.*

Again, participants indicated that the final product was not the sole focus; to many customizers, the journey—the process of customizing—was more important than the destination. Most participants who referred to their sneakers as artwork were ones who designed them by hand, but even Charles, who customized his shoes online through industry websites, viewed his creations as a form of art. Charles even tried to use industry websites to express artwork that he enjoyed. He attempted to put his favorite painting, The Scream by Edvard Munch, on a pair of Vans but was refused due to copyright infringement issues. Other participant methods of artwork on their shoes included painting, drawing, airbrushing, stenciling, dip-dying, writing, and switching up laces to create different patterns.

Engaging in the practice of sneaker customization was a natural development from previous art-related skills, talents, or experiences. Most participants who sold sneakers viewed them as a way to capitalize on their artistic prowess through a medium that was more popular and visible than traditional artistic forms. For instance, Nicole majored in graphic design in college and had experience with photography and drawing. She started customizing because: "I wanted to just try it because I saw a lot of people doing it and I wanted to try my hand in it. And it also was another way for me to make some money". Justin's story involved a higher level of investment in sneaker art, as he attended a prominent art school in California with the intent of becoming a sneaker designer. After failing to obtain an internship with Nike or Adidas, he returned to the East Coast and started his own art business, which included customized sneakers. He stated that even his non-sneaker products, which he designs, have "always been dripped in the culture around sneakers". Justin and Nicole had no qualms about mixing artistry with business.

Not all professional customizers agreed, however. For participants who viewed artistry and business as contradictory, there was a sense that the commodification of customized sneakers provoked a collective decrease in the quality and originality of the art produced. While it was widely acknowledged that it was acceptable to sell sneakers, participants shared Jameson's (1991) pessimism toward cultural commodification, positioning sneaker customization as an endeavor that should be about the pursuit of true artistry first and profit second. This view was even shared by participants who themselves customized sneakers and sold them. Most of these professional customizers rationalized this paradox by arguing that they customized for the art first and the money second, but accused other professional customizers of only being concerned about the money first and the business second. As a result of focusing on money rather than artistry, participants said that other customizers only catered to what's "hot" instead of seeking originality. The privileging of profit over artistry, then, was seen as the incentive for conformity (described above) and thus responsible for the dilution of sneaker culture. For instance, following up his complaint that every "Tom, Dick, and Harry with an airbrush" calls themselves a customizer now, Paul argued that true artistry was what separated the "real" customizers from the "fake" customizers. When asked what separates him from the other professional customizers he derides, Paul said the following:

> *Well you're dealing with an artist, a real true artist with 30 years' worth the airbrushing experience under their belt. You know, someone that's been doing it before it was a fad and someone that is passionate about it. . . there's a lot of things that we can do that other artists just simply can't. Like these people who call themselves customizers, there's some things we can pull off or they can't, or even that they wouldn't even dare to try.*

Justin agreed that certain customizers' skillsets are only bound to the latest social media trends, explaining that "Any artist. . . I guarantee you whatever the trending topic is on Instagram right now, that's what their [sneaker] sketches will look like". Cody, another professional customizer, also pointed to passion as what makes him distinct, saying the following: "I'm not looking to make a crazy company just off customizing sneakers. It's

just a close passion of mine, being an artist. I just love doing it every day, morning or night". Those customizers who declared that they had passion were wary of sneakers that looked passionless, which they often viewed as coming from people with superficial art skills, often working in the commercial sneaker industry. Customizers who made "passionless" shoes were dismissed by participants as merely conforming to the latest trends, only interested in money, or both. According to these participants, passionless sneaker customization has increased in the past few years to the detriment of sneaker culture.

Especially significant to our exploration of sneaker consumption as a contested terrain, participants also viewed true artistry as the reason to consume on the street level instead of through conventional retail outlets. Many participants thought that industry sneakers followed an algorithmic formula based on the latest trends or cheap knockoffs—if not stolen, uncredited replicas—of what street-level customizers were already doing. On the other hand, street customizers that were truly artists (as in, not just following the money) were viewed as more capable of transcending and innovating the industry's replicative and monotonous designs. Justin, speaking about that industry formula based on trendiness, said the following: "I'm not about to conform to that. I do what I want. I draw or I create what I feel. What people say is popping or what's trending at the time, I don't feel like that's real art". Paul agreed with Justin and considered the quality of his art to be so renowned that he no longer viewed the industry as a factor in his business. Paul states the following: "My niche is carved out. What [Nike] does doesn't affect me, because they're not gonna find an artist like me. I don't really worry because I can create. . . People come to me to get something that Nike can't mass produce". Paul offered the hypothetical example of a Martin Luther King Jr. tribute design for a custom sneaker. If the industry or lower-skilled street customizers were to make that shoe, Paul claimed that they would only add some words from King's "I Have a Dream" speech with some symbolism of Black History Month. Paul, however, could provide a portrait of King and add an artistic twist such as having King look up to the clouds with the speech's words in them, symbolizing King's religious motivation and his vision that at the time seemed unattainable. According to Paul, the industry did not have artists skilled enough to design a shoe that intricate. Paul said that he has customized portraits on sneakers for many people and that he is allowed to do so because he is a commissioned artist. For participants, passionless customization led to depthless superficiality in sneaker culture, but passionate customization was the answer to restoring artistry and originality.

For some of the customizers who viewed sneakers as a business, those who focused on the artistry were deemed more genuine than those who focused on the business aspects. As described above, they were able to reconcile their business practices of selling sneaker culture with their underlying intentions of promoting and innovating it. Other participants, however, did not see anything wrong with approaching custom sneakers as strictly business. These participants did not understand it as a dichotomy of either art or business but viewed themselves as being in the "art business". Steven said that sneakers, to him, were an "investment", adding that he merely took advantage of his love for art and sneakers. He began customizing when he realized that he "could make a lot of profit off of sneakers, because at this point, sneakers are a big business". Steven had no issue with customizers being driven by profit, as long as it did not detract from the quality of their art.

Ten of the participants in the study actually started their own business involving sneakers and saw custom sneakers as an avenue for them to become entrepreneurs (including seven of those who expressed a concern for sneaker commodification). Six of the ten sneaker entrepreneurs—Darren, Paul, Ken, Wayne, Cody, and Justin—started an entire fashion brand around their customized sneakers that extended into clothing, hats, and other fashion wear. Those who were unapologetic about viewing sneakers as a business were also unapologetic about conforming to the latest "hot" trends. They viewed this pursuit as merely fulfilling market demand. To them, making custom sneakers according to one's exclusive tastes and interests was admirable, but it would stifle sales and lead to sneakers just sitting on one's shelf. Nicole explained her rationale for making shoes

that people wanted, stating, "Shoes are expensive. . . you can't just make them and then hope someone buys them. Because then they're just sitting there. They're customs, so if nobody likes how they look at that time, what are you gonna do?" For Nicole, customizing according to what was popular was common sense, while trying to subvert the popular trends for the sake of "artistry" was simply bad business.

The ultimate goals of selling sneakers differed, however. For many participants, the goal was to make money and sustain a career in selling sneakers. Most approached customization as a part-time hobby, but six participants created and sold customized sneakers full-time. Cody viewed his business success as a means to broaden his profile; not to make himself more money but to increase his platform in order to circulate his artwork to consumers. Wayne created his brand to gain exposure for his design skills, with the hopes of one day being noticed by the industry companies (the same ones he strongly critiqued, a paradox he acknowledged) and being offered a job. Justin created his brand to disseminate his artistic vision, although he was also hoping it would lead to bigger and better opportunities. For Darren and Taylor, their brand was created to ultimately empower the youth from where they grew up (see Wallace and Andrews 2022).

For some participants, the business of sneakers was at odds with the personal meanings of sneakers, creating dilemmas. For example, Amber started off by making sneakers that were meaningful to her but ended up selling her favorite sneakers when someone saw her wearing them and requested them. Also, Cody stated that the business aspect has detracted from his passion for art and customization. The expectations of his customers have added a level of stress that he aimed to avoid when entering the business. Cody states the following:

> *I could sit down and do this all night, customize shoes and make art or whatever, I'm happy. But nowadays it's turned more into the business aspect. So I've been doing more customizations for people and commissions. . . if there was a time where I could breathe, I would love to do like 3 to 5 pairs just as a collection for myself. But right now I do it more for others. But I wanna get back to doing just my stuff, without the pressure and stress and anticipation of making somebody else's day.*

As Cody's musings illustrate, even for those who subscribed to the belief that sneakers were both a symbol of artistry and a profitable commodity, situations arose where they were forced–however reluctantly–to choose one over the other.

6. 'I Finally Got 'Em': Customized Sneaker as an Affective Commodity

Although we have discussed the (sub)cultural functions and identity-construction mechanisms of sneaker consumption and customization, customization was not always utilized instrumentally by participants as a rational calculation in pursuit of a predetermined end. It is insufficient to assess the contemporary consumer's motivations, desires, and behaviors as if they were purely driven by economic rationalism. One must consider the affective elements of objects and the meanings they signify, and specifically how they provoke emotional responses to various ideological narratives mediated through marketing, advertising, and promotional discourse (Andrews 1998). Brennan (2004) refers to affect as emotions, passions, attitudes, moods, or desires that provoke physiological responses that, in our case, are stimulated and transmitted through consumer goods. Because "cultural practices are implicated in, and constructed out of, their ideological, economic, libidinal, aesthetic, material, and emotional effects" (Andrews 1998, p. 6, italics added), affect must at least be in dialogue with ideology, especially considering the primacy of affect in sneaker industry marketing and advertising (Wallace 2022).

For most participants, the emotional, affective elements of custom sneakers were enough of a reason and justification for their creation and adornment. Ideologies and the pursuit of identity certainly shaped the significations of sneakers and customizations, but the affective implications, as Andrews (1998) writes, "[bridged] the gap between ideology and everyday existence" for participants. In laying out his theory of symbolic creativity, Willis (1990) found that clothing felt differently for individuals in certain contexts and that

individuals manipulated their clothing styles to "produce the right effect, to induce the right feeling or mood, involving subtle dressing strategies and choices of colours or styles" (p. 89). Customized sneakers were used in this way. While participants said they were not always able to put their feelings toward wearing custom sneakers into words, some of the descriptive phrases used included the following:

> *Charles: They just feel great.*
>
> *Shane: It's spectacular. . . it feels amazing.*
>
> *Wayne: It's a style, a pride thing.*
>
> *Darren: It's a statement, like it gives you a sense of confidence that you might not have without them.*

Steven, an individual and professional customizer, stated that emotions are what drive his creative process of customizing shoes: "All the shoes that I customized came out of emotions. I would use them to represent me or what I'm going through at a certain time". Paul stated that even the act of customizing sneakers evoked certain indescribable feelings and said that he "fell in love" with each pair of sneakers he made for others, though he later said that sneakers had become an addiction. Shane also said that the feelings that sneakers create for him have made his hobby develop into an almost unhealthy insatiability, stating the following:

> *I don't even know if I would call [sneakers] a hobby now. It's more like an obsession. Because even with buying a brand-new shoe, the hunger is not done, the hunger is not complete. I'm still looking for some new kicks right away.*

Shane's comments support Campbell's (1994) argument that commodities cannot satisfy needs because consumers desire the emotional stimuli that commodities engender rather than the commodities themselves. Though customizing sometimes made it more impossible to quell the insatiable need to possess every possible style or design, it also served as an outlet for managing this emotion.

Participants alluded to three specific feelings that customized sneakers evoked: the feelings of self-affirmation, nostalgia, and customizing as a therapeutic practice. The first, and one of the more surprising, feelings that sneakers evoked for participants was one of self-affirmation. For many participants, both traditional and custom sneakers served as a signifier of achievement, as if they were the material manifestation of individual progress in the face of social adversity. For Black working-class participants especially, sneakers represented the successful transcendence of their austere upbringing. For these participants, the ability to buy and wear the sneakers that they coveted—but could not afford—during childhood affirmed to them that they, in some capacity, have achieved success in later life. This pattern can be expressed in the participants' own words:

> *Cody: When I was a little kid. I couldn't get the name brands. I wasn't allowed to. It cost too much. . . you know, the typical parents stuff. So when I was able to get my first pair of Nike's, it meant something. So then once you start to learn about it and you learn the whole lifestyle about it. . . as you grow and get older, it just becomes a part of you.*
>
> *Wayne: For me, [sneakers] are also very personal. I grew up not having a lot, so now that I'm able to buy a pair of shoes or 2 or 3 for a couple hundred dollars, and make that money back and be able to spend again. . . it's like an art. It's entrepreneurship.*
>
> *Amber: If [the sneakers] are some that I've wanted since I was a kid, it makes me feel like 'I finally got em.' You just want to cherish them.*

Sneakers were, in a way, a convoluted emblem of the (neoliberal) American Dream. They were, in a vernacular sense, material evidence of having "made it" within the consumption-defined late capitalist American formation.

The participants listed above were referring to the traditional sneakers that their peers growing up would wear. For other participants, customization was used to mimic the traditional sneakers that they could not afford. As Brett states, "If I didn't have the money

to buy the shoes I liked, I would spend all of my time drawing them and adding my own details to the concepts". For Brett, customization filled the gap between what he could afford and what others had. Similarly, Nicole stated, "I remember when I was younger, I always wanted to have a lot of shoes, but I couldn't get them because I couldn't afford them. But now I sell to buy what I need, or customize what I want". Even currently, Nicole uses customization as a way to have the designs she likes without having to pay high prices for them. Nonetheless, these affective comments represent how the contested terrain of sporting consumption is not always transgressive or self-reflexive. For participants, custom sneakers were a commodity used to communicate meanings both internal and external to the self. However, out of these responses emerges deeper questions, such as the following: why were sneakers chosen as a demonstrator of achievement over other objects? For what reason does achievement need to be demonstrated through consumption at all? Is it more to reassure oneself or to signal achievement to others? These comments could be read as the sneaker industry advertising—not only being successful in generating affective attachments (and its close association to sustained profit) but also having an even greater affective impact than they could ever imagine.

Although the above responses allude to childhood as a time to overcome, sneakers also exemplify the more positive aspects of childhood. Nostalgia was a feeling that arose from sneakers and also became manifest in certain customizations. Having the ability to buy sneakers that were popular during participants' childhoods (most commonly the late 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s) was representative of simpler times. Adding upon the pattern of self-affirmation, Ken, an individual customizer, stated the following:

> *[Buying sneakers] started off as aspirational. Because when I was younger, I couldn't get all the shoes that I wanted. So it's like, you get to a certain level of success when you get older and it's kinda aspirational and nostalgic. Because now I can go back and buy all those shoes that I couldn't get when I was younger.*

For Ken, buying the sneakers that he could not afford during childhood was not an act of "catching up" but an enjoyable way to remember the past.

Participants also mentioned a feeling of nostalgia when customizing their sneakers. A common way to do this was to embed sneakers with cartoons from childhood, either to wear and gain recognition or as a way to stimulate sales. The four participants who engaged in this practice (Justin, Steven, Amber, and Charles) indicated that the designs were meant to spark nostalgia not only for themselves but also for others who grew up in the era in which that cartoon was prominent. For example, Amber customized her sneakers with designs from the popular 2000s-era cartoons SpongeBob SquarePants and The Boondocks in order to sell them to fellow consumers her age. Many of Justin's sneakers included prominent Black and Latino cartoons from the time that he was growing up. For Justin, this was important because it gave today's Black and Latino youth a form of representation to identify with. Steven also sold sneakers with cartoon designs, stating that his designs "gave that emotion off… everyone who knows that cartoon, they know what it was and they feel that feeling". For these participants, designs inspired by popular cartoons were meant to create a bond with others through shared nostalgia.

Cartoons were not the only signifiers of an earlier time period added to sneakers. Cody and Ken both recognized the inclusion of hip-hop designs as an evocative commemoration of the era when that music was released. For example, Ken added a Wu-Tang ice cream cone, a famous symbol of the popular early 1990s rap group Wu-Tang Clan, to one of his sneakers. Ken said that others would routinely see the shoes and tell him that they remembered that era when Wu-Tang was popular, which validated the shoes for Ken. Similarly, Cody stated that a pair of Nike's with a design reminiscent of Kanye West's 2004 album College Dropout made him think of his love for that album, which caused him to reflect upon how much life has changed since that time. Although largely benign, this pattern demonstrates that the ideological association between hip-hop and sneakers that began with Adidas and Run DMC in the 1980s is still apparent today (Wallace 2022).

Lastly, participants described the act of wearing and/or customizing sneakers as therapeutic. Steven, as outlined earlier, stated that he customized sneakers in a way that represented his emotions and what he was going through at the time that he made them. Thomas, referring to the act of customizing sneakers, said, "it helps me feel free as a person, and it relieves stress and gets me in my zone. It's like a form of meditation". It was not the sneakers themselves but the act of customizing that was a stress reliever for Thomas. For Brett, customizing shoes by hand with paint was preferred to online industry customization because the experience of working on a sneaker and seeing the process from start to finish was therapeutic. As elaborated in Wallace and Andrews (2022), multiple participants viewed the process of customizing as therapeutic, especially for disadvantaged inner-city youth. Darren viewed an interest in sneaker culture and fashion consumption as a way for inner-city youth to process, organize, and express their raw emotions in what he called a productive way. Wayne said that his passion for customizing sneakers kept him out of trouble and served as a way to "get a lot of kids off the street" to this day. This lends support to Lee's (1993) point about late capitalism's increasing emphasis on the experience of consuming rather than the materiality of what is consumed, as the experience of consuming and customizing had affective implications for participants regardless of what the final product became.

7. Conclusions

We have argued that sporting consumption should be understood as a contested terrain. Apparent in our three interrelated tensions—individual versus conformity, artistry versus business, and affect versus instrumentality—is that participant understandings of sneakers, themselves, and other sneaker consumers were constructed in explicit or implicit negotiation with the commercial sneaker industry, and more broadly, late capitalist consumer culture. Participants share a "common" culture (Willis 1990), linked by factors of class, race, space, and consumer interest. Nonetheless, they differ in the meanings they grant to customization and the values they attach to those meanings. Some viewed sneaker customization as an avenue to stick out amongst the monotony of mass culture, while others used it to fit in with what they saw around them. Some customizers were passionate about the artistic process and products of sneaker customization because of how it differed from the sneaker industry, while others justified the callous commodification of sneakers as a way to keep up with the industry. All participants—individual or conformist, artistic or entrepreneurial—had an affective attachment to sneakers that, for some, demonstrated a humble embrace of industry marketing, and for others, demonstrated a bold rejection of it.

While we have presented a narrative that focuses on creative individual agency within consumer culture, it is clear that underlying each comment and act of sneaker customization is the messy pursuit and expression of identity. The relationship between identity and commodities is often complex and paradoxical. Dittmar (1992) describes it as indicative of the idealism–materialism paradox of modern society: the way in which, on one hand, identity is perceived as being unique, autonomous, and not heavily influenced by people, society, and culture, yet on the other hand, identity is so clearly defined and moderated by the exchange, possession, and use of commodities (Lury 2011). Indeed, the contested terrain of sneaker consumption vividly exemplifies Miles's (1998) statement that "not only does consumerism structure our everyday lives, but it does so by offering us the illusion of consumer freedom when, at least to a certain extent, such freedoms are inevitably constructed and constrained" (p. 5). Nonetheless, sneaker customization demonstrates how contemporary consumers use symbolic creativity (Willis 1990) in their consumer practices to *speak back* to the culture industries. In doing so, they engage in sport-related consumption to assert themselves as authentic, if not contradictory, agents in the ongoing construction of meaning and identity in late capitalist consumer culture.

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Article

Athlete Maltreatment as a Wicked Problem and Contested Terrain

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Abstract: Athlete maltreatment in organized sport has attracted considerable attention from governing bodies, stakeholders and the general public. Despite numerous studies and policy proposals from various countries, the problem remains unresolved due to its inherent complexity. Drawing upon the concept of 'a wicked problem' widely utilized in policy analysis, this study first identifies the wicked features of maltreatment, focusing on: (1) the difficulty of establishing a definition of maltreatment; (2) the challenges of identifying its causes; and (3) the impediments to identifying solutions in a context of embedded stakeholders and unintended consequences. To provide further analysis, we compare athlete maltreatment with other issues in sport such as doping and match-fixing, to suggest that lessons can be drawn from other wicked problems in the same contested terrain. Overall, given the complex interplay between maltreatment and the maintenance/legitimization of sport systems, this paper calls for continuing attention and evaluation of existing research/policies and advocates for a more multidimensional view that acknowledges maltreatment as a wicked problem.

Keywords: athlete maltreatment; wicked problems; contested terrain; sport; policy

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1. Introduction

The issue of athlete maltreatment in sport has garnered significant attention from governing bodies, stakeholders and the public worldwide (Kerr et al. 2019a; Park et al. 2024a, 2024b). In light of the escalating public concerns regarding athlete maltreatment across various tiers, ranging from grassroots to national and professional levels, there has been a burgeoning demand for targeted research (Bisgaard and Støckel 2019; Johnson et al. 2020; Mountjoy 2020; Vella 2019). Moreover, the issue transcends countries, sports and levels, while also involving a number of stakeholders such as athletes, coaches, team doctors, administrators and national and international sport organization officials. Compounding the issue is that maltreatment is often overlooked due to "fear of reputational damage, silence or collusion, and ignorance" (Mountjoy et al. 2016, p. 1019). In decades past, this reticence to acknowledge the problem by sport organizations yielded minimal sport policy development and implementation to manage maltreatment (Brackenridge 2001). Yet even in countries like Canada and South Korea, that have had policies in place for over a decade, it appears that the issue is no closer to being resolved (see Canadian Heritage 2019; Park et al. 2024b). Thus, in many ways, athlete maltreatment in sport resembles 'a wicked problem' (Rittel and Webber 1973), similar to other seemingly intractable policy issues such as unemployment, poverty and affordable housing.

From this viewpoint, athlete maltreatment can be conceptualized as a wicked problem. Adopting a wicked problem approach to the issue extends our understanding beyond the current literature by: (1) highlighting why it is difficult to define and delineate; and (2) outlining why it is difficult to diagnose its causes across different levels of sport. Although some scholars have proposed solutions or policies to prevent maltreatment in

organized sport, a wicked problem approach suggests that solutions are invariably problematic because any particular solution may create new or unanticipated issues. As such, while labelling an issue like 'athlete maltreatment' as a 'wicked problem' does not yield resolutions (and indeed this would be the antithesis of the perspective), the approach might provide a wider understanding for managing its chaotic and complex nature (Head 2022).

Thus, we draw upon the work of Rittel and Webber (1973) who use the term 'wicked problem' to broadly characterize issues that are resistant to planning interventions. In this view, wicked problems are social problems which interrupt current thinking, are challenging to define and are difficult to resolve. Within the context of maltreatment in sport, a perspective on wicked problems permits the inclusion of a range of issues within broader complex relations, by including motivations and interests of its numerous stakeholders (Westberg et al. 2017). As a result, the purpose of this research is to explore athlete maltreatment as a 'wicked problem' in society—that is, a problem that defies definition and planned efforts to solve it. Accordingly, this research uses the wicked problems approach widely used in policy analysis to identify the complexity of athlete maltreatment, including the divergent interests of stakeholders. The preference for a wicked problem approach is that it has the potential to provide new insights regarding why numerous programs and policies trigger controversy, fail to carry out their stated aims, cause unforeseen results or are impossibly difficult to monitor and coordinate. Furthermore, given the inherent characteristics of wicked problems it is nearly certain that the debate over the definitions, causes and solutions for athlete maltreatment constitute a *contested terrain*. Jackson and Scherer (2013) conceptualize a contested terrain as:

> . . . a site of struggle not unlike a battlefield, involving key interest groups with varying resources and material interests, and competing ideas and beliefs. . . contested terrains are about power struggles over resources (financial, material and human) and ideological and moral/ethical beliefs sometimes they are minor philosophical disagreements, but sometimes the result is major conflict. Stated another way, contested terrains involve competing claims over national common sense as various groups seek to continually endeavour to refashion their way(s) of life and interests as legitimate and apolitical. (pp. 888–89)

To date, the concept of a contested terrain has been widely utilized to critically analyze various areas of debate such as: (1) sport diplomacy (Jackson 2013); (2) alcohol sponsorship (Cody and Jackson 2016); (3) health and wellbeing (Jackson et al. 2022); and (4) sport mega-events (Jackson and Kobayashi 2023). Building on this framework, we can scrutinize athlete maltreatment as a wicked problem. This research is structured into three sections. First, it discusses the general concept of wicked problems, including its origins as an alternative to theories of rational planning. This section also outlines the key elements that characterize wicked problems. Second, it looks at why athlete maltreatment may be considered a wicked problem and specifically in relation to: (1) its ambiguous definitions; (2) its multiple causes; and (3) its links to vested interests and the creation of new problems. Additionally, this section explains why understanding maltreatment as a wicked problem is important for a comprehensive analysis. Lastly, athlete maltreatment is compared to the wicked problems of doping and match-fixing in order to understand the similarities but also the challenges of definition with respect to laws, polices and rules.

2. Conceptualizing Wicked Problems and Their General Characteristics

The concept of wicked problems was first introduced by Rittel and Webber (1973) to explain emerging policy issues in the social and environmental planning literature. Within academia, the concept of wicked problems has since been used to point to a wide variety of social constructs across different disciplines including: (1) policy (e.g., Head and Alford 2015; Peters 2017); (2) education (e.g., Ramley 2014; Wegner 2008); (3) climate change (e.g., Lazarus 2008; Levin et al. 2012); and (4) sport (e.g., Byers et al. 2020; Sam 2009; Westberg et al. 2017).

Notably, Rittel and Webber's (1973) fundamental aim was to discredit two existing theoretical approaches and paradigms. The first was "a systems-based, rational-scientific, grand theory of planning" and the second was "the classical paradigm of science and engineering" as a basis for planning in "modern professionalism" and "social science" (Crowley and Head 2017, p. 541). Their original motive for redefining the capacity of planning and modern professionalism was the social dissent, protest movements and upheavals that radically disturbed the USA in the 1960s and 1970s (Crowley and Head 2017). In this view, a poor understanding of wicked problems was conceptualized as a general obstacle to effective implementation and design as much as it was identified as a special group of problems (Peters 2017). Rittel and Webber's (1973) approach was intended to help policymakers become attuned to problems which have alternative policy structures and various causes.

To this end, the two fields of planning and policy could be appropriately linked. While the planning approach has a powerful design element in relation to policy (Peters 2021), it tends to be negative about the role of politics in reducing the capacity to solve issues. In contrast, members of the policy and practice analytic camp are likely to accept politics as an essential element of the policymaking process (Peters 2017). The acknowledgment of politics in planning thus became an implicit cornerstone in understanding wicked problems. Underpinned by these two elements, Rittel and Webber (1973) described 10 characteristics to differentiate wicked problems from the wieldy issues that the government had previously dealt with and managed successfully (e.g., infrastructure building).

However, subsequent researchers have collapsed Rittel and Webber's (1973) original 10 characteristics of wicked problems into three or four categories. For example, Roberts (2000) indicates that wicked problems can be condensed into four elements in that they display: broad disagreement, open-ended solutions, complexity and constraints (see also Head and Alford 2015).[1] Others similarly synthesize, three common features of wicked problems from the literature (Ansell and Bartenberger 2016; DeFries and Nagendra 2017; Rittel and Webber 1973; Sam 2009). According to Sam (2009), these are mainly involved with: "(1) the difficulties with problem definition; (2) the uncertainties relating to causal chains and mechanisms; and (3) the propensity for remedies to result in new or unintended problems or to exacerbate existing challenges" (p. 502). Peters and Tarpey (2019) also suggest that Rittel and Webber's (1973) 10 characteristics include three common features:

> First, they emphasize that many problems we now face are poorly defined, and linked to other problems. In addition, solutions for those problems also are not readily apparent and are linked with the very actors who are the cause of the problems. And finally, it appears impossible to know, ex ante, what would constitute a good solution. (p. 220)

Based on this framework, this paper considers athlete maltreatment to be a contested, intractable issue owing to its 'wickedness' in relation to three features: (1) its ambiguous definitions; (2) its multiple causes; and (3) its links to vested interests and the creation of new problems. Through a synthesis of various policy documents and scholarly resources, the next section outlines three characteristics of wicked problems and how they are related to athlete maltreatment.

3. How Can Maltreatment Be Regarded as a Wicked Problem?

3.1. The Difficulty of Definition: Various Perspectives on Maltreatment

While wicked problems share some similarities, they are essentially unique (Ansell and Bartenberger 2016; Rittel and Webber 1973). Hence, the first feature of wicked problems is that they are either difficult to define or are poorly defined (Peters 2017; Peters and Tarpey 2019). Reflecting this point, the term maltreatment has been used inconsistently by researchers, including the use of a range of different definitions. For instance, the definitions of maltreatment in society vary widely due to a diverse array of factors, such as: (1) relational and non-relational maltreatment by the nature in which the behavior occurs (Stirling 2009); (2) its detailed characteristics—negligence, neglect and commercial or other

exploitation, including physical and sexual abuse, emotional ill-treatment (World Health Organization 2016); and (3) a new definition of non-accidental violence (Mountjoy et al. 2016). As a result, Fortier et al. (2020) state that "such a broad definition of physical maltreatment contributes to a substantial risk of confusion in classifying physical maltreatment and psychological maltreatment" (pp. 4–5).

Moreover, definitions of maltreatment are shaped by the various perspectives of stakeholders. For example, the media appear to interpret maltreatment only in relation to its most serious form—sexual abuse. News regarding sexual abuse produced by the media may be used to deliberately invoke social interest, generate revenue and enable media to seek comment from both government and sport organizations thus further elevating its public profile. Sexual abuse in the sport community has rather exclusively gained more attention, disregarding other sorts of abuse (Kerr et al. 2020; Ohlert et al. 2018; Stirling 2009). Indeed, the Safe Sport Summits in Canada were framed by the consistent argument that sexual abuses are "the most egregious behaviors" (Kerr et al. 2020, p. 8), focusing much less on the wide range of research on children highlighting that their health and wellbeing are affected by many types of maltreatment (Kerr et al. 2020; McCoy and Keen 2022). Athletes, in contrast, view maltreatment to include an extensive range of abuses. For instance, Kerr et al. (2019b) note that 1001 current and retired Canadian national team athletes reported experiencing maltreatment within the following categories: psychological abuse, neglect, sexual abuse and physical abuse. Overall, these findings reveal that definitions of maltreatment in sport may vary across media, academics and athletes.

The point above also demonstrates that while certain types of abuse that breach athletes' rights might be categorized as crimes (Mountjoy et al. 2016), the vast majority of cases of maltreatment involve non-criminal behavior such as emotional abuse, bullying, hazing and neglect. The fact that each of these behaviors holds a range of definitions also renders the interpretation of maltreatment difficult to achieve consensus. Emotional abuse in sport, for example, is defined by deliberate, repeated and sustained patterns of non-contact behaviors between athletes and caregivers within a critical relationship role (Stirling and Kerr 2008, 2013) and resulting in the potential harm of athletes. One element lacking clarity in research surrounds whether intent and frequency of behaviors are more or less constitutive of maltreatment (Kerr et al. 2019b). Importantly, and as will be discussed below, a wicked problem approach should not be read as a demand for 'air-tight' definitions. Rather, it serves to highlight that problems are not easily classified or disambiguated as they tend to be connected to other problems that may be nested within one another.

3.2. The Challenges of Identifying the Causes of Maltreatment

A second characteristic of wicked problems is that they have complex causal chains that relate to interacting systems (Rittel and Webber 1973). Any definitive conceptualization of a wicked problem's cause is elusive because each cause is often connected with other issues (Ansell and Bartenberger 2016; Peters and Tarpey 2019). Putting it another way, Van Bueren et al. (2003) note that "causal relations [around wicked problems] are numerous, interrelated and difficult to identify" (p. 193). As it relates to maltreatment, this strand of discussion deals specifically with four different causal interpretations: (1) the misdeeds of a few bad individuals; (2) the power/authority of stakeholders imbued by the sport environments; (3) the sport system itself (culture, practices and self-regulation); and (4) the primacy of maintaining 'image' or reputation in sport organizations.

Immoral behavior by 'a few evil individuals' can be regarded as one of the critical causes of athlete maltreatment. Likewise, by and large, maltreatment is viewed as caused by 'the moral failures of individuals' rather than by wider structures. For instance, in Canada, an investigation by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) reported that almost '222 coaches' in amateur sports were charged with sexual offences against children, involving over 600 victims over the previous 20 years (Ward and Strashin 2019). Most victims, the investigation reported, were athletes training with coaches who looked for points of access to prey on children left in the clubhouse. In turn, the perpetrators commit-

ted various types of sexual violence such as sexual exploitation, rape and possession or production of child pornography (Ward and Strashin 2019). The investigation showed that 36 different amateur sports coaches were charged and convicted because of their individual sex crimes but there was little discussion about the wider structure and system of sport that may have contributed to the problem.

It is also important to consider that the problem may be caused by the power/authority of stakeholders imbued by the sport environment. In this view, both media and scholarly works have recognized one potential cause that is related to the power of stakeholders towards their athletes. As Kavanagh et al. (2020) state, the cause of maltreatment by perpetrators is all placed upon the "individuals who had misused their positions of power" (p. 1). More particularly, the power/authority of stakeholders is the dominant 'causal storyline' (Stone 1989) and is often expressed in the following way:

> In this kind of story, problems or harms are understood as direct consequences of willful human action. Either someone acted in order to bring about the consequences, or someone acted with full knowledge of what the consequences would be. . . But when the consequences of purposeful human action are bad, we have stories of oppressors and victims. (Stone 2012, p. 209)

For example, the South Korean media recently connected the suicide of a Korean national triathlete with the abuse of a coach, a team physiotherapist and peers. As the media reported, their wrongdoings were reinforced by their power/authority in a sport environment where success was rewarded regardless of the harmful methods used to achieve it (Kim and Lee 2020; Lee et al. 2022). As Park et al. (2024a) note, power differentials between coaches and athletes are reinforced by vertical stratification rooted in South Korea's strict hierarchical sporting culture, which facilitates maltreatment in elite sport. By extension, the negative impact of the power/authority of coaches in elite sport is exacerbated by two main factors: (1) the increased professionalization of coaching as an area of technical and scientific expertise (Gilbert et al. 2006; Kim and Dawson 2022); and (2) the support from organizations to maintain the position and legitimacy of coaches (Abraham et al. 2006). Hence, behaviors that would normally be defined as maltreatment are accepted and normalized because they appear successful in terms of winning at national and professional levels.

Furthermore, it is widely known that athlete maltreatment is linked to other sources, such as the 'culture, practices and self-regulation' within particular sports and/or the sport system more generally. Indeed, systemic practices in sport may enable maltreatment to occur, highlighting that the problem is more complex than just individual acts perpetrated towards athletes (Kavanagh et al. 2020). In particular, the culture and practices in the sport field shaped by Korean Confucian culture, seniority, a military-service culture and meritocracy may create conditions conducive to athlete maltreatment and help maintain dangerous sporting environments (Park et al. 2024a). According to Young (2019), for example, hazing is "one of the worst kept secrets in all of sports" with neophyte athletes sometimes experiencing traumatic initiation rituals within new team settings (p. 75). Further, and related to culture, sports coaching conduct and methods have sometimes been identified as part of a punitive 'culture' of control (Burak et al. 2013; Sullivan and Kent 2003). This issue was highlighted in the Universal Code of Conduct to prevent and address Maltreatment in Sport (UCCMS) which was developed at the 2019 Safe Sport Summit in Canada. However, some participants of the Summit were concerned that the code would have a negative impact on coaches' ability to perform their job, and thus requested that the following clause be added:

> Conduct and coaching methods that are acceptable to Canadian standards for skill enhancement, physical conditioning, team building, rule enforcement, or improved athletic performance [would be exempt from descriptions of maltreatment]. (Kerr et al. 2020, p. 10)

Those advocating for changes to current sports coaching conduct and methods perceived this clause as expressive of efforts to sustain a punitive 'culture' of control (Kerr et al. 2020).

Another acknowledged discourse associated with the causes of athlete maltreatment is that "coaches create a culture of retribution" (Jacobs et al. 2017, p. 132) and thus behave inappropriately to control their young athletes. The culture of control and retribution is reflected in quotes from two of their interviewees:

> If parents complain then the next morning at practice their daughter will be told, 'You do not tell your parents those kinds of things. What we do and say, stays here and you do not share that with your mother.' She gets yelled at and is shamed in front of the others and/or is isolated during practice. You know that this girl will never say anything at home anymore. That is what I call total control.
>
> If a coach knows someone is coming [from the board or NGA] all he has to do is say to an athlete: 'Be careful . . . You know that competition you want to go to next month?'. (Jacobs et al. 2017, p. 132)

From the perspective of athletes, identifying the cause of maltreatment can be a problem because they may be socialized by the sport culture and have known nothing other than training within a hierarchical sport system. Consequently, athletes learn strict obedience towards coaches and team doctors, which itself becomes a major barrier to the problem that athlete welfare advocates are trying to resolve (Park et al. 2012, 2024a). It is important to acknowledge that just because a problem is identified in a particular place in which athletes might be socialized (e.g., the collective training camp, Olympic Training venue) (Park et al. 2024b), this does not necessarily mean that this is where the problem lies or that it (in itself) is the cause (Best 1995). In this sense, causal explanations are inherently political, where different interests will attempt to strategically portray causes that support their preferred solutions (Stone 1989).

A suite of research studies on the influence of commercial incentives with regard to athletes have emphasized 'win at all costs' behavioral outcomes, including the ruthless pursuit of profitable sponsorships, excessive testing with training technologies and recovery modalities (Belk 1996; Gems 1999; Van Bottenburg 2003; Westberg et al. 2017). From this perspective, Roberts et al. (2020) argue that "a winner-take-all reward system may induce coaches and athletes to use whatever means necessary, including abusive methods, to achieve results" (p. 11). For example, during the Larry Nassar trial, victims' testimonies disclosed that 'win at all costs' mentality of the U.S. Olympic Committee and USA Gymnastics' reinforced a culture in which athletes were conditioned to tolerate physical, emotional and sexual abuse (Kerr et al. 2019a). Likewise, within the South Korean elite sport system, the Specialist Athlete System for developing student-athletes has served as the cornerstone of its rapid growth for over 50 years, leading to a 'win at all costs' attitude that prioritizes achieving medals and competition success, often at the expense of athlete wellbeing (Park et al. 2024b).

Notably, sport organizations in many countries have operated a system of 'self-regulation' to protect athletes, but such systems tend to lack the necessary mechanisms required to monitor the health and safety of athletes. As Kerr et al. (2020) note, sport activities occur within a somewhat distinct realm, often detached from rules and regulations governing broader societal norms. In contrast, other areas where children are involved, such as educational settings and day care centers, have sufficient sanctions in place for individuals in positions of trust and authority (Kerr et al. 2020). From these perspectives, the overall sport environment, including its culture, practices and self-regulation are difficult to target as the cause of the problem because in many ways they have emerged as a response to previous problems.

Exemplifying the mix of causal mechanisms for athlete maltreatment at the extreme level is the case of Larry Nassar, who committed serious sexual transgressions as the USA gymnastics team doctor from 1996 to 2014. There were reports of concerning behavior as early as the 1990s, but what was eventually recognized as criminal behavior was hidden by

stakeholders who tried to protect the 'image' of USA Gymnastics (McPhee and Dowden 2018). This is because USA Gymnastics earned revenue by utilizing the wholesome image to attract sponsorships and advertisements. Hence, in this view, the cause of athlete maltreatment is not only the individual but the collection of interests who are incentivized to ignore or defend it.

3.3. The Challenges of Identifying Solutions: Links to Vested Interests and the Creation of New Problems

A third characteristic of wicked problems is that solutions are not readily apparent (Peters and Tarpey 2019). This essentially means that it is hard to qualify the effectiveness of remedies. Although planners and sport organizations have tried to implement various policies, programs and recommendations to solve the problem, solutions are inevitably elusive. Notably, maltreatment is an important consideration for stakeholders marked by the 'efforts' of agencies, schools and organizations which are in charge of providing solutions or remedies. Romano et al. (2015) refer to the *Helping Traumatized Children Learn* report (Cole et al. 2005) which identified multiple recommendations, including "school-wide infrastructure, culture, and policies; staff training; cross-sectoral links; academic and non-academic strategies" to promote educational success (p. 434). While educational programs for the prevention of maltreatment in sport for coaches and parents have amplified internationally for more than 25 years, empirical evaluations in relation to the effectiveness and success of such programs remain absent (Kerr et al. 2014; Kerr and Kerr 2020). In this sense, as a serious social problem, athlete maltreatment generally relies as much on political judgments as it does on (social) scientific certitudes in its search for remedies; that is, the problem is inherently resistant to an agreed solution (see Head and Alford 2015).

Indeed, the solutions to maltreatment for sport participants are far from clear. While the lack of solutions lies partly with the definitional ambiguity of the problem itself, the wickedness of solutions is also because they are connected to the individuals and organizations that are the cause of the issues (Head and Alford 2015). For that reason, athlete maltreatment may be resistant to simple remedies (e.g., Codes of Conduct) and solutions may need to be applied across different sectors and domains. Therefore, solutions to safeguard athletes from the problem of maltreatment may invariably have positive or negative impacts on stakeholders such as athletes, parents, coaches and managers. In South Korea, for example, a new regulation to advocate for the victims of sexual abuse in sport has led to an unanticipated result that they now have to prove in court that they were sexually assaulted as a direct result of the power and authority of perpetrators (Kim and Kim 2019). That is, despite a system of law established to protect the victims, its implementation may create new issues such as re-victimizing those who were abused and/or shielding the system from blame.

In this regard, solutions to resolve athlete maltreatment can create new problems or unintended consequences (Sam 2009; Weber and Khademian 2008). This is because wicked problems require decision making within uncertain conditions in that, "the further one develops causal chains of consequences into the future, the more the effects of uncertainty will come into effect" (Rittel 1977, p. 392). For example, in 2019, following several high-profile scandals and growing concerns regarding athlete maltreatment, the South Korean government appointed a Sport Reform Committee[2] to comprehensively review the sporting system and investigate the underlying causes of the problem, resulting in seven recommendations (Hong 2020; Park et al. 2024b). One of the significant risks identified surrounded the Collective Sports Training Camps (CSTCs) to youth and adult athletes residing in villas or flats, that could expose them to various types of maltreatment. To address this problem, the Committee advocated for the complete abolition of the CSTCs (operated from elementary to high school, including unconventional off-school camps) and suggested permitting limited dormitory operations exclusively for long-distance students (Kim and Jang 2022). However, despite efforts to eradicate the CSTCs, focusing solely on this aspect of the sport system inadvertently led to new problems such as the emergence

of 'illegal' training camps near schools and private sport clubs (Park et al. 2024b). This example demonstrates that solutions or remedies will invariably give rise to new issues or unintended consequences, highlighting the characteristic complexity of wicked problems.

To sum up, maltreatment in sport is difficult to accurately define because the problem can be linked to multiple, overlapping *causes*. It is further 'wicked' because solutions are not readily apparent, and these are often politically connected with stakeholders and organizations. Finally, maltreatment is wicked because the mix of incomplete causal interpretations and isolated solutions invariably create unanticipated issues. As shown in Table 1 below, the relationship between the concepts and characteristics of wicked problems and maltreatment in sport has been identified through a diverse range of features of sport.

Table 1. The relationship between characteristics of wicked problems and maltreatment.

Characteristics of Wicked Problems	Maltreatment in Sport
It is difficult to define the problem (Peters 2017; Peters and Tarpey 2019)	1. Definitions of maltreatment are broad or ambiguous 2. Definitions of maltreatment differ according to different stakeholders 3. Definitions of maltreatment are institutionally prescribed as criminal and non-criminal behavior
It is difficult to establish the cause of problems (Ansell and Bartenberger 2016); Problems are linked to other problems (Peters and Tarpey 2019)	1. Maltreatment is viewed as the result of 'a few bad individuals' 2. Maltreatment is caused by the peer power/authority of coaches, support professionals, institutionally imbued by the sport environment (Stirling and Kerr 2016) 3. Maltreatment is related to other problems in the sport system such institutionalized practice and self-regulation because sometimes maltreatment is integral or part of culture 4. Maltreatment persists because it is hidden from stakeholders to sustain the 'image' of sport organizations (McPhee and Dowden 2018)
Solutions are not readily apparent (Peters and Tarpey 2019); Solutions are linked with the people/organizations who are the cause of the problem; Solutions create new and possibly unforeseen problems (Sam 2009; Weber and Khademian 2008)	1. Maltreatment may be resistant to simple remedies with a narrow behavioral scope (e.g., Codes of Conduct) 2. Solutions are difficult to apply across different sectors and institutional domains 3. Solutions may have both positive and negative effects on stakeholders (e.g., athletes, parents, coaches and managers), such as when victims are 'revictimized' by investigative processes, or when undesired practices are propagated outside of the system

3.4. Why Maltreatment as a Wicked Problem Is Important to Understand

It is widely known that wicked problems are important for stakeholders in order for them to understand the implications and challenges of policymaking. As described in the previous section, the concept of wicked problems tends to be characterized as any difficult issue, but sometimes with "seeming disregard for the components of the concept as originally articulated" (Peters and Tarpey 2019, p. 222). Although the characteristics of wicked problems are significant, the common underlying factor is that a rising number of issues facing governments and organizations, cannot be solved effectively or cannot be solved through the existing processes that they use (Peters and Tarpey 2019). Nonetheless, it is necessary to understand several forms of social problems with the various attributions of wicked problems since they are overwhelmingly perceived to explain a large number of policy issues.

Approaching maltreatment in sport as a wicked problem is a potentially important task for stakeholders who might show disagreement regarding the cause of the problems. For example, scholars and policymakers in other sectors such as planning, economics and education have leveraged the theory of wicked problems to identify more fine-grained causes of the problem as well as novel/effective solutions. Some advance the need for dialogue-based approaches for goal setting, planning and strategizing (Head and Alford 2015; Healey 2020; Innes and Booher 1999). Others, including officials and administrators,

prefer not to use the theory because they favor solutions that reduce conflict with other stakeholders while also diminishing the complexity of administration.

Although various remedies have been proposed and trialed, wicked problems, by their very nature and composition, cannot be completely resolved. This does not imply a sense of fatality and inevitability but rather encourages scholars and policymakers to understand and acknowledge the limits and potential unintended consequences of these issues. Consequently, the way in which policy literature defines wicked problems and the normative concepts within the proposed sport system predispose the way the problems of maltreatment are framed. The next section briefly outlines the cases of doping and match-fixing as other examples of sport-related wicked problems and how they are related to maltreatment in sport. Also, it includes a brief description of laws and policies related to child maltreatment and athlete maltreatment.

4. Other Wicked Problems in Sport: Doping and Match-Fixing

The relationship between the features of wicked problems and maltreatment discussed in the previous section can be compared to other wicked problems such as doping and match-fixing in sport by identifying and explaining potential similarities. These problems are relevant in that they are perceived as serious issues in sport that have resulted in the creation of new policies and institutional regimes. More importantly, there is a long-held worldwide recognition that maltreatment, doping and match-fixing in sport have threatened the value and integrity of sport and have been understood as difficult problems to address because they have the features of wicked problems (Sam et al. 2023).

Let us briefly compare the similarities. Here, we can think about the challenge of defining the problem of doping as a wicked problem. For example, some athletes might not regard the social use of prohibited substances such as alcohol, cocaine and marijuana as 'doping' as they are not generally taken to enhance performance. However, the anti-doping rules regulate these substances as rule violations when traces of them are discovered in an athlete's urine during the competition (De Hon et al. 2015). Meanwhile, the issue of doping is not a strictly pharmaceutical problem; rather, it is characterized as cheating (Kräkel 2007), and as one of the most serious threats to the integrity of sport (Engelberg et al. 2015; Gurgis et al. 2023). Match-fixing likewise undermines the fundamental feature of sports competition which is the uncertainty of process and consequence (Hosmer-Henner 2010; McNamee 2013; Tak et al. 2018). It has a long history in all types of sport going back to the earliest times, but mostly in terms of 'cheating to win' rather than gambling (Preston and Szymanski 2003, p. 618). Definitions of match-fixing often refer to terms like 'improper alteration' but rarely specify exactly what is meant by 'improper alteration' (Chappelet 2015, p. 1261).

In part, this highlights the issue of how language is used to define/redefine particular problems which, in turn, influences how they are framed and understood by the public. In particular, maltreatment, doping and match-fixing are very often regarded as cultural practices. Many researchers indicate that "doping practices" are facilitated by coaches, medical and managerial staff because doping is used to enhance sport performance (Kerr and Kerr 2020, p. 100). Moreover, match-fixing is sometimes framed as a corrupted betting/gambling-related practice with "the intentional manipulation of competitions, results or aspects of a match", which directly impacts on the integrity of sport (Moriconi and De Cima 2020, p. 162). Maltreatment in professional and amateur sport is also recognized "as part of a culture facilitated by management who either turn a blind eye or believe it to be in the athletes' interests" (Kerr and Kerr 2020, p. 100).

Another similarity between maltreatment, doping and match-fixing is that many preferred explanations for solutions can be invoked as an argument amongst stakeholders. For example, a range of efforts to solve these issues (even very short-term and intensive plans such as: laws, regulations, penalties, policies, education) are often challenged by the combined views of experts and the government. Nevertheless, to solve these problems, carefully designed remedies may not be readily obvious because the remedies are associated

with the "very actors who are the cause of the problems" (Peters and Tarpey 2019, p. 220). As the Russian case of state-sanctioned doping illustrates, it is not necessarily in the best interests of elite sport agencies to eradicate doping, if incentives are overwhelmingly in favor of winning medals. In a similar vein, sports betting is undeniably an important source of revenue for sport and while there are monitoring systems targeting irregular betting patterns and suspicious sporting outcomes, it is impossible to identify the precise effectiveness of the countermeasure (Kalb 2011).

In sum, despite all of the efforts to eradicate maltreatment, doping and match-fixing, these problems persist in sport because there are no complete remedies available to resolve ongoing threats to the integrity of sport. Thus, it is useful to understand the characteristics of problems in sport with respect to particular features of wicked problems which are perceived to explain various policy issues. This understanding is particularly underscored by the fact that doping and match-fixing regulations have been in place for decades and consequently these offer opportunities for policy learning on the part of stakeholders wishing to tackle maltreatment.

Laws, Policies and Rules Regarding Maltreatment

Research on maltreatment is important for enhancing the quality of policy that may control this serious social problem. For example, intervention and prevention strategies for the maltreatment of children are widely used. Laws and conventions to prevent child maltreatment were originally enacted in many countries (e.g., South Korea, Australia and the United States) in the 1960s and 1970s. In particular, the enactment of laws associated with child maltreatment seems to vary for historical, cultural, religious and economic reasons but what is clear is that all laws should be maintained by balancing societal tolerance with reasonable enforcement (Mathews and Bross 2013).[3] The concern of child protection in sport has been enhanced by the establishment of children's rights policy. Rights for athletes and children in sport stem from their legal and moral roots emerging from pre-existing human rights law (Kerr and Stirling 2008). First, "the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) was established by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the National Olympic Committees and the International Sport Federations in 1983" (Kidd and Donnelly 2000, p. 140). Second, policies and organizations for athletes' rights in Canada were implemented by "the Canadian Olympic Association Athletes' Advisory Council, AthletesCAN, the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada, and inclusion of ethical conduct and athletes' rights in the Canadian Sport Policy" (Kerr and Stirling 2008, p. 310). Lastly, the issues besetting sport were recognized by Sport England in partnership with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) as well as initiated by the Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) in 1999 (Turner and McCrory 2004).

To sum up, maltreatment is recognized as a major issue in society as evidenced by the implementation of numerous laws, policies, institutions and organizations to protect athletes and children (Park et al. 2024a; Stirling 2009). Moreover, a number of legal frameworks and avenues can be combined to provide preventive mechanisms and an extensive repertoire of remedies for societies and experts working with child protection, policy and justice (Mathews and Bross 2013). However, despite these multiple strategies, initiatives and increased attention, scholars observe that current policies have failed to prevent maltreatment in sport (Donnelly and Kerr 2018; Kerr and Kerr 2020; Park et al. 2024b). While the reasons for this are not clear, it is likely that within both highly commercialized and hypercompetitive national sport systems, athletes may be the victims of maltreatment by coaches, managers and colleagues who are all under pressure to succeed. Additionally, stakeholders such as agencies, schools and sport organizations have allowed the perpetrators of maltreatment to offend. It is thus difficult to isolate the causation of wicked problems because of the complex nature of sport mechanisms and systems.

5. Conclusions

Despite attracting attention from numerous stakeholders and relevant organizations, resolving athlete maltreatment is hindered by its inherent intractable or unmanageable features. This study examined the contested terrain of athlete maltreatment in sport, which faces challenges in both defining and addressing the problem. Using the concept of a wicked problem, we suggest maltreatment in sport remains intractable because: (a) definitions of the problem vary according to the various perspectives of stakeholders including the media, researchers, the sport community and athletes; and (b) conceptions of the problem vary along legal-societal interpretations of criminal or non-criminal behavior. Secondly, establishing the cause of athlete maltreatment is challenging due to its connections with other issues (that may be both 'real' and perceived). More specifically, there are four distinct causal interpretations: (a) the misconduct of a few individuals; (b) the power/authority granted to stakeholders by the sport environments; (c) the sport system itself (culture, practices and self-regulation); and (d) the priority given to maintaining the 'image' or reputation of sport organizations. Lastly, solutions for addressing athlete maltreatment are inherently elusive as they are closely intertwined with individuals and organizations responsible for the problem (Head and Alford 2015). Consequently, the problem may resist simple remedies such as Codes of Conduct, and solutions will often create new problems and unintended consequences over time (Sam 2009; Weber and Khademian 2008). Solutions to protect athletes from maltreatment may inevitably produce both positive and negative impacts on stakeholders (e.g., athletes, parents, coaches and managers). Hence, based on our analysis, maltreatment is "vicious or tricky" (cf. Jackson et al. 2022, p. 5), due to the inherent complexity of its key attributes.

Ultimately, viewing issues (e.g., maltreatment, doping, match-fixing) through the lens of a wicked problem contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in organized sport, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of opposing stakeholders and the interconnected challenges these present. As previously mentioned, most studies of maltreatment in sport have analyzed similar aspects of the problem, yet without acknowledging that the definitions, proposed causes and any associated implemented solutions have multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations. Indeed, the contexts of wicked problems are rarely challenged. Therefore, since discussions about maltreatment are often restricted at the level of key stakeholders, sport organizations tend to nominate themselves as the ones most capable of analyzing the problem and identifying solutions. This self-nomination can be problematic due to potential biases and conflicts of interest, hence why some countries (like Australia and New Zealand) have established independent statutory entities to address the problem (see Sam et al. 2023). In this lies the hope that maltreatment in sport can be more broadly constructed within various perceptions of both the victims and perpetrators, reflecting the diverse and conflicting interpretations inherent in wicked problems. Yet, even so, to mitigate maltreatment in sport will require a wider scope than most remedies can provide. This exploration would thus suggest attending to the contested terrain more broadly as a means of developing coordinated responses among stakeholders. While such responses may only achieve partial and temporary successes, this approach will nevertheless invite ongoing attention and effort, perhaps amenable to continuous adaptation and change.

It is thus important to consider that the definitions, causes and resolution regarding athlete maltreatment are intertwined in a complex manner with the maintenance and legitimization of sport systems (see Figure 1 below). In light of these findings, future studies may consider advocating for periodic reassessment of the enduring institutional factors that contribute to athlete maltreatment in organized sport, along with corresponding endeavors aimed at mitigation. We hope that our critical evaluation, encompassing the suggested research agenda, will stimulate other scholars to explore the issue of athlete maltreatment.

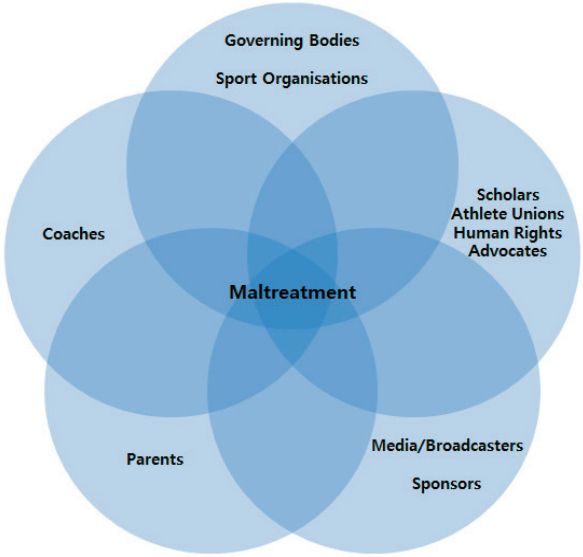

Figure 1. 'Wicked' nature of maltreatment in sport by highlighting the complex and contradictory positions of stakeholders.

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Notes

1 Rittel and Webber's (1973) original 10 characteristics can be conceptually integrated into three main elements. Characteristics 1 and 7, for example, are related to defining the problem; Characteristics 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 are essentially definitions in relation to solutions; Characteristics 8 and 9 indicate the possibility of another problem that links with numerous points of view; Characteristic 10 describes the liability of the planner or person ultimately responsible for developing and implementing a solution (Ansell and Bartenberger 2016; Head and Alford 2015; Peters 2017).

2 The committee members consisted of five Vice-Ministers (the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST), the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF), the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MOEF) and the National Human Rights Commission of Korea and 15 civilian experts (sport, human rights, gender, disability, law and civil society) from February 2019 to January 2020 (Hong 2020).

3 The first English laws regarding maltreatment, such as the Poor Law 1868, were aimed at intervening in cases of severe neglect but were poorly implemented. Prosecutions for severe maltreatment were rare (Mathews and Bross 2013, p. 481). In 1974, the enactment of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) delineated state obligations for safeguarding children and bolstered the fulfillment of these duties with new federal funding for state initiatives and nationwide studies. CAPTA has undergone multiple reauthorizations, most recently in 2010 (National Research Council et al. 2014).

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Article

The Contested Terrain of Sport and Well-Being: Health and Wellness or Wellbeing Washing?

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Abstract: Wellbeing has firmly established itself within contemporary practice, politics and policy. Indeed, the cultural, commercial, and terrestrial landscape of the concept is staggering and manifests within popular discourse and across global organisations and institutions, national governments, workplaces, and consumer lifestyle products and services. Notably, the field of sport, exercise, and physical activity has been identified by the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations, and the OECD as a key sector with the potential to contribute to people's wellbeing. This should not be surprising given that there is a large body of literature espousing the benefits of regular physical activity (in myriad forms) as part of a healthy lifestyle. However, there are increasing concerns that wellbeing's global ubiquity may be leading to a range of unintended consequences and/or unscrupulous practices within both international organisations and nation-states. This largely conceptual essay focuses on the concept and process of wellbeing washing by (1) tracing the historical roots and evolution of wellbeing; (2) exploring its reconceptualization within the framework of neoliberalism; (3) offering a preliminary outline of the concept of wellbeing washing; and (4) briefly describing how wellbeing washing is manifesting within the context of sport in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Overall, this analysis explores wellbeing as a contested terrain of interests marked by a range of complexities and contradictions.

Keywords: wellbeing; health; wellbeing washing; sport; neoliberalism

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1. Introduction

Wellbeing has firmly established itself within contemporary practice, politics, and policy. Indeed, the cultural, commercial, and terrestrial landscape of the concept is staggering and manifests within popular discourse and across global organisations and institutions, national governments, workplaces, and consumer lifestyle products and services (Cederström and Spicer 2015). Notably, the field of sport, exercise and physical activity has been identified by the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations, and the OECD as a key sector with the potential to contribute to people's wellbeing (World Health Organization 2024; United Nations 2023; OECD 2024). This should not be surprising given that there is a large body of literature espousing the benefits of regular physical activity (in myriad forms) as part of a healthy lifestyle. However, there are increasing concerns that wellbeing's global ubiquity may be leading to a range of unintended consequences and/or unscrupulous practices within both international organisations and nation-states (Bache et al. 2016; Chapman 2016; Davies 2015; Murphy 2021). Specifically, the combined compulsion to identify and implement often well-intentioned wellness and wellbeing policies, including those associated with sport, within a dominant neoliberal political-economic paradigm is problematic on two fronts. First, the pace at which alleged evidenced-based wellbeing policies and practices are being mandated within state, public, and private organisations may be counterproductive and may be leading to new and

more harmful types and levels of unwellness (Atkinson 2021; White and Blackmore 2015). Second, the same groups, in order to commodify and capitalise on the concept or to meet key performance indicators in order to justify their budgets (or their very existence), may deliberately or unconsciously engage in what could be referred to as "wellbeing washing", the strategic use of wellbeing by governments, corporations, or organisations to cultivate an image of being proactive, positive, and caring while they are in reality doing very little or actually doing harm.

With respect to the commodification of wellbeing, consider the Canadian multinational athletic apparel retailer Lululemon. In 2023, the company published its own Global Wellbeing Report, which, in and of itself, highlights how the concept is being appropriated and commercialised by corporate entities. Moreover, the Lululemon case provides insights into how corporations are strategically positioning themselves not only to provide information about contemporary wellbeing trends, but also to offer expertise on how wellbeing should be conceptualised and pursued. Consider the following quotation from their global report:

> "Institutions, brands and society at large have an important role to play in enabling and supporting the pursuit of wellbeing, without creating stressful imperatives and upholding unachievable standards. It's time to introduce a softer take on self-care—one where the journey towards being well includes enjoyable, simple acts of movement, mindfulness and connection". (Lululemon Global Wellbeing Report 2023, p. 7)

The fact that Lululemon asserts that "brands have an important role to play in enabling and supporting wellbeing" could be considered a form of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Hiswåls et al. 2020). While some public health scholars support CSR in this domain (Johansson et al. 2022), it could also be regarded as a strategic form of wellbeing washing and a sign of the widening scope of who is involved in setting the wellbeing agenda.

Arguably, wellbeing has become intricately entwined within the vast realm of politics, economics, health, education, and consumer lifestyles, shaping a vast network of discourses and policies that wield power, allocate resources, and ultimately impact people's quality of life. This analysis responds to one aspect of a recently proposed research agenda related to wellbeing. Jackson et al. 2022) advocated for a future focus on three lines of wellbeing research, including: (1) wellbeing as a wicked problem; (2) wellbeing and alternative futures; and (3) wellbeing washing. This essay focuses on the latter by: (1) tracing the historical roots and evolution of wellbeing; (2) exploring its reconceptualization within the framework of neoliberalism; (3) offering a preliminary outline of the concept of wellbeing washing; and (4) briefly describing how wellbeing washing is manifesting within the context of sport in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Overall, this analysis explores wellbeing as a contested terrain of interests marked by a range of complexities and contradictions.

2. Origin and Evolution of Wellbeing

Even a scant review of the literature reveals that the concept of wellbeing comprises a rich historical tapestry, encompassing a spectrum of meanings including quality of life, happiness, flourishing health, and even morality and mindfulness (Dodge et al. 2012; Seligman 2012; Davies 2015; Smith and Reid 2017; Leary 2019). In light of this multiplicity of understandings of wellbeing, a major challenge faced by scholars, policy makers, and everyday citizens is the diversity of uses and meanings embodied within the concept. For example, Pollard and Lee (2003) describe it as a "complex, multi-faceted construct" that defies easy definition and measurement, while Thomas (2009) contends that wellbeing is "intangible, difficult to define, and even harder to measure". The confusion is exacerbated by the conflation of wellbeing with concepts such as wellness and welfare. Perhaps we should not be surprised given the origins and development of wellbeing, particularly in relation to public policy.

For example, wellbeing's contemporary interpretations can be traced to the late 1770s, when Jeremy Bentham identified happiness as a societal metric that could be used to advance "utility" or the "greatest happiness of the greatest number" (Bentham 1776). In

turn, English philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) employed utilitarian principles to shape law and social policy. This fusion of utilitarianism with liberalism paved the way for the emergence of an economic model of human behaviour, with profound implications for society.

Today, most understandings of wellbeing can be categorized into two primary frameworks. The first, known as subjective wellbeing, underscores a holistic, multidimensional evaluation of an individual's mental, physical, and spiritual health (see the following for systematic reviews of the concept: Das et al. 2020; Ngamaba et al. 2017; Topp et al. 2015). This approach finds resonance in the World Health Organization's Well-being Index (World Health Organization 1998). Established in 1998, the WHO-5 Index serves to gauge the subjective wellbeing of individuals aged nine years and older. Comprising five statements covering aspects like cheerfulness, calmness, vigour, restfulness, and fulfilment, this index stands as one of the most widely employed questionnaires for evaluating subjective psychological wellbeing. It has been translated into over 30 languages and extensively utilized in research endeavours worldwide. Furthermore, as highlighted in a systematic literature review, "[t]he scale has adequate validity both as a screening tool for depression and as an outcome measure in clinical trials and has been applied successfully as a generic scale for well-being across a wide range of study fields" (Topp et al. 2015, p. 174). Nevertheless, the WHO-5 Index has its critics. For instance, the WHO-5 index concentrates on gauging the frequency of positive emotional states but overlooks negative emotions, along with their intensity and duration (Kusier and Folker 2020). Moreover, condensing the multifaceted nature of wellbeing into just five basic questions for quantification and operationalization oversimplifies the concept. The significant influence of the WHO-5 index cannot be ignored given that governments, corporations, and various other sectors have helped establish it as part of a dominant wellbeing agenda.

The alternative conceptualization of objective wellbeing encapsulates the comprehensive dimensions of the concept, providing an alternative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a metric for a nation's overall prosperity (Western and Tomaszewski 2016). An exemplary model is the OECD Framework for Measuring Well-Being and Progress, crafted based on the 2009 Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, with substantial OECD input. This framework comprises three primary components: present wellbeing, disparities in wellbeing outcomes, and resources for future wellbeing (www.oecd.org). Similar to the WHO-5 index, the OECD Well-being Framework has influenced a broad spectrum of scholarly analyses across various academic domains and has served as a foundation for international policy development across a range of sectors, including the economy, health, and education (McGregor 2018). Nonetheless, akin to the WHO-5 index, the OECD Well-being Framework faces several limitations, including a lack of consensus on validity and on the constituents and determinants of wellbeing (Cavalletti and Corsi 2018). Furthermore, both the WHO-5 and the OECD approaches to wellbeing have come under scrutiny for several reasons: (1) they both operate on the assumption of objective measurement of wellbeing (Alexandrova 2018), disregarding critical distinctions in the quest for international conceptual harmony (Auld and Morris 2019); (2) both are primarily Western-centric, marginalizing alternative perspectives such as Asian and Indigenous perspectives and those of other cultural orientations (Diener and Suh 2009; Jorm and Ryan 2014; Rappleye et al. 2020; Tiberius 2004; Tov and Diener 2009); and (3) both function within a broader framework of societal norms and values that may not fully encompass the diversity of everyday human experiences and struggles (Bache and Scott 2018; McGregor 2018).

While these two wellbeing frameworks may seem distinct, they are in many ways interconnected and rooted in both positivist and neoliberal paradigms. Thus, on the one hand, the introduction of wellbeing as a more progressive measure of national economic and social outcomes signifies social change. On the other hand, however, the translation of state-level policies and associated performance metrics often centres on *individual* wellbeing (Jackson et al. 2022). Consequently, being "well" is defined by traits such as health, pro-

ductivity, efficiency, resilience, obedience, and loyalty—qualities that ensure compliance, reduce costs, and boost economic growth (Cederström and Spicer 2015). Therefore, contemporary wellbeing remains entrenched within a context shaped by a blend of utilitarianism and neoliberalism. Next, we explore the emergence of wellbeing as a tool of neoliberalism and its societal implications.

3. Neoliberalism and Wellbeing

The Global Wellness Institute reported that the "wellness economy" reached an estimated $US5.6 trillion in 2022, with projections suggesting it could soar to $US8.5 trillion by 2027 (Global Wellness Economy Monitor 2023). These figures are indicative of the commodification of wellness and wellbeing. However, in a broader sense, they represent one aspect of neoliberalism that Harvey (2007, p. 22) describes as: "...a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade". Harvey offers one particular conceptualisation, but it is important to acknowledge that neoliberalism has been widely interpreted and critiqued, particularly when it has been treated as a phenomenon that is everything, everywhere, all at once (Biebricher and Johnson 2012; Cahill et al. 2018; Gamble 2001; Giroux 2008; Hardin 2012; Lane 2023; Springer et al. 2016). Nevertheless, regardless of enduring definitional debates and conceptual limitations, one of the central features of contemporary neoliberalism is that it involves the state negotiating between public and private realms and forming strategic, albeit temporary, alliances where necessary to ensure that a market-driven system is upheld. Consequently, the state is complicit in sustaining a system that involves a fundamental shift in a range of social and fiscal responsibilities from the state to the individual (Connell 2010; Harvey 2005). As such, it is worth reflecting on the emergence of neoliberalism and its subsequent influence on the politics of wellbeing.

The 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of neoliberalism. In France, President Nicolas Sarkozy commissioned a report to assess the efficacy of using Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a metric for a country's economic performance and social advancement (Stiglitz et al. 2009). The report underscored the limitations of GDP as a comprehensive indicator, as it fails to reliably predict the health of either the economy or its inhabitants. It recommended the incorporation of supplementary indicators beyond GDP, prioritizing a shift from measuring economic output to assessing people's wellbeing (Stiglitz et al. 2009, p. 12). Since 2008, wellbeing has gained significant prominence, prompting states and non-governmental organizations, including the WHO and the OECD, to adopt new models and frameworks aimed at recalibrating economic and social priorities.

In addition, several states (including Canada, Ecuador and the UK) have implemented national wellbeing frameworks. Perhaps the most explicit is New Zealand's Living Standards Framework featuring a "wellbeing budget." Aligned with global trends, New Zealand's wellbeing model relies on aggregated individual indicators and is backed by social investment in areas aimed at securing future wellbeing (Treasury 2018). Driven by subsequent "wellbeing budgets" spanning five years (2019–2023), such measures have become embedded in the strategies and programs of all state agencies. One aspirational positive outcome of the Living Standards Frameworks was increasing awareness of the potential value of Māori indigenous perspectives on wellbeing. However, the 2023 election of a centre-right National-led government has raised fears that any progress made could be quickly eradicated. Consequently, despite its purported advantages, five sequential versions of the wellbeing budget could not reduce the country's enduring social problems, including: poverty, homelessness, employment insecurity, and labour exploitation. Rather, based on any available set of quantitative or qualitative measures, New Zealand's economic, health, and social wellbeing levels have declined (McClure 2021). What is particularly noteworthy in relation to this analysis is how wellbeing, as both discourse and policy, has

been appropriated in order to reframe the aforementioned systemic problems as individual challenges and responsibilities (Rose 1999; Sointu 2005).

To illustrate how the neoliberal agenda impacts the experiences of citizens, let us consider how wellbeing has been embraced and operationalised within the values and logic of the organisational workplace. Over the past decade, we have witnessed the rising emphasis on the idea of "self-care for work", which has resulted in the emergence of a wellbeing services industry comprising consultants, coaches, and specialists (Cederström and Spicer 2015). In conjunction with this change, there has been an increase in workplace wellness and wellbeing programs featuring "wellbeing champions" and their corresponding awards. The organisational logic of these initiatives is that employees who proactively manage their wellbeing are more productive and take less sick leave, but they also promote alignment with corporate values that are increasingly defined in terms of demonstrating loyalty and commitment to the employer. Beyond these benefits, employers are rewarded with being able to use their wellbeing programs as a marketing and recruitment tool to attract new employees and/or as evidence of benevolence because they demonstrate duty of care for existing workers through messages of "work-life balance" and the offering of Employee Assistance Programs (EAP). This neoliberal reconfiguration of wellbeing has yielded two significant and interconnected effects. Firstly, wellbeing now functions as a "policy paradigm through which the mind and body are assessed as economic assets" (Davies 2011, p. 65). Secondly, akin to health, wellbeing has become deeply ingrained within organisations and wider society to the extent that "deviation from its norms is stigmatized" (Cederström and Spicer 2015, p. 4).

The preceding discussion presents a critical evaluation of the constraints inherent in scholarly conceptualizations of wellbeing, as well as its potential exploitation by state, corporate, and other agencies. This scenario has resulted in rising uncertainty and doubt regarding the theoretical and practical value of tools like the WHO-5 index. Notably, some observers have even questioned whether the concept of wellbeing is itself counterproductive or potentially hazardous (Gruber et al. 2011; Murphy 2021; Timimi 2020; Whitaker 2010). Given some of the ambiguity, complexity, and at times contradictory nature of wellbeing as concept, practice and policy, a number of concerns emerge. First, from its idealistic roots, wellbeing has evolved into a type of ideological norm that stigmatizes those who fail to align with it. Second, the increasingly entrenched dogma that endorses the uncompromising pursuit of wellbeing may, ironically, lead to negative outcomes; that is, wellbeing may not only be alienating people, but actually making them sick. And, third, the uncritical collective fixation on a neoliberal model of wellbeing is leading to a range of both unintended consequences and malicious practices, including the phenomenon of wellbeing washing.

4. Wellbeing Washing

"Wellbeing washing" derives from similar concepts such as sportswashing (Boykoff 2022; Fruh et al. 2022; Skey 2023) and greenwashing (Kolcava 2023; Miller 2017; Williams 2024). These concepts share a number of characteristics, including the fact that they: (a) signify something that appears intrinsically positive, (b) operate at both global and local levels; and (c) seek legitimacy within the popular consciousness while simultaneously masking or marginalising the root systemic causes and effects of real social problems. Here, we define wellbeing washing as the strategic use of narratives, policies and practices by supranational, state, and corporate organisations to signal positive and even morally obligatory intentions, while these narratives, policies and practices are designed to advance neoliberal values of productivity, cost reduction, brand maintenance, conformity, and control. Arguably, the real power and influence of wellbeing lies primarily in its positive meaning, which creates a type of "halo effect" (not unlike concepts such as "democracy", "freedom", "liberty", "sport", etc). Thus, even though there is nothing natural, essential or inherently good about "wellbeing", anything associated with it tends to inherit its positive qualities, thereby making it a powerful and strategic, albeit speculative, concept and tool that can be used

by a range of stakeholders. Thus, we should not be surprised that many agencies and organisations use wellbeing as a virtue-signalling term to launder or "wash" the real effects of some of their objectives and practices. The next section provides a preliminary exploration of how wellbeing and wellbeing washing are emerging within the context of sport. It is important to note at the outset that, given the fledgling nature of the concept, our analysis focuses on using examples to illustrate the nature and potential implications of wellbeing washing.

5. Sport and Wellbeing Washing

There is an established body of literature highlighting the positive relationship between sport, exercise, physical activity, and health and wellbeing. The majority of research in this area tends to focus on one of three areas. The first, and probably the largest, area is the impact of sport, exercise and physical activity on subjective and psychological wellbeing (Chalip et al. 1996; Downward and Rasciute 2011; Fasting 2015; Steptoe and Butler 1996; Testoni et al. 2018; Wilson et al. 2022a, 2022b; Zhang and Chen 2019). Second, research and concurrent policy have emerged in response to the negative impact of hypercompetitive elite sport on athlete wellbeing. This category includes issues of athlete wellbeing ranging from maltreatment (Kerr et al. 2014; Kerr et al. 2019; Kerr and Kerr 2020) to governance and integrity issues, to basic mental health challenges, and, finally, to financial challenges related to living and training costs. The profile of the problem is evident in the fact that the world's leading sport organisations, including the IOC and FIFA, have introduced programs that support athlete wellbeing. For example, the IOC has developed a platform called *Athlete365*, which "supports more than 130,000 elite athletes and entourage members on and off the field of play through a range of advice, services and tools, with a particular focus on well-being" (IOC Expands Mental Health Support for Athletes 2022). For the 2022 Beijing and 2024 Paris Olympics, the program included the Mentally Fit Helpline, which is available to all Olympians, Paralympians, and associated members of their entourages 24 h a day, 7 days a week, in 70 languages. Viewed from one perspective, this appears to be a very positive and supportive scheme that recognises the physical, mental, emotional, and financial challenges facing elite sport personnel. However, viewed from a more critical perspective, it raises questions about the negative and challenging culture of hypercompetitive sport, which is generally proclaimed to be a source of health and wellbeing. Indeed, it is often only when a crisis of extreme severity that poses a risk of reputational damage occurs that an organisation, such as the IOC, takes action. As such, there are reasonable grounds for critics to question the motivation behind these programs and whether they are genuinely dedicated to athlete wellbeing or whether they constitute a form of corporate social responsibility or public relations strategy. A key question then is, how do we determine whether or not institutional programs, like those of the IOC, are genuine and proactive in preventing or fixing problems rather than ex post facto, reactive initiatives prompted by a need to manage public relations scandals related to athlete welfare and wellbeing?

A third category of sport and wellbeing research relates to nation-state sport policy development and investment and, more specifically, to the value of sport. Most Western nations have a dedicated Ministry of Sport (or similar) that is responsible for delivering a range of programs from the grassroots to the elite level. A regular challenge for these agencies is to provide evidence of the value of sport to the nation. For many years, governments typically cited the benefits of community sport with respect to promoting healthy, active lifestyles; building confidence and character; and fostering social cohesion. By contrast, at high performance levels, the value of sport tends to be characterized in terms of enhancing national identity, with success on the world stage enabling governments to celebrate heroic medal winners to inspire future generations. However, within the context of neoliberalism and new public management, such intangible indicators have been insufficient as objective, quantifiable criteria capable of providing the hard data demanded by governments seeking evidence of a return on taxpayer investment (Brookes and Wiggan 2009; Coalter 2007; De Rycke and De Bosscher 2019; Grix and Carmichael 2012; Kavanagh and Rinehart 2021;

Nessel and Kościółek 2022; Sam 2009, 2012). As a result, new structures of management emerged along, with a new vernacular and set of narratives about accountability and key performance indicators (KPIs), regardless of whether the data were related to grassroots or high performance sport. At this point, we provide a brief example of how New Zealand's introduction of a new wellbeing economy in 2019 is having some unintended and concerning consequences for both sport policy and related research.

Between 2017 and 2023, New Zealand was led by the centre-left Labour Party, first as a member of a coalition agreement under the Mixed Member Proportional system (MMP), and, in its last term, as a majority government. During its six years in office and particularly in its last three years with a majority, it embarked on an almost unprecedented journey of transformational social change. Much of the change was linked to two interrelated policies, which were previously noted: The Living Standards Framework, which was introduced in 2017, and the subsequent five annual versions of the Wellbeing Budget (2019–2023). In combination, these foundational policies provided the scaffolding for the emerging "Wellbeing Agenda", wherein:

> "...wellbeing budgets allocated resources based on a broader array of pre-defined *wellbeing outcomes*. In practice this means that Government departments are *required to clearly articulate the wellbeing benefit of initiatives* when seeking new funding in the yearly budget cycle". (Lane et al. 2023, p. 6, *emphasis added*)

Enhancing both the scope and influence of the state's authority, in 2020, the Labour government introduced the *Public Service Act* (Parliamentary Council Office, Public Service Act 2020), which:

> "...created a nimble and collaborative public service.....This vital legislative change addresses the need for more flexible and collaborative approaches...to tackling the more intricate challenges in a policy environment, and provides the legislative clout to enable meaningful cross-agency collaboration and potential partnership. Working across government agencies is key to influencing physical activity settings and behaviours in areas otherwise unreachable by sport policy makers alone (e.g., into the policy domains of the likes of Education, Transport and Health)". (Lane et al. 2023, p. 6)

Not surprisingly, it did not take long for the state-level wellbeing agenda and its attendant policies to materialise across, and manifest within, almost every state department and state funded entity, including universities and research centres.

Specifically related to this analysis, Sport New Zealand, the government's Crown Agency responsible for sport, quickly signalled its intention to support wellbeing, inserting it as a dominant narrative and policy focus across the New Zealand sporting spectrum. With respect to high-performance sport, the issue of athlete wellbeing emerged from a range of scandals within national sport organisations (NSOs) including New Zealand Rugby, New Zealand Football, New Zealand Cycling, and New Zealand Gymnastics. Initially, it was the NSOs that commissioned their respective task forces and inquiries to review the evidence and make recommendations for transformational change (Dawbin et al. 2021). However, Sport NZ followed suit, commissioning its own investigation into athlete welfare in 2018. While sport journalists would eventually call 2018 the "year of reviews" (Cleaver 2018; Pearse 2019), government action began in earnest the following year, at the same time as policies associated with the New Zealand Labour government's first "wellbeing budget" were being implemented across state sectors.

Alongside Sport NZ's attention to wellbeing in elite sport, the agency began to reprioritise community sport (or sport-for-all) under the belief that "growing the quality of participation opportunities helps to maximise wellbeing" (Sport New Zealand 2019, p. 4). Thus, after a period of focusing almost exclusively on sport (rather than physical activity) between 2012–2018, Sport NZ would once again promote "quality experiences in play, active recreation and sport...to ensure the greatest impact on wellbeing for all New Zealanders" (Sport New Zealand 2020, p. 6). Central to its new mission was a focus on youth

wellbeing, particularly the wellbeing of Māori and Pasifika youth. Sport New Zealand thus launched its 2020–2032 Strategic Plan to "demonstrate impact and show alignment to the Government's Living Standards Framework". The plan was titled "Every Body Active" and introduced two major policy initiatives: (1) The Big Wins and (2) Balance is Better. Notably, both programs focus on identifying and extracting the "value of sport" beyond basic physical activity, skill development, winning medals, or securing world rankings. Indeed, both initiatives are premised on the belief that sport participation enhances youth wellbeing.

However, while Sport New Zealand (2019) could show alignment with government policy priorities, its assertions regarding sport's 'Return on Investment (RoI) to the government's wellbeing agenda' were as yet unproven. Thus by 2020/2021, the agency introduced total estimated subjective wellbeing value into its reporting framework (Sport New Zealand 2023). Thus, drawing upon data collected as part of its ongoing "Active NZ Young Peoples Survey" (2017) which involved over 6000 participants aged 5–17, Sport NZ, in strategic collaboration with academics across the nation, developed a research plan to link sport and wellbeing.

As a priority, the agency aimed to conduct and publish research that supported the proposed link. The result was that Sport NZ and its academic partners excavated their own database to find a link, however tenuous, that confirmed a positive relationship between sport participation and wellbeing. Relying on a single question (wherein youth were asked to rate their wellbeing on a scale of 1 ("very unhappy") to 10 ("very happy"), the authors correlated these scores (with values ≥ 8) with a range of variables, including whether the respondent had "*participated in any physical activity that was specifically for the purpose of sport, exercise, or recreation in the past seven days*?" While the paper's authors acknowledged that the single wellbeing question was a blunt measure, they nevertheless maintained its robustness, as the question had been drawn from the OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-Being. To date, two research articles have been produced, both of which confirm a positive relationship between sport participation and wellbeing (Wilson et al. 2022a, 2022b).

Two observations can be made here. First, in relation to elite sport, the concern for wellbeing emanated from longstanding issues ostensibly created by the government agency's *own* policies and programmes aimed at achieving medal targets, including centralised operations and performance-based funding models (cf. Cottrell 2018; Heron 2018). A number of remedies have since been proposed. HPSNZ now advances the co-existence of "winning" and wellbeing as 'without compromise'. To "ensure the right balance between wellbeing and the requirements of elite sport", HPSNZ has proposed funding up to eight full-time "Wellbeing Manager Roles" for NSOs while also introducing new measures to monitor wellbeing in NSO environments. From this, we see that athlete *welfare* emerged as a "problem" immediately before Labour's budget was issued but was soon transformed into *wellbeing* in the ensuing years.

Second, and in relation to linking wellbeing, sport, and physical activity, Sport NZ eagerly sought evidence for its annual reporting and, accordingly, added measures to its annual public survey. In this light, Sport NZ's research can be understood as a strategic effort to legitimise sport as an inherently positive activity and not necessarily as an effort for the purposes of scientific advancement *per se*. The idea that a person's wellbeing can be measured by a single survey question poses at least one validity problem (Forgeard et al. 2011; Kusier and Folker 2020). The difficulty in disambiguating activity measures (such as hours spent in 'social sport', versus 'organised sport', versus 'physical education', versus active transport) also introduces issues of validity for these correlations. As such, the studies were not meant to offer policy advice or insight regarding how to improve wellbeing, inasmuch as they were conducted to legitimise the link.

Indeed, the first papers' conclusion—that quality experiences in sport "matter"—is an assertion unconnected to the data but closely reflected in Sport NZ documents over the past decade. Likewise, it is questionable whether the findings "clearly demonstrate[e] the importance of developing quality coaches that provide positive experiences through

the delivery of youth sport" (though this assertion is also evident in Sport NZ policy documents). Taken together, both works can thus be read as exemplars of "policy-based evidence", rather than "evidence-based policy" (Cairney 2016, 2022; Parkhurst 2017; Strassheim and Kettunen 2014). However, a notable dimension to these papers concerns the co-opting of academics, also with an interest in leveraging wellbeing.

Given the Labour government's focus on wellbeing, academics (including one of this paper's authors) may have regarded the shift as an opportunity to leverage research funding. Arguably, this context has at least two dimensions; first, it is opportunistic in the sense that academics seized the chance to secure funding, and second, it is fatalistic to the extent that the scarcity of research funding compels scholars to compete for the limited resources available. Moreover, this context introduces indirect pressure to cooperate, knowing that Sport NZ has considerable influence over current and future national research priorities. In many ways, this situation highlights one of the challenges of undertaking collaborative research between state agencies and academics, particularly in cases where the state agency, in this case, Sport NZ, has representation and influence within both groups. Indeed, it raises the prospect of a potential conflict of interest. For example, one of the authors of the publications cited was not only a co-editor of the special issue within which the manuscripts were published, but also holds joint appointments at Sport NZ and a university. Thus, while the research may have been undertaken with the best of intentions, the lack of independence, including the source of funding and the potential for academics to become complicit in aligning research with government priorities (and by default, Sport NZ's priorities) should raise concerns. Arguably, even if it was unintentional, it represents a form of *wellbeing washing* given that the purpose of this research appears to be to meet Sport NZ's need to: align and promote state-led wellbeing objectives, legitimise its strategic plan, and potentially influence scholarship. In short, wellbeing was not necessarily a socially valued end in itself, but rather an independent variable used as a means to an end (in this case, funding and legitimation of public policy). Arguably, this facilitated the process of wellbeing washing in three ways. First, the simple incorporation of the word "wellbeing" bestowed a positive aura around Sport NZ's policies and research. Second, Sport NZ's collaborative partnership with academics confers a degree of legitimacy given that it implies that a crown agency draws upon expert advice and guidance. And third, the focus of the published research helped Sport NZ to mask both the lack of existing sport policy success with respect to enhancing national physical activity and health levels and also the fact that they actually had no empirical evidence to support the policy's operating assumption that sport enhances wellbeing. Ultimately, at best, these outcomes represent examples of wellbeing washing, but at worst, they could be described as the weaponisation of wellbeing.

6. Conclusions

Given the complex and contradictory nature of wellbeing, along with its enduring, yet precarious, position within policies and programs, we suggest that it is time to critically evaluate the current hegemony of the concept within the political, cultural, and economic spheres. Beyond outlining the contested terrain of the concept with respect to definitions, branding, and policies, this essay has introduced the concept of "wellbeing washing". The concept provides a framework for critiquing research, policies, and programs that intentionally or unintentionally operate to sustain and advance the interests of particular stakeholders. It may be inevitable that wellbeing will be susceptible to being a contested terrain given both its complexity and competing interests. Indeed, wellbeing embodies many of the key characteristics of what is referred to as a "wicked problem" (Rittel and Webber 1973). This concept refers to problems that have ambiguous definitions and meanings, are subject to multiple causes, are linked to a range of vested interests, and where attempts at finding solutions often lead to the creation of new unanticipated problems (Bache and Reardon 2016; Hunter 2009; Rittel and Webber 1973). However, despite these complexities, the concept of wellbeing washing may have merit and utility for a wide

range of sectors, including policymakers and practitioners. For example, it provides an alternative perspective that challenges the hegemony of the current neoliberal wellbeing agenda, which may be doing more harm than good. Moreover, basic awareness of the risks of wellbeing washing may encourage people to engage in critical reflection about the policies and practices that they are responsible for implementing or that may influence their everyday lives. Such reflection may help limit or avoid some of the ethical pitfalls associated with many contemporary health policies and practices. Future researchers may wish to explore the shifting trajectories of conceptualisations of wellbeing and attendant incorporation and co-optation within and across a range of political, economic, and social institutions, including sport, at both the local and global levels. Here, research that examines the nature and effectiveness of wellbeing policies and programs, including those linked to sport, in different nation-states may offer valuable insights. Overall, this modest analysis has hopefully responded to Carrington's (2024) recent declaration that "For Sport Studies to remain relevant, for it to continue to produce insights. . .we need to. . .engage in public debates around sports politics and policies. If we are able to do so, then Sport Studies will continue to play an important role in current and future struggles to remake and reimagine the world" (2024, p. 16).

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Has It Never Been a Better Time to Play? Opportunity, Empowerment and Contested Terrains of Women's Grassroots Football in Australia

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Abstract: The introduction of the semi-professional Australian Rules Football League for Women (AFLW) in 2017 was indicative of a broader 'boom' for women and girls' sport in Australia. The 'boom' promised not only newly created, or enhanced, professional pathways for elite women athletes but also a commensurate change in the community sport landscape, backed by a gender equality framework, that would offer women and girls new, and supported, opportunities to play sport. This paper investigates what happens when these opportunities are taken up by examining the experiences of a senior women's football team in a community-level Australian Rules football club in Melbourne, Australia. Drawing on 11 semi-structured interviews with players, we consider the transformative potential, for these individuals and for gendered power relations, that might be generated from women's participation in traditionally masculine sporting spaces. The findings reveal contradictory moments of both emancipation and empowerment on one hand with ambivalence and disempowerment on the other. Women's participation in Australian Rules Football is a contested terrain that is simultaneously embodied, cultural, and social, and we note the experiences and strategies that women utilize to negotiate their engagement with football. We argue that increasing "opportunities" for women to play football is not enough for the transformative promise of the AFLW to be met, and as such, further highlight the ongoing contested terrain of women's sport.

Keywords: gender; football; Australia; AFLW; feminism

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1. Introduction

> At the end of the day it's just a game, but we've always been told we can't do it, that we're not strong enough, that you know, we're not able bodied enough, that we're going to get injured, that it's bad for us, that it's wrong, that you know, women shouldn't be aggressive and they shouldn't tackle and I really like that I can now have that and that I can say well yes I can and yes I am good at it. (Mia)

The above quote from 28-year-old Mia captures her feelings about taking up the contact sport of Australian Rules Football (henceforth ARF) and demonstrates individual experiences of empowerment by overcoming dominant expectations of deficit feminine bodily potential. Mia's statement is also positioned in a broader political and social context in Australia (and other industrialised nations) where opportunities for women to engage in previously hegemonically masculine sports are 'booming' (Elliott et al. 2023). This includes the 'active' removal of traditional barriers to women's participation by stakeholders, sport organisations, government policies, and even sports media (Casey et al. 2019), and the

accompanying belief that gender equality in sport can increase levels of equality in other parts of society (Theberge 1997; English 2020). Put simply, Mia's positive and empowering experiences gained from playing ARF are reliant on broader structural and cultural changes in the way the sport is organised and how its resources are distributed.

The history of gender inequality in sport indicates, however, that Mia's experiences are anything but simple. Messner (1988, p. 208), writing almost 40 years ago about the 'contested terrain' of women's bodies and empowerment in and through sport, articulated the following:

> Organized sport, as a cultural sphere defined largely by patriarchal priorities, will continue to be an important arena in which emerging images of active, fit, and muscular women are forged, interpreted, contested, and incorporated. The larger socioeconomic and political context will continue to shape and constrain the extent to which women can wage fundamental challenges to the ways that organized sports continue providing ideological legitimation for male dominance.

McLachlan (2019) argues that we should be cautious about an uncritical and ahistoric celebration of the 'boom' in women's sport and any subsequent narratives of progress in gender equality, as they can obscure continuing and new forms of resistance and oppression. Our research question is to understand the physical and social experiences of women like Mia who take up the traditionally masculine sport of ARF in their adulthood to interrogate the transformative potential of sport and recognise any "emergent contradictions in this system" (Messner 1988, p. 208). We consider the ways in which their engagement with ARF may identify contradictory moments of empowerment and emancipation on one hand and resistance and inhibition on the other. As a "contested terrain", women's use of their bodies in ARF has the potential to highlight internationalised, social, and structural forms of empowerment and conflict.

A characteristic of the contemporary 'boom' for women in sport is the attempts to create, and hence equalise, the professionalised opportunities for women to play competitive, revenue-generating sports (Bowes and Culvin 2021; Pavlidis 2020; Taylor et al. 2020; Thomson et al. 2022). This usually involves women playing traditionally hegemonically masculine sports such as cricket, soccer, rugby, ice hockey, ARF, etc. Commensurate with the logic of professionalisation is that this will have a flow-on effect on participation rates for girls and women at a grassroots level, lower the levels of dropout because of increased playing opportunities and improved conditions, and as a result improve pathways and revenue for even higher-quality professional women's sports (see, for example, Brice et al. 2022; Casey et al. 2019; Elliott et al. 2023).

Such rapid changes in the sporting landscape can be fraught and, in this case, produce a two-speed economy for women's sport. At the elite end, there is an acceleration commensurate with professionalisation, increased media coverage, improved training facilities, and development opportunities, while at the grassroots end, one finds the continuation of old and the emergence of new structural "inequalities and challenges that are day to day realities" (Adams and Leavitt 2018, p. 160). In agreement with Adams and Leavitt (2018, p. 167), we need to move beyond celebratory discourses of gain, achievement, and progress to critically consider the current state of girls' and women's sport as a "complicated, non-linear, non-universal success story". Certainly, this would be the case for elite sport. Cooky et al. (2021) note that the considerable body of research that has looked at the quality and quantity of women's sport in the media over the past 40 years indicates that very little has changed, and that women's coverage remains "dismally low" (Cooky et al. 2021, p. 366). Persistent gendered inequalities in the Australian context are seen in leadership positions in sport organisations (Morgan et al. 2024), salaries and conditions for

professional players (for example, Marshall et al. 2022; Taylor et al. 2020), media coverage (McDonald et al. 2023), and increases in online abuse (McCarthy 2022).

At a community level of sport, Jeanes et al. (2021) note that despite attempts to create greater gender equality, the allocation of, and access to, space served to reproduce restrictive gender relations and maintain masculine privilege and power. Research on experiences of playing these types of hegemonic masculine sports has tended to focus on elite or sub-elite levels (for example, Fletcher et al. 2024; Pavlidis 2020; Taylor et al., 2020). The experiences at the grassroots level have concentrated primarily on teenage girls (for example, Bevan et al. 2020; Elliott et al. 2023; Pielichaty 2020; Wedgwood 2004). Of note, despite the research on inequality above, several of these point to positive and emancipatory experiences from playing. Wedgwood (2004), utilising Young's (1980) framework of feminine bodily comportment and mobility, demonstrated how schoolgirls playing ARF caused them to experience their bodies in radically different ways from their previous socialisation, producing a sense of freedom and emancipation.

To summarise, the above research indicates that women and girls' inclusion in traditionally male sporting spaces remains a complex and contested terrain, involving the navigation of individual bodies through the embodied process of doing, within multiple social and structural fields of being. This paper aims to fill a small gap in the research on gender in sport by focusing on the experiences of adult women who committed to playing ARF in a competitive community league. In what follows, we briefly introduce our context and methodology before discussing our key findings. Firstly, the excitement and solidarity formed through a newfound physicality coupled with contradictory forms of embodiment expressed through levels of competency and injury. Secondly, we examine the concept of contested terrain in relation to the resources, time, and space made available to women playing ARF at the community level.

2. Context and Method: Playing Footy at the Sharks

Despite women playing ARF for over 100 years (Hess 2011), the recent acquisition of the women's game by the Australian Football League (AFL) and, in particular, the launch on 3 February 2017 of the inaugural season of the women's league (AFLW) signalled a significant moment in the sport. The introduction of an elite women's competition was expected to have economic, social, and cultural impacts on women's sport participation (Willson et al. 2018). The inaugural AFLW season exceeded all expectations with substantial media coverage and spectator demand often surpassing stadium capacity (Willson et al. 2018). The interest in women's football grew at all levels, from grassroots to elite (Burke et al. 2023), and, after the announcement of the AFLW in 2016, there was a 21 percent increase in female participation before the competition had even begun (Squiers 2017). This increase in participation has been labelled as a 'boom' in women's football across the country (Alomes 2019; Willson et al. 2018).

Although women's football has existed since at least 1915 (Hess 2011), many of these clubs were women-only spaces, and the leagues were administered by women (Burke et al. 2023). The 'boom' in ARF associated with the AFLW resulted in AFL clubs that were previously men-only developing women's teams. At the community level, a similar trend occurred with clubs forming teams for women and girls and the associated community leagues forming women's competitions modelled on those of the men (Burke et al. 2023). In this way, ARF sought to duplicate itself across all levels of the sport through the inclusion of teams and competitions for girls and women. The Sharks (pseudonym) is a typical club in this regard. Formed in the 1950s, it operates in one of the eight Victorian metropolitan football leagues. In July 2017, the Sharks advertised in the local newspaper:

> We want you in the green and blue! It's never been a better time to play football. Be part of the inaugural SFC Women's Senior Team for the 2018 season. Come to our meet, greet and try session on Wednesday, July 26th.

Subsequently, the first author and the participants who make up this research began playing ARF as members of the senior women's team in 2018. Most clubs in the area were starting women's teams, so similar advertisements were appearing often, and many of the first author's sporty peers were signing up. Typical of the logic of duplication were plans for an exponential increase in the women's game to match that of the men's. For example, the league that the Sharks played in offered one women's division with 13 teams in 2018, two divisions of 10 teams each in 2019, and three divisions of 8 teams each in 2020 (to say nothing of the offerings for girls at the junior levels). Community sports clubs like the Sharks operate out of facilities managed or leased by local government. Many of these facilities were designed without women's participation in mind, and the sudden increase in teams undoubtedly strained resources, especially the fields and ovals the game is played on (Casey et al. 2019; Hanlon et al. 2022; Jeanes et al. 2021).

Nevertheless, for most of the women who joined the Sharks' women's team in 2018, the opportunity to play ARF offered the realisation of a lifelong interest in playing. Whilst mostly novices to playing competitive ARF, the women in this study were not novices to sport. Indeed, all had various levels of socialisation through a variety of competitive sports, including netball, basketball, soccer, swimming, athletics, and a couple in ARF. Their sporting histories are important to note as, whilst the Sharks and ARF were new to them, they were experienced in the Australian community sport model and therefore embodied taken-for-granted aspects of playing sport such as turning up on time, following rules, coaching, and aspects of teamwork and discipline.

The players all identified as cisgender women and were aged between 21 and 33 years old. Further, they were relatively culturally homogenous, identifying primarily as 'white', though one player also identified as New Zealand Māori. While white women still face sexism and barriers to competing in traditionally male sports, women of colour face additional barriers, and the rise of participation in sports is not evenly spread across all women (Carter-Francique and Flowers 2013). Sanders (2020) describes how ARF bodies in the popular media, literature, and iconography are still depicted as "for the most part professional athletic *male* Caucasian bodies" (p. 287). Therefore, ethnically diverse and women's football bodies are under-represented. The Sharks team, although overwhelmingly made up of white women, is representative of the area in which the football club is located (ABS 2016).

This research was part of a broader project that sought to understand the contemporary boom in women's sport from the perspectives of those who were purportedly benefiting from it, namely the women involved in these activities. As such, it is framed by a critical feminist perspective that seeks to listen to the lived experiences of women in sport. The project had university ethics approval and consent from the Sharks football club to conduct the research. To understand the experiences of women who played ARF at the Sharks, the first author (who was a founding player) utilised ethnographic techniques to document the social interactions in the field. This involved participating in two 1.5 h pre-season training sessions per week from November 2019 to March 2020 and an overnight training camp. All players on the women's team were informed about the ethnographic component and granted consent for it to occur. Whilst field notes were completed after each training session, COVID-19 and subsequent restrictions resulted in the cancellation of the 2020 season.

The data in this paper is drawn from semi-structured interviews that were informed by ethnographic insights, the primary author's own experiences of playing at the Sharks, and Wedgwood's (2004) application of Young's theory on feminine comportment and mobility. Information about the interviews was posted on the teams' private Facebook

group (the main form of communication), giving the opportunity for the 22 players on the team to be interviewed if they chose, a form of generic purposive sampling (Bryman 2016). Participation was completely voluntary, and informed consent for interviews to be recorded and pseudonyms to be used was provided by all participants. Eleven players volunteered, and semi-structured interviews lasting between 30 min and 1 h were conducted with each of them. The sample size represented 50% of the players.

The interviews started with questions about each player's sporting history, namely when they began, what the activity was, how they got involved, and what experiences they remembered. From here the questions shifted to understanding why they decided to start playing ARF as adults and then if and how their experiences differed from playing other sports, especially in relation to physicality and embodiment. Finally, questions were asked about players' experiences of the broader club culture and the position of women in it.

Due to COVID-19, interviews were conducted via the video-conferencing platform Zoom. The record function was used to create an audio recording of each interview. Data were transcribed immediately after each interview, which provided a chance to begin to understand the common themes in the data and tailor questions for later interviews (Bryman 2016). Themes were initially identified by the first author and were coded without needing to fit into a pre-existing coding frame (Braun and Clarke 2006). This analysis was then presented and cross-checked with the other two authors, who offered suggestions for refinement. Themes were identified on a latent level to 'examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations—and ideologies—that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data' (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 84).

3. The Contested Terrains of Women's Community Football

In the following section, we discuss the findings under two themes. First, we describe how the players relished their opportunities to try football, something they felt had largely been denied to them until the advent of the AFLW. Here we identify how the players were able to develop physical skills as they had the freedom to try new things in a fairly 'low stakes' competitive environment. We outline the ongoing relevance of Young's (1980) modalities of feminine existence for understanding embodied empowerment in the AFLW era. While Young had stated that the restrictive socialisation of girls (i.e., throwing like a girl) had opened up since she had constructed her argument (Burke et al. 2023), we found that the participants in this study did speak about how they had to re-learn how to move their bodies in order to execute some of their new football skills—this was specifically relevant to tackling; which requires bodily contact and physical force that were new to the participants.

Secondly, we position the women's team within the broader social and organisational structure of a historically male club and juxtapose the individual experiences of empowerment gained through football with the continued inequalities and struggles of being women footballers. In this section, we examine both how women identify hostility and ambivalence and how they work to negotiate these inequalities through various attempts to gain legitimacy, either by becoming more serious and competitive or by accepting the status quo, being grateful for any opportunity to play, and maintaining a belief that things will get better over time.

4. Contested Embodiment

For most women at the Sharks, the catalyst for playing ARF was undoubtedly the launching of the AFLW competition. It tapped into a collective imagination formed from growing up in Melbourne, where ARF is the biggest game in town. The momentum created

around ARF resonated with the players, as demonstrated by Sophie (28), who had played one season 10 years previous and stopped due to sexist comments from others:

> Once women's football just began to boom a little bit more, I then felt like I could, you know there was a lot more people standing up for women's footy, so I felt like I was more supported to go back and play.

The way the AFLW had been advertised and the social commentary surrounding it created, at this grassroots level, a sense that choosing to play was about more than just sport; it was about being part of social change. Ella (25) captures this feeling:

> I think for the most part, you know, all the women playing are really respectful of each other and I think we're all sort of, even between teams, we're all supportive because we're doing something that we all probably thought we'd never be able to do.

A key aspect for players at the Sharks was a sense of solidarity grounded in the reality that most of them were learning to play a new sport as adults.

> As soon as I went to one training, I was like 'yep, these are my people' [laughs] (Mia, 28)

For most of our players, there were no procedural barriers to joining the Sharks, and the subsequent collective support and environment were overwhelmingly welcoming. However, despite the contemporary celebratory progress narratives about women being able to play any sport they choose (McLachlan 2019), this does not mean that their involvement in ARF went without (continued) resistance:

> Well, I wanted to start playing a little bit earlier but my partner at the time was like 'women don't play football, that's gross', we're not together anymore needless to say [laughs] (Mia, 28)

> The worst person in my life was actually a teacher. . . he was really awful, he told me that I shouldn't be playing a man's game. . . and just really sexist remarks about me playing footy (Sophia, 28)

> Friends probably haven't reacted very nicely to it at all, it's all a very big joke that my sexuality is questioned when I get back onto the football field which is, I just guess not nice, so yeah I have two, two of my closest friends in particular have told [my male partner] to watch out. . . so I wouldn't really talk to my friends much about playing footy (Lucy, 22)

Forms of sexism and homophobia persist about the choices these women make regarding the use of their bodies; however, this did not deter these players from prioritising ARF and managing these tensions either by ending a relationship, calling out sexism, or, in Lucy's case, not talking about it.

Despite all having some form of sporting background, ARF required the acquisition of a whole range of new skills and physical embodiment. The traditional approach to learning a sport in Australia targets children through modified versions of the activity, followed by a focus on skills and an introduction to competitive games (Eime et al. 2022). Therefore, a group of adult women all starting a new, competitive sport is atypical and made possible because they are all starting at relatively the same point, namely as novices.

> As soon as I had the first couple of training sessions, I just loved it because everyone was not good at it, but we were all having so much fun, giving it a go (Zoe, 21)

As a result, the newness of the skills was exciting as players felt rewarded when they saw dramatic improvement. Many also said the skills were harder to execute than other sporting skills and made for feelings of accomplishment like no other:

> I just remember when I would do something well and I was just like 'I can't believe I just did that, did you see that, I just did a thing', so it's just like this constant pride, joy, happiness (Lucy, 22)

Whilst generic skill development and learning were central to the explanations of empowerment that the Sharks players provided, there is also something specific about the physicality required in ARF that heightened their perceptions and experiences of individual empowerment. Specifically, the aspects of the game requiring a high degree of physical force include tackling, bumping, and shepherding. This created the unique experience of a group of adult beginners learning new skills and new modalities of movement while participating in an activity that may still be considered 'gender-inappropriate' (Wedgwood 2004, p. 142).

Iris Marion Young (1980) describes the socialisation of female embodiment under three modalities. When discussing the modalities of feminine movement, Young (1980) describes an 'inhibited intentionality', whereby women and girls often assume they cannot complete an easy task before even attempting it. When attempting a task, they may display a 'discontinuous unity' whereby the untrained female will often not engage her whole body for a physical task with the same naturalness as the equally untrained male would, such as using only the lower half of the leg to kick and not following through with the movement (Wedgwood 2004). Feminine movement tends to also show an 'ambiguous transcendence' where women generally take up less space than is available for them, tending to keep their limbs as close as possible to their bodies while walking, standing, sitting, and when playing sports (Wedgwood 2004).

These modalities are a useful framework to analyse physical experiences in ARF. Despite sporting histories that disrupt Young's contradictory modalities, the players at the Sharks experienced an internal contest with, and departure from, their previous modalities of movement through tackling and the contact elements of ARF. As an activity that these women had not been socialised into, learning to tackle provided both unnatural and scary.

> I don't think it ever feels natural running at someone and putting your arms around them, but once I started doing it, I didn't have a problem with doing it and now I'd say it comes naturally (Gabrielle, 21)

> Completely unnatural tackling,. . .. like my first instinct was to make the space rather than to go in for a tackle, so yeah it took probably that whole first season to get it in my head that no, I should be going in for the tackle, like I can actually, you can be physical in the game rather than keeping distance (Isabella, 33)

The apprehension caused by learning to use one's body in a previously inconceivable way took time to overcome.

> It was worse than I thought, it was like, I just, I don't think I expected how strong the other player to be and how quickly they could get me to the ground, but yeah it wasn't what I was expecting (Gabrielle, 21)

> I think it was really hard and I had a massive shock. I was like 'oh that really hurt' and I needed just a moment to go like I'm ok (Ella, 25)

Further aspects, such as tackling, produced moments of reflexivity regarding using their bodies in such forceful ways:

> I was kind of shocked, I just lay there for a second and then I was like ok and just got back up and kept playing, I think from then on, I was like 'ok, I can actually go in hard' (Phoebe, 23)

> I just remember like lying there for a couple of seconds and I'm thinking about it and I'm like 'am I okay? am I?, arms and legs work' and I just remember being slightly disorientated for a few moments (Lucy, 22)

Women have traditionally been taught to experience their bodies as "fragile encumbrances rather than as tools with which to get something done" (McCaughey 1997, p. 92). This led to many women interviewed feeling as though they needed to seek permission before using their bodies forcefully. Some players experienced some hesitancy when using new skills such as tackling. Young (1980) describes a double hesitation, based on a lack of confidence that their bodies have the capacity to complete the movement and the fear of being injured. Once they overcame the initial hesitation and learned in a supportive environment, many found tackling to be an empowering aspect of playing football.

> I love tackling, at first, when I first started, I was probably a bit apprehensive but probably after my first few sessions when we did tackling, I loved it, it was so good, yeah and I really enjoy it now (Zoe, 21)

> I think it makes you feel good when you get a good tackle and you get a free kick or you know just being able to use your body in a way that you've never been able to do it before, or that people don't expect you to use it in that way (Ella, 25)

Ella's quote above reflects another common response from players regarding learning to tackle and being confident in using one's body in such a way, namely an awareness (and perhaps pride) in breaking gendered stereotypes.

> It almost took someone to tell me it's ok, you need to be more aggressive and you need to, you can be, you're just not, you're just not used to it, cause you know, as women we're not supposed to be, we're supposed to be placid and like 'ooh no, don't touch me' (Mia, 28)

> I like getting tackled because I want people to think that no, I'm not some weak little girl, like I can actually take it (Zoe, 21)

The results of tackling and contact on players bodies also became symbols of pride and empowerment as forms of injury, especially bruising, became emblematic of legitimacy and of being genuine players of ARF.

> I would rock up to uni on a Monday and all of the girls who played footy would be like oh look at this massive bruise I got and it was sort of like a, how cool's this that we're all like connecting through football sort of thing, and then just discussing our games (Ella, 25)

> I liked having a black eye for a bit because I felt like I looked really tough (Zoe, 21)

> I remember showing my friends and being like yeah this is how tough I am, like got all these bruises from footy (Elise, 25)

Such collective 'badges of honour' were shared in other public ways, such as via social media posts (see Image 1, Image 2).

Image 1

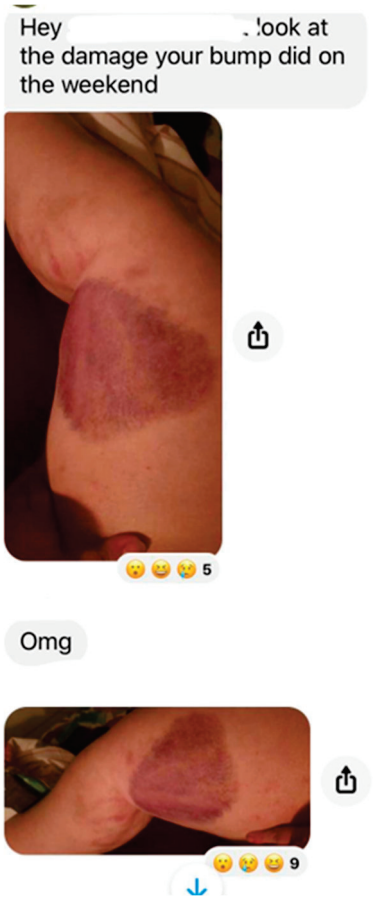

Image 2

While it could be said that bruises are a reminder for women of how empowered they felt while getting them and therefore should be shown off, it can also be argued that the glorification of injury perpetuates one of the worst parts of the male-dominated model of sport (Hardwicke et al. 2024; Young and White 1995). Similarly, whilst the display of injury and badges of honour was celebrated within the football community, this was not necessarily the response from family members, for example:

> People thought I was insane because one, just for a girl to play in general, but for me, my size, you know my grandma cries about it [laughs], people freak out when I tell them that I play, yeah it's not really my family's favourite thing (Grace, 21)

> I always told [my dad] like 'what's the difference between me and [my brother]? why is it that you're worried about me but not worried about [him] getting hurt?' (Zoe, 21)

> It was like, that's a netballer's injury, that's always going to happen, you know, it was don't play for the 6 weeks, but it wasn't don't play ever (Ella, 25)

Despite the reality that injury and risk are inherent possibilities in most sports, these reactions indicate how these women choose to use their bodies is contested by others and demonstrate the 'cultural paradox of girls using physical force' (Wedgwood 2004, p. 124) that reinforces ideas about gendered bodies and appropriate masculinity and femininity.

There are other contradictory aspects of empowerment found in forms of body contact, as expressed by Mia:

> I definitely feel like I have a lot more aggression, and that I have a lot more confidence when I play football, cause when you play other sports that we

> previously have played, you're not allowed to be aggressive, you're not allowed to assert yourself as being confident or that you're strong…. I think that's something that we love, we as females who play football, it's that you can, if you are angry, you're allowed to be angry and you can use that anger in a certain way.

Mia's confidence and strength emanate from a newfound aggression and a channelling of anger in an 'appropriate' way. This also suggests a departure from initial reasons for playing at the Sharks, namely:

> [I wanted] a club that was starting out so I could be a part of it and not have to compete too much because it was more about fun and just giving something a go as opposed to being really competitive (Ella, 25)

Whilst players all experienced some form of physical empowerment through their participation in a game that requires the use of physical force that challenges gender stereotypes, Mia's comments reflect a focus on performance, competitiveness, and dominance that perhaps runs counter to the notion of fun and having a go.

The players who took part in the interviews all agreed that their original motivations for joining the Sharks were about shared goals of learning and enjoying a new sport without pressure to perform in a like-minded, supportive social setting where, as Zoe (21) suggests, 'like if you stuff up, you stuff up and nobody cares, that's why I think I just like it'.

Whilst this sort of environment creates the conditions to nurture these women and provides a safe space to have a go without fear of judgement, it is apparent that this can become a source of tension. Firstly, as noted by Zoe, who had played netball, previous socialisation into sport for these women was in the competitive sport model, where pressure and performance are a reality. In other words, the norms and values of competition are embedded in their previous experiences and understanding of sport. Undoubtedly, as individuals gained competency and skill in playing ARF, the concept of 'standard' or who is a good/bad player will start to impact the way women individually experience football and make sense of their own performance. Secondly, the team exists in a competitive league, with promotion/relegation and a finals series. Initial feelings of "I enjoy playing football so much, I didn't really care about if we're winning" (Grace, 21) are overridden by the concept of the work ethic. Trying hard and losing by lots only makes sense if the effort results in losing by less, and then maybe even winning.

However, the biggest issue that creates the tension between performance and participation is the reality of being a women's team in a club with a long men's history and established traditions, rivalries, and hegemonic beliefs about gendered bodies and physical capacities and abilities. It is to this contested terrain, namely the women entering historically men's spaces, that we move to next.

5. Women in a Men's Club

Whilst the women interviewed experienced various forms of empowerment through their new modalities of movement, including enhanced confidence, joy, pride, solidarity, and sense of belonging, their individual feelings of empowerment were not experienced without gendered struggles. The positive experiences and feelings mostly occurred when the team was set apart, namely training and matches when the women could create a welcoming and accepting environment. However, this team must exist within the larger club structure. This is summed up succinctly by Mia (28):

> It's very male dominated and yeah you can play, but what is the cost of that?

As women have made their way as players into a previously exclusively male space, they are required to do so on male-defined terms. Mia had experience playing at a women's-

only club for a season prior and was asked about the differences. She noted the resistance to change:

> I think they're so used to doing things one way, just for them, that now that they have to spread their resources a little bit, I think it's very challenging for them and I just don't think that all clubs that have men's teams as well are really willing to give the females a shot.

The women's team would not exist without the club, and although women have created a team environment that suits their needs and interests, they still must exist within the larger club environment and structures. The male club leaders are celebrated by the club and local community for offering a senior women's and junior girls' program, as the growth of opportunities available for women in these competitions is often praised in a way that still privileges male perspectives (Burke et al. 2023). While merely introducing the team is considered progress, there are clear examples that the required support has not been provided for the team to flourish. The unequal distribution of tasks within the football club environment translates into typical perceptions of what (and who) are important and valued (Willson et al. 2018). While women have made their way into more playing and decision-making roles, they still must abide by the male 'rules' of the social space. According to Jeanes et al. (2021), the lack of importance placed on the contributions of women helps to maintain the gender hierarchy and the control and influence men have over the club.

As Elliott et al. (2019) highlight, progress narratives of women playing ARF can create an additional barrier because it can lead to many of the practical obstacles of participation being overlooked, which further reinforces ARF as a space privileging boys and men. In a study on Australian adolescent girls who play soccer, cricket, and ARF, Bevan et al. (2020) found that sports clubs have an important role as they can assist participation but also actively limit participation through inequality and discrimination in forms such as male teams being given better fields, promotion, equipment, and time slots for training and games.

When discussing the challenges of playing football as a woman, Elise spoke of the hierarchy of teams within the club, demonstrating the perceptions of the women's team in the club:

> People get around [the senior men's team], that's what they want to see, whereas senior women's has kind of been, it kind of gets stacked somewhere in between, it's not even as big as some of the junior footy, like it's not seen as the same kind of hierarchy, where senior men and women are up there [indicates with hands], it feels like we're kind of down here somewhere, the importance that the club places on us is, is really low (Elise, 25)

A common theme when asked about the challenges of playing football was the lack of respect for, resources allocated to, and power held by the team. Many found the club and its decision-makers to be ambivalent to their existence, often speaking of how important the women's team (and junior girls' program) was to the club, without backing them via support or resources. Elise continues:

> It's definitely a challenge when you know, you're trying to be a serious team and you want to be important to your club and you see certain things happen where you're like oh this wouldn't happen if it was the men's team, like when we train and we don't have lights, when we don't have equipment, when we don't have physios, when we don't have good coaches and a team of coaches behind us, supporting us, when we can't get people to do goal umpiring, we can't get people to do scoring, like just those little things.

The lack of resources and space allocated causes women to feel as though their position as footballers is not taken seriously and reproduces previously existing attitudes 'that women in sport have never been taken seriously and they've never demanded the attention of other people, or they've never gotten it' (Mia, 28).

As one can feel the frustration in the unequal distribution of resources the women's team experiences, it is also noted that they want to be taken 'seriously' or regarded as a 'serious team'. This returns us to the previous tension between having fun and learning versus demonstrating characteristics of being 'serious' or approaching things like the men's teams. As identified earlier, this approach revolves around winning at all costs, which includes a willingness to sacrifice one's body, engage in violence, and play through injury. The incongruity between perceptions of what the team should be results in a lack of respect, as summed up by Gabrielle (21):

> I remember one day we had a match scheduled for a Sunday afternoon and there's been a muck up with scheduling, so the under 14's or the under 12's (boys) used the main ground and we got moved a couple of hundred metres up the road, to play on this really shitty school oval which was about half the size, it was actually really insulting, particularly when the girls would be paying significant registration fees, putting a lot of money in over the bar and really supporting the club and just to be shafted was quite, it was just horrible, I remember being particularly angry about that because it just really highlighted how we were perceived.

Further, the women's team has actively tried to improve their situation, though with little success. The team has advocated for better access to club resources since the beginning. Despite this, there has been a lack of tangible change:

> We think that it might be getting better because they've heard us, they've heard our complaints but I haven't really seen much change, like I feel like it's the exact same as when we first started, like what's changed? I actually can't think of one thing that's really changed. (Zoe)

The onus of this change (for example, more resources) has constantly been put on the women themselves. Gabrielle (21) speaks of the expectation for the women to put in a similar level of commitment as the men before the club has been willing to commit to providing appropriate resourcing:

> For people to expect so much from players, they need to be able to give us like at least, you know, the same training times and same grounds and all that sort of stuff and then from there I think if the club's putting all that in and the leagues putting all that in, like you need to expect it from your players

However, it was clear throughout the interviews that regardless of the parts of their experiences that could be improved, women were just grateful to be able to play. In her study on AFLW players, Pavlidis (2020) found that even with the second-rate conditions women in sport face, it is expected that they should be happy and optimistic. Many players in her study expressed happiness just to be playing regardless of the conditions. Similarly, at the Sharks, players tried to justify the lack of resources and respect.

> I feel like some people are impatient with that and they feel like we should have exactly what the boys have now and I think they don't realise that, you know, [the Sharks] started what, in the 60's I think or the 50's. . . so they've got huge history behind them and it's been males up until recently (Isabella, 33)

Pavlidis (2020) suggests that optimism and happiness with the status quo is a strategy that might result in a higher chance of belonging. Issues have been raised with the club

multiple times, but there is a sense within the team that if they are patient and just continue showing up, things will slowly start to become more inclusive.

To combat the lack of importance placed on the team by the club, Phoebe (23) suggested on-field success may be a way to gain capital within the club:

> I think that it's just a generational thing, men have been playing footy for so long so of course they're still in that mindset of it's their club kind of thing, but I think as long as like we keep playing and especially when clubs are successful, like if [the Sharks] women won like the grand final or something, we would definitely be taken more seriously I think so it's just about keep playing and you know getting involved I suppose.

For most, the negativity only enhanced their desire to play and prove these people wrong. Although focusing on adolescent Australian Rules players rather than adults, Elliott et al. (2019) found that many girls had experienced their peers undermining their participation in a 'boys sport' through degrading, hegemonic, or sarcastic remarks. Most of the girls in this study also showed motivation to 'prove the haters wrong' and continue their involvement in football. This is echoed by Zoe:

> It's a bit more physical and you feel like a bit tougher, you feel like yeah, I get tackled but I still am up and playing, I think especially as girls, I like getting tackled because I want people to think that no, I'm not some weak little girl, like I can actually take it and I'm not going to go cry like majority of people would think, so I think that's why I like it.

As a social and cultural space, the Sharks football club's attempts at being part of gender equality through the inclusion of a women's team demonstrate the ongoing and enduring issues related to community-level sports. Whilst only in its 3rd season at the time, these interviews identify the ways players rationalise or contest enduring experiences of ambivalence and inequality. Strategies to prove the 'haters wrong' focus on performance and acceptance of even greater risk by going in harder. Considering the individual feeling of empowerment the women discussed through learning to tackle, it is not surprising that this might become an option; however, this puts the onus of changing the cultural and structural inequalities that are present on the women's capacity to demonstrate aggression and physicality, rather than on the (men's) club to change its attitudes and allocation of resources.

6. Conclusions

To conclude, we return to the notion of contested terrain. Our aim was to understand the embodied and social experiences of a group of adult women who take up ARF in the context of the 'boom' in women's sporting opportunities in Australia. At an individual level, women at the Sharks demonstrate the emancipatory potential from challenging feminine modalities through the unique physicality of ARF. Whilst this physicality is affirmed within the team, it is not necessarily appreciated by significant others in their lives. Simultaneously, there emerge the beginnings of internal conflict within the team about the rationale for playing, put simply for 'fun' or 'seriously'. These individual experiences are then placed within the historically masculine context of the Sharks club, whose concept of inclusion and gender equality sees women as an addition to the status quo rather than an opportunity to reimagine and redistribute power relations. Hence, our players identify simultaneous moments of empowerment and disempowerment that are then negotiated and rationalised in various ways.

It is clear throughout this paper that women's sport is a site of debate, negotiation, and conflict; however, in the contemporary moment, there is a widely uncritical, ahistorical

acceptance of the 'boom' for women in sport. Whilst participation and opportunities to play most sports have increased for girls and women in Australia, one should be wary of adopting the "simplistic notion that women's increasing athleticism unambiguously signals increased freedom and equality for women" (Messner 1988, p. 207). As Messner (1988, p. 198) also articulates, "within a reflexive historical framework, we can begin to understand how sport (and culture in general) is a dynamic social space where dominant (class, ethnic, etc.) ideologies are perpetuated as well as challenged and contested."

In proclaiming a 'boom time' for women in sport, sport evangelists have taken up, and uncritically reproduced, the assumption that there has been a continuous 'natural progression' of lineal improvements that has also translated to broader equality for women in society (McLachlan 2019). This rhetoric has carried into the community sport space by new players, who are happy to get a chance to play and move their bodies in new (albeit more violent) ways. While being included in this way does illustrate some challenges to the status quo and possibly illustrates a more gender-equal society, the 'emergent contradictions' evident here, however, are that in the face of ongoing sexism and homophobia, the players have largely adopted a frame of gratitude, optimism, and persistence to explain their experiences. To uncover the two-speed economy connected to the rapid professionalisation of women's sports, more research needs to focus on the experiences of women at the community level from which to advocate for new approaches for achieving gender equality in these sporting spaces. Taking on the un-reflexive, ahistorical 'boom time' position ignores previous gender equity (both successful and unsuccessful) efforts and potentially obscures the ongoing contestation over women's embodiment, equality, and freedom, and as such, the patriarchal power relations of historically male-dominated sports are not being transformed in any meaningful way by the inclusion of women in these clubs.

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Article

'I've Always Fought a Little against the Tide to Get Where I Want to Be'—Construction of Women's Embodied Subjectivity in the Contested Terrain of High-Level Karate

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Abstract: Karate can be both a martial art and a combat sport. Male and female karate athletes attended the Tokyo Olympic Games 2020 (2021). Elite sport often portrays female athletes through the sexualization of their bodies, while the martial environment leaves them open to accusations of masculinization. In the process of constructing themselves as fighters, *karateka* women do produce new ways of performing femininities and masculinities, which is a hard-work process of negotiations, leading them to the construction of a particular *habitus* strictly linked to their performativity within the environment. They take part in a contested terrain that mixes several elements that are often contrasting. In this article, we aim to present factors identified with the women athletes of the Spanish Olympic karate team that affect the construction of their embodied subjectivities. We focus on two main topics, authenticity as the real deal to belonging, and a possible gendered *habitus* struggling with the achievement of the condition of a warrior. We carried out an ethnographic study with the Spanish Olympic karate squad supported by autoethnographic elements from the first author. We focus here on the data from double interviews with 14 women athletes and their four male coaches. Embodied subjectivity as a process of subject construction to disrupt objectification and forms of othering showed to be a challenge, a complex task, and embedded in contradictions. Karate women's embodied subjectivities are built in the transit between resisting and giving in. Despite several difficulties, through awareness and reflection on limitations, *karateka* may occupy their place as subjects, exerting agency, feeling empowered, and fighting consciously against the naturalized '*tide*'.

Keywords: subjectivities; embodiment; negotiations; belonging; gender

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1. Introduction

We know that women's place in elite sport is problematic for a number of reasons. Female athletes face diverse stereotyping to reach a position in the contested terrain of sports (Jackson and Scherer 2013), especially in environments understood as masculine, such as the *karateka*[1] world. By mixing a combat sport and a martial art, karate can host several patriarchal features that challenge women's determination to become fighters, and perhaps even more so for Olympic *karateka* athletes. In the context of sport as a male preserve (Theberge 1985), elite sport often portrays female athletes through the sexualization of their bodies, while the martial environment leaves them open to accusations of masculinization, which is linked to lesbian performativity (Bennett et al. 2017; Butler 1990). In the process of constructing themselves as fighters, *karateka* women do produce new ways of performing femininities and masculinities (Channon and Phipps 2017; Edwards et al. 2021; Maor 2018). However, this is not a process free from consequences, in relation to

peers and to oneself. The construction of a female *karateka* embodied subjectivity (Foucault 2016; Merleau-Ponty 2005) is demanding on women, requiring them to negotiate the construction of a particular *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) that is strictly linked to their performativity within the environment.

The lack of recognition of women's capabilities coupled with the inferiorization of their athletic performance is already known in sports that are understood to be hyper-masculine, such as football, rugby, and combat sports (e.g., Mierzwinski et al. 2014; Turelli et al. 2022). This is so to the extent that if, on the one hand, women entering male-dominated environments can achieve levels of excellence and feel empowered, on the other hand, they need to deal with sanction and control (Edwards et al. 2021). Not unlike several other sports at the Olympic setting, karate retains and reproduces gender normativity. Following such an approach, studies taking into account male performances in karate have been carried out (for example, Alinaghipour et al. 2020), though not from a sociological perspective. As such, on an unproblematized binary gender order[2], general female performativity in karate has not been extensively researched. There is a literature on women in combat sports—for example, boxing (Carlsson 2017; Tjonndal 2019), judo (Guérandel and Mennesson 2007), and mixed martial arts (Jakubowska et al. 2016; Mierzwinski et al. 2014)—in addition to sociological reviews of the literature on the topic (e.g., Channon and Jennings 2014; Channon and Matthews 2015; Follo 2012), and women's self-defence from a physical feminism point of view (McCaughey 1998).

Notwithstanding, the specific literature on women's karate is still limited. Studies by Guthrie (1995) and Maclean (2015, 2016) have approached the gender theme, though neither includes women elite athletes within the Olympic context[3]. In this regard, our study makes a contribution to the social sciences, gender, and female sport, specifically deepening knowledge in the female elite[4] *karateka* context, where female embodied subjectivity struggles in interaction with a martial *habitus*. There are several studies exploring the concept of *habitus* in martial arts and combat sports (MACS), with Wacquant (2002) being a pioneer (see also Spencer 2009, 2012). However, our research focused on women in high-level karate taking the opportunity of the exclusive time, to date, of karate in the Olympic Games, Tokyo 2020 (2021), and specifically looked at embodied subjectivity, with *habitus* working as one strongly present parallel concept. It is also relevant to say that we decided to work with the concept of embodied subjectivity rather than identity considering that the former is a broader concept due to its sociological roots, expanding the psychological perspective of the identity topic. Also, in addition to knowing about the identities that *karateka* women can represent through belonging to karate, we are more interested in knowing how they build their subjectivity in such a contested terrain to deal with its several issues. We are considering the definition of contested terrain of Jackson and Scherer (2013, pp. 888–89) 'as a site of struggle (. . .) involving key interest groups with varying resources and material interests, and competing ideas and beliefs'.

In seeking to understand this process, we carried out a study with the women's Spanish Olympic karate team. The experiences they have embodied through karate, having practiced it since childhood, shape their experiences of themselves and of the world. In this paper, our aim is to present the factors identified with the athletes that affect the construction of their embodied subjectivity in the contested terrain of karate as an Olympic sport. This is important to be known because, by breaking down the process they went through, we can develop strategies to work in favour of women's sport, helping to make it a place where the objectification of women athletes is undermined. It must be said that there are several factors that help in shaping such embodied subjectivity, like personal struggles against hunger to be kept in weight categories, or overcoming pain from training sessions and injuries, and suffering from the pressure to win. However, we are focusing here on two not-so-explored topics in the literature, as far as we know, that link belonging to authenticity as *the real deal*, and a produced martial gendered *habitus*, to an ideal of the warrior. We chose to focus on these topics because, although complex, they are new to the

body of literature specific to women's karate, and present the potential of innovation for the area of women's combat sports.

In presenting this process of subject construction within karate, we first look at embodied subjectivity, providing an overview of this concept. Next, we briefly approach the quest to own a place and find comfort in belonging to MACS. The issue of belonging is present in sport in general, often being linked to a sense of safety; in karate, though, it can become a challenge enforced by the hierarchical system of belts as a stimulator path to be followed in order to integrate levels of mastery. The pursuit of a sense of belonging, then, highly affects how practitioners mould themselves to the environment. After addressing such a concept, we explain our methodological choices, considering that this paper relates to the central part of a broader ethnography. Finally, we present the section of findings and discussion, in which the women elite athletes express what it means for them to perform as *karateka* with characteristics that *define* them, helping to understand how embodied subjectivity is being constructed in the *dojo*[5] as a *habitus*-sharing environment, and on the competitive *tatami*[6]. The process they follow is not the same as that for men, showing itself to be a complex process, contradictorily guided by (hetero)normativity and a traditional martial pedagogy that places everyone in strict binary positions. To understand this multifaceted process, we add to the discussion the idea of a specific martial gendered *habitus* that seems to be present in this heteronormative gender binary environment. Both processes are connected, but we intentionally start with the topic of authenticity as we want to reflect its subordination to the gendered *habitus*. We would create a different impression if presenting the gendered *habitus* first, given that such an order of presentation could be read as a liberation process from impositions that the women face in the environment. Unfortunately, this is not what happens for now and we want to make it clear.

1.1. Women's Embodied Subjectivity

Embodied subjectivity is a dynamic concept that refers to the processes of the production of oneself (Foucault 2016) in an individuality sense, leading the person to become an embodied subject able to experience empowerment. A person's embodied subjectivity is built in the encounter of their lived experiences that capture the world through sensory perceptions with the reflexive processes ingrained in such living (Merleau-Ponty 2005). In this situation, karate could work as a technology of the self (Foucault 2016) supporting the process of empowerment, as it is reported in studies carried out in other combat sports (e.g., Maor 2018; see also Pedrini and Jennings 2021). However, high-level sport entails the risk, inevitably, of a view of the body-as-machine (Vaz 2001), while women athletes run the risk of being sexualized (see Toffoletti et al. 2018), with both processes feeding their objectification. A reflection on lived embodied experiences, therefore, is required as a component of self-cultivation (Foucault 2016), taking into account that we have/are selves that overlap in constituting our subjectivity.

Even though feminism has undeniably led to changes in the social and historical condition of women in many societies, secondary roles remain prevalent for them (Roth and Basow 2004). Patriarchal structures are organized and reorganized to maintain the hegemonic order (Connell 1995; Williams 1977). With that, women *karateka* may disrupt the gender order to some extent; however, in so doing, they face various adversities, be it in the general social context, in the sports world, or in the very traditional setting of a martial art.

We adopt Butler's (1990) concept of performativity to express our understanding of gendered embodied subjectivity. In performativity, repetition plays a central role, leading to reposition, so there is fluidity, and nothing is fixed. In having karate as a central element of life, the women athletes in this study *embodied* karate, although in different proportions, but enough to shape their performances, often in searching for authenticity as a way to feel and be seen as genuine through belonging to an environment that challenges their very situation as women (Young 1980; for an updated version, see Young 1998). They seem to find such authenticity in performing as *karateka* women, which is read as a genuine performance and is therefore more valued than something that could be considered a theatrical performance;

but this comes at a cost. They need to claim a position among fighters, belonging to the *karateka* subculture, which requires a set of negotiations, and this cost is increased further by reaching the Olympic scene, which makes karate more public and athletes more visible. To belong to the very small circle of *karateka* that could experience Olympic karate, or to be close to that by being part of an Olympic squad, positioned the researched athletes in a select place. Considering this, next, we briefly explain some elements of the process of belonging to an elite sport with a strong martial art background, which asks for surrender and adaptation to the local *habitus*.

1.2. Finding Your Place—The Comfort of Belonging through Habitus Embracement

In his work about techniques of the body, Mauss (1973) addresses the theme of imitation, which is a constant in sports contexts, with new practitioners becoming *mirrors* in the attempt to assimilate with the environment and resemble its respected members. When embodying an environment's *habitus*, a concept first mentioned by Mauss (1973) and developed as we use it here by Bourdieu (1990), the person forges themselves and becomes a constituent part of the group, which also accepts and incorporates the person (Mauss 1973). Then, the process of belonging is elaborated in a dynamic two-way street that is constantly being remade.

According to Spencer (2009), *habitus* can be conceptualized as an acquired ability and faculty, and is in place when the embodiment of body techniques happen. From this perspective, the embodiment of *habitus* refers to the habits or corporeal schemas described by Mauss (1973), notwithstanding, in expanding the focus of the somatic to an embodied subjectivity, and we recall Foucault (2016) on his technologies of the self. Karate does not detach from its background of martial arts even when becoming an Olympic combat sport. It retains invented or selected martial traditions (Hobsbawm 1983; Williams 1977) and philosophies that affect (Green 2011) athletes, as much as the general social and cultural learning process (Bourdieu 1990), setting up power dynamics.

In order to belong to elite-level karate, the athletes interviewed need to differentiate from amateur practitioners or traditional martial artists. At other times, however, the same high-level *karateka* recapture the roots that keep them connected to the martial art, perhaps romanticizing the traditional warrior's fraternity or sorority. There could be, therefore, a beneficial double-belonging, or yet a messy feeling of betrayal, to one of the scenarios, putting in evidence aspects of the contested terrain that sports karate at the same time takes part in and constitutes. Now we move on to presenting the methods employed in this study.

2. Methodology

This study draws from a larger (auto)ethnographic project led by the first author. The original plan, which we had already begun to enact during 2019 and early 2020, was to conduct an ethnography of the Spanish women's Olympic karate squad, in training and in competitions, following them to the Tokyo Olympic Games in August 2020. By the time of the arrival of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic globally around February/March 2020, the first author had observed training sessions with the *karateka* and had begun to establish some relationships with them and their coaches. The pandemic changed our plan since training was disrupted and the Olympic Games themselves postponed until August 2021. To accommodate the global lockdown, we needed to adapt the initial research design and procedures. The pandemic, therefore, forced us to change methods and make compromises.

We decided to use some information from the first author's lived experiences[7] as a karate black belt and long-term amateur athlete in an autoethnographic approach (Landi 2018; Sparkes 2020), matched with data generated through online interviews with the elite athletes and their coaches, and video analysis of their competitive styles of fighting. For this paper, our analysis focuses mainly on data from one-to-one interviews with the women's karate squad and their coaches relating to the research question "what factors affect the construction of female *karateka* embodied subjectivities in the Spanish Olympic

karate team". We added extracts of the autoethnography where it is of more relevance. Our work was grounded in a social constructivist approach, supported by feminist studies of critical perspective (see Olive and Thorpe 2018)[8]. The theoretical framework added to the autoethnographic process led us to a dialogical and reflexive analysis of the interviews of the elite *karateka*, acknowledging a mutual affect as part of the process (Pavlidis 2013).

2.1. Participants

Our sample was composed of 14 women elite athletes, with ages ranging from 19 to 33, and who had practised karate for 13–26 years, as well as four men coaches, ages 33–62, with participation in karate ranging between 17 and 47 years. All participants were Spanish nationals, though from different regions of Spain. The athletes possessed between first and fourth *dan*[9], while the coaches achieved second to eighth *dan*. Among the athletes, ten practised *kumite*[10], and four practised *kata*[11].

2.2. Data Generation

We adopted an open-ended semi-structured interview (Hammer and Wildavsky 1990). We conducted two interviews with each participant. The first interview focused on general issues in the *karateka* environment and the second more tightly focused on the research topic. Over three months, we conducted 38 interviews, including a pilot between June and September 2020. The interviews lasted an average of 1 h 10 min, totalling more than 44 h of recordings. The co-authors of this article acted as guarantors of trustworthiness in the data analysis process, in a triangulation of scholar experts (Guba 1983) in the sociology of sport.

2.3. Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

The data analysis began in early December 2020. The first action was transcribing the interviews, followed by coding them (Charmaz and Thornberg 2021), along with the translation process. We had a previous category system which was restructured based on real data obtained. From February to June 2021, the findings and discussion were written up. We followed all the procedures recommended by the Ethics Committee of the Autonomous University of Madrid to carry out the research, which considered that the project met its ethical requirements and approved the study in 2019, under approval number CEI-102-1930.

In the next pages we report the findings and discuss them in relation to athletes' perceptions of the construction of their embodied subjectivities that were influenced by their long-time belonging to karate and the gendered *habitus* verified with them. We note that some regions of Spain are characterized by taking strong feminist positions, which confronts with the extremely religious heritage that the people hold, affecting the social situation of the population. These embodied social features mix up with the martial *habitus* that the fighters find in karate, producing something of the same singular to Spanish karate, and plural, considering that Olympic karate is about a global movement. For more details on Spanish karate from a foreign point of view, please see Turelli (2022).

3. Findings and Discussion

We present findings that showed paths taken by women athletes to construct their embodied subjectivities in elite karate. We found athletes' concerns for authenticity, referring to being 'the real deal', as a genuine way of performing, and the relation of this to belonging, as well as a gendered *habitus* in the quest for warrior status. Both topics are supported by contradictions found in the contested terrains due to the 'power struggles over resources (. . .) and ideological and moral/ethical beliefs' (Jackson and Scherer 2013, p. 889). Yet belonging is about taking part in a current environment; it generates the feeling of authenticity when the achievement of such a condition is obtained through relevant challenges and produces a sense of exclusivity. A gendered *habitus* that places people according to traditional and gender binary stereotypes becomes controversial when the ideal model proposed is fixed and the same for all. Such contradictions and contrasting

points add to the complexity and richness of the subjectivity that is being constructed by women due to its need for negotiations, since female space in the considered-masculine environment is still not guaranteed, but a continuous struggle.

3.1. 'We Are Authentic'—What It Means to Belong to a Karateka Group

Sometimes women *karateka* consider themselves athletes, sportspeople like any other, dealing with issues shared among the sports community; at other times, they expose the view that karate gives to its practitioners some special characteristics, providing them with a sense of exclusivity and originality outside of what could be considered commonplace, and feeling superior in relation to other people and sports. They address such a sense as an experience of authenticity, which can be understood as being 'the real deal', something genuine with the value of legitimacy, distanced from falsehoods. Achieving a high-level position is something that places people in a restricted circle, as Diana explained:

> *It's high-level sport. (. . .) It is a pyramid, so at the top of the pyramid not everyone fits.* (Diana, Interview13(2), 13 August 2020)

To perform as a woman in such an environment is something that can confer status due to the peculiarities of the *karateka* field. A woman who fights, despite all the difficulties she faces in performing it, can find in such a condition a place of authenticity, meaning that she differentiates herself from other people, feeling exclusive, brave, maybe even special, in a sport that is yet not widely embraced by women. Then, there is the combination of belonging with feeling like a genuine *karateka*. This is intimately known by the first author, who used her personal experiences in karate to decode some reported information through interviews with the elite athletes, as pointed out in the methods. Remembering her path, she wrote

> *You take part in the context and become part of the group after passing the challenges presented. (. . .) And I would add that even though all these things come at a price, being the only girl training among boys 25 years ago in a countryside town guaranteed a remarkable exclusivity. In other words, all my friends (girls) were surprised that I was doing what none of them had the courage to do, even if I invited them to participate. So I confess that I felt authentic.* (Fabiana, autoethnographic text, in Turelli 2022)

The search for this place to feel genuine often leads people to attribute a special status to what they dedicate themselves to. Although many of the women consider themselves to belong to a generic community of *athletes* on the one hand, on the other hand most have the view that performing as *karateka* represents the insertion of exclusive values in their lives. They reveal their belief in being part of an inner circle of martial artists as the next testimonies attest:

> *I think that karate moulds your character and way of being, and we do have specific characteristics that maybe you don't have them with other sports.* (Hera, Interview21(2), 27 August 2020)

> *Inside of us we can feel something that makes us different from others, I don't know exactly what it is. The way you take things, respect.* (Artemis, Interview26(2), 7 September 2020)

> *I think that karate does help me to be an educated, respectful person, that opens up paths that other sports may not.* (Minerva, Interview12(2), 12 August 2020)

> *I sincerely believe that karateka have a different mind than any athlete or person. I believe that we have been so governed by discipline, rectitude (. . .), and that does not apply in all sports but within karate it does.* (Venus, Interview22(2), 2 September 2020)

Karateka cite values that shape character, as advocated by Funakoshi, the accepted founder of karate, and mention concepts related for them to the distinctive and somewhat special way of performing as *karateka*. They are elite sportspeople like other athletes, but also consider themselves to belong to something differentiated, in a superior manner.

Donnelly (2006, p. 220) notes that the position of 'us against them', to some extent found here, clarifies 'differences between core subcultural participants and the people they define as other'. Since performing as a fighter involves taking some risks that not everybody is willing to take, this is linked within the environment to courage, a valued feature among karate people that adds to the authenticity they seek.

To verify to what extent belonging to karate affects athletes' embodied subjectivities, we also asked them 'who are you?'. The question showed itself to be difficult to answer. We share two comments:

> *Complicated this question! (. . .) When I fight at my best, I am authentic. Maybe I don't have a spark, maybe my matches don't seem super attractive, super entertaining. But I do my job.* (Diana, Interview13(2), 13 August 2020)

> *Well, I think I'm a fighter. In many ways. Because it has cost me a lot to get to where I am now. (. . .) So I've always fought a little against the tide to get where I want to be.* (Minerva, Interview12(2), 12 August 2020)

The authenticity that Diana sees in herself, as do other athletes, contains contrasting elements. It seems that she poses her authenticity as a way of genuine performance, against what is expected of elite athletes in terms of spectacle, of entertainment. However, if she wins, by doing her job, she is worthy of remaining in the squad. Minerva emphasizes that she is not following the tide as well; the place she wants is not a common place, but a place that requires a fight and effort to be conquered. Then, both athletes believe themselves to be adopting positions, to some extent, with an extra value, maybe with differentials of what can be considered as a community of athletes. Their embodied subjectivities, therefore, are produced based on the feeling of being the real deal in the very effort to belong to a place that challenges, but also reinforces, their performances, and on the sense of self-worth as warriors, which will be explored in the next topic.

3.2. 'We Are Warriors'—The Pursuit of Characteristics of Ideal Karateka *and the Presence of a Gendered* Habitus

The search for acceptance into and belonging to a group justifies the embodiment of the local *habitus*. However, there seems to be a contrasting gendered *habitus* that makes subjectivity construction a complex task for women. This concept may present itself as an extra reason for the way women conform, while they resist diverse issues within the terrain of karate.

The construction of embodied subjectivity is affected by the strong value that is attributed to a warriors' performance. There is a pedagogy behind the actions taken in martial arts that promote a somewhat romanticized view of warriors and masters. In a contrasting position with a combat sport fighter, a warrior would usually be a male martial artist with a moral code, like a *samurai*, following a powerful and respected tradition (Hobsbawm 1983; Williams 1977). Indeed, Cynarsky et al. (2012) describe such a pedagogy as a way of moulding the character for the practitioner to achieve an elevated moral status. It must be noted that the education in martial arts is usually under a strong gender binary and straight view of sexuality; it is heteronormative (see Turelli et al. 2022). Therefore, women performing karate often seek to fit into the binary hierarchical order. This order means, in general terms, that men under the martial pedagogy are authorized to develop high standards of fighting, while women pursue this ideal model of warrior, but are rarely viewed (by mostly male *sensei*[12]) as reaching the criteria for doing so.

Then, even though karate has become an Olympic combat sport, the place women hold within it is mired in complexities. Unlike in mixed martial arts, where 'A fighter becomes a mixed martial artist in the experience of being in the ring' (Spencer 2009, p. 136), far more is required for women karate fighters to become warriors. Women are seen as being authorized to take part in the male environment, as it is *naturally* (Young 1980, 1998) considered to be, and thus they are not seen as true fighters, but receive instead an inferior classification to men within the context (Turelli 2022). They have their fighting

styles compared to men's, even though, following traditional martial pedagogy, they neither receive equal education to men, nor is it based on equity, but on the wider-known traditional approach. Then, if they somewhat disrupt the normative gender order several times through pursuing the (male) ideal of a warrior for the context, they risk having their performativity stereotyped, falling into accusations of lesbian performativity, as Venus pointed out:

> *Many people think that, that we are* machungas *(lesbians).* (Venus, Interview22(2), 2 September 2020)

The assumption of lesbian performativity for participating in a male sport environment tends to be frequent and becomes a stereotype that women need to deal with, regardless of their sexual preferences. In such situations and contexts, women athletes react in ways that reinforce heteronormativity by exaggerating their femininity (e.g., Tajrobehkar 2016) as a way to deny that they identify as lesbians. It relates to embracing emphasized femininity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) through, e.g., using makeup, wearing tight, sexy clothes when not wearing a *gi*[13], wearing high heels, and so on. Venus still can extract the benefits from such a stereotype by converting it into a way of feeling genuine. She gives minor importance to the stereotype since she considers herself to be a 'real girl'. This, in turn, can be read as an embodiment of the traditional gender binary and straight pedagogy (Fitzpatrick and McGlashan 2016). Venus said:

> *I think we are authentic. Because I think we are the ideal girl that everyone thinks is a boy, but when they meet you, they really realize that you are a real girl.* (Venus, Interview22(2), 2 September 2020)

Then, women seek the given high standard of fighting, proving their value as warriors, worthy of belonging to the group, but also striving to portray themselves as 'real girls' that display emphasized femininity and do not identify as lesbians; another contrasting point, since girly women may be distanced from holding a supposed true warrior status. Thus, to belong to the environment, *karateka* women, particularly at this elite level, make a series of negotiations. At some points, they position themselves within this contested terrain as resisting forms of domination, and at other times they (need to) give in to keep their place in the team (Turelli 2022). They end up embodying the martial *habitus*; notwithstanding, it is to some extent adapted to a female version of warriors, not understood as 'true' warriors in the context, though given the supposed female *natural* condition (Young 1980, 1998) with the role of supporting men. Atena, an interviewed athlete under a pseudonym, provided an example of the negotiations she makes even when she holds power due to the second role she holds. She reported

> *Within the coaches' group, when we go to a championship I am a girl (coordinator of the squad at her province), I have to catch their attention. I must tell them what they are going to do, and they are reluctant, and it is "what is this girl going to tell me?" So what I'm trying to do is. . . like being neutral, trying to say things in a way that doesn't hurt. So if I have to scold him, even though I would yell at him, what I try is (. . .) "look, this can't happen again because. . . I know that anyone makes a mistake. . ." You try to handle a little better, because if the situation that I am the authority can produce rejection, if I was more hierarchical. . . (would be worse). A man who is in power, if you fail, he would throw you off. But I try to do it like a conversation, I call you aside, we talk. . .* (Atena, Interview14(2), 15 August 2020)

Female *karateka* seek to reach the ideal of a warrior's fighting style, accommodating this request with the situation of women that is viscerally embedded in them by society (Mason 2018) and by the traditional martial pedagogy itself. It is contradictory because they are asked to perform in line with the given ideal model, but it mixes up their social self-positioning. They want to achieve warrior status to find their own self-worth, and keep their 'real girl' status, positions that they continue to struggle with. In such a pursuit, they deal with elements that are demanding to their holistic health and wellbeing, elements

challenging men fighters as well, but that echo loudly among women since they are considered to be in a men's area. It seems that to perform at the same time as *real girls* and *real fighters* could give them *the real deal* of *karateka* women. They commented that

> *Karate is a sport considered more for boys, so for girls to be there they must have character, a strong personality.* (Vesta, Interview16(2), 18 August 2020)

> *I think that in the end a woman who gets into a sport that a priori is considered masculine, first, has a (strong) personality. And courage or will.* (Afrodite, Interview19(2), 24 August 2020)

These comments show the influence of the martial *habitus* and ways that athletes find to deal with it, making negotiations to conquer the position they want, as well as showing the impacts this can exert in their embodied subjectivity. In attesting they are warriors, they point out values that are highly considered as values they carry, and also highlight some characteristics that they could portray as an advantage regarding men. The athletes explained:

> *We use intelligence much more than boys. Boys are more physical, and for that reason they also score more points. Generally, the scores of the boys' fights are higher, I think they defend less, they go crazy.* (Minerva, Interview12(2), 12 August 2020)

> *Guys get hotter. (. . .) I don't want to say that we girls don't get stung, because we do it a lot, but we know how to do it in a different way than simply "well, now I get stung and hit and destroy you."* (Diana, Interview13(2), 13 August 2020)

Women define their characteristics as opposed to what would be viewed as the strong point in men, corroborating the current and normative gender binary view of men and women as well as the pedagogy under which they are being coached. It means, while they claim for equality, it is not possible to detach from the viscerally embodied social gender binary values.[14] This is why they emphasize the 'head' as a main characteristic of *karateka* women, a synonym of performing more rationally, intelligently and even strategically than men, who would be more impulsive and 'physical'.

However, athletes and their coaches present a contrasting view; coaches undeniably recognize men as physically superior and more skilled than women, but they also see men athletes with greater strategic capabilities. So, while women consider their own fighting style to be rational and calculated, coaches will point out that this as actually a deficit in females, again remarking the gendered *habitus* and placing women as inferior fighters. The tactical aspect is what characterizes good fighters for coaches, and what, according to them, *karateka* women lack. One coach stated

> *We find very good girls, with a lot of technique, raising their legs, very fast, but then at a tactical level. . . Today at a strategic level that does not help you if you are not able to deceive the opponent, make her fail. . .* (Coach Apolo, Interview33(2), 25 September 2020)

The coach refers to the level not reached by women in his view. Women want to prove their worth for fighting and that the shortcoming pointed out by coaches is mistaken, which especially involves them in working hard to reach a sense of belonging within the team, but also due to the internalization of the hierarchical figure and his gaze (Foucault 2009). However, their pursuit follows orientations received by the people who *deeply know* (and hold, like the true owners of) the martial art, who are the coaches. Thus, they internalize messages, try hard to attest their ability as warriors, and sustain inner battles against the beliefs of inferior performance that they supposedly present (see Turelli et al. 2022). Another athlete provided a testimony in this regard:

> *I have heard it in the coaching courses, "with the girls the tactics cannot be worked". Author: And why? Atena: Because they say we are unbearable, that you say to a girl "look, what you are going to do is. . .", imagine, "well, now I want you to dodge and do. . ." and that we start crying, that we have a very bad character, that I don't know*

> *what. (. . .) I tell them "well, I'm not like that", and then they tell me "it's because you're a boy." (meaning that she performs strongly, has not so many sexual appeals. . .) That is the turn. The first time "you can't because women are unbearable", and the second time is "of course you do, but because you're a boy."* (Atena, Interview14(2), 15 August 2020)

In addition to the contested terrain that the contrasting comments of coach Apolo and Atena evidence, Atena provides a testimony that corroborates the point on the masculinization stigma of women fighters, leading back to Venus' quote presented earlier on lesbian performativity. Atena still shows how *karateka* feel the impacts of the binary martial pedagogy that positions them as poor fighters (Turelli et al. 2022). They are playing in the competitive sports world, which hinges on victories and defeats, the former usually leading to high status and the latter to the possibility of being humbled and ultimately ejected from the squad. Then, there can occur experiences that are read as dishonourable. We provide an example from our autoethnographic notes:

> *I punched the senshu*[15]*, and then I received the first kick to the head. (. . .) With the second kick in the head and the score at 1 × 6, I was already in my shame process, worried about several things external to the fight, and was not reasoning well, which made room for the third kick and the defeat by 1 × 9. This shame is absurdly terrible, especially in the moment, but also after and even now, years after the fight took place.* (Fabiana, autoethnographic text, in Turelli 2022)

Insisting on the gendered *habitus*, the internalization of judgments and opinions, and some allowance of being constantly evaluated by others (Foucault 2009), lead women to become their own regulators. Minerva provided an example of this:

> *I am a self-demanding person and I don't need nobody to be behind me to try my best. I can do it alone.* (Minerva, Interview1(1), 29 June 2020)

To do this with oneself requires remarkable moral strength, regardless of the normalization and acceptance of the load of the judgment of others, to the point where it becomes embodied as self-demand. It can be read as self-discipline and praised in the sports world, but also as a disciplinary way of living (Foucault 2009), where the body needs to progress in a disembodied approach, like a machine (Vaz 2001). The entire process can end up being felt as heavy to carry, often linked to experiences of guilt for not achieving (self)imposed targets. Guilt is in a close relationship with shame, and is a form of self-punishment for thinking that the ideal fighting style is not achieved, even if perpetually pursued. Then there is the feeling of non-completeness and the *non-abled* fighter (Turelli et al. 2022), who lacks ability and is ultimately inferior. Some athletes commented on how they struggle with this issue:

> *That's why I didn't feel good, because I threw extra rocks in my backpack that I didn't have to carry.* (Diana, Interview4(1), 21 July 2020)

> *I do think "I'm not good for this, I'm never going to get it." Those kinds of thoughts, yes. . .* (Vesta, Interview8(1), 25 July 2020)

> *I have a (inner) saboteur who tells me bad things and I tell myself it's a way to protect me, like when you make excuses, "I'm going to lose, I'm going to lose", like if you lose, you were already saying you were going to lose. (. . .) It's a constant fight.* (Artemis, Interview23(1), 3 September 2020)

This self-disciplinary approach and the burdens taken as self-punishment relate to the gendered *habitus* found among these women. The prominent place given to a specific posture that must be presented results in pressure, concern, and self-depreciation, contravalues embodied that lead women fighters to produce a sub-*habitus* within the martial *habitus*, generally spread among female *karateka*. This feeds a cycle of self-blaming for performing in modest ways, with restricted movements in space, for example, when it was

instilled in the education on the female body from infancy (Mason 2018; Young 1980, 1998). In this regard, Atena pointed out

> *I believe that if I'm a coach and I'm used to always receiving from others "you didn't do this well", and you are judging yourself harshly, I think that that makes women in general much more insecure than men. Because there is always a criticism of what you do, always. If you go very covered, you are a nun, if you go uncovered, you are a whore, if you paint yourself, why do you paint yourself, and if you don't paint yourself, you don't explore yourself. There are always comments on everything about you. I think it conditions you. (. . .) Many women say "and can I do that? And will I be able to. . .?" Because they have always put it in you that it's not your site, that you can do things wrong. (. . .) I think that it's not the same to go on a flat road than to go uphill. If you put me uphill, it makes it much more difficult for me to arrive than for you.* (Atena, Interview14(2), 15 August 2020)

We argue that female athletes pursue the archetypal ideal fighter that is pointed out by their coaches and the environment whilst navigating contradictions, and it strengthens this peculiar gendered fighter *habitus*. Women *karateka* under the traditional martial pedagogy education do not enjoy the same place than that designed for men. Notwithstanding, they keep stressing that they can perform as *true* warriors:

> *We are warriors. (. . .) I think warrior is a word that defines us quite well.* (Hera, Interview21(2), 27 August 2020)

> *We fight to the end, and that defines us, not giving anything up.* (Minerva, Interview12(2), 12 August 2020)

> *I would say that (we are) brave, moving forward, that nothing stops you, nobody.* (Ceres, Interview17(2), 23 August 2020)

Women want to prove their self-worth for the sport through the emphasis they place in their comments, and it must be noted that they are indeed overcoming limits and barriers both on the mat, for their space in the sport, and in life itself. The social construction of women counts on constricting their achievement of goals that are reflected in the sports world. Notwithstanding, they continue to fight for their place, and this very fight, even if full of challenges, is outlining and constructing subjectivities *enabled* to exercise agency over traditional structures and contested terrains, despite the rhythm it takes.

4. Conclusions

In this article, we aimed to present factors identified with the women athletes of the Spanish national squad that affect the construction of their embodied subjectivities in the contested terrain of karate as an Olympic sport. We focused on presenting that which seemed not-so-explored in the literature, and with the potential to visualise paths for women's sport. We presented two main topics, one relating to authenticity, as being the real deal and thus deserving to belong, and another about a gendered *habitus* struggling with the achievement of the condition of a warrior. All this is developed in an environment permeated both by a traditional martial pedagogy, which still follows heteronormative gender binary rules, and by the known sportive culture that objectifies women athletes. These elements are made up of combined, complex and contrasting points that mainly affect women in their process of constructing embodied subjectivity, a hard-work process.

Such contrasting points contribute to shaping subjectivities that deal with moments of insecurity and are due to the help in leading to the verified gendered *habitus*, which is therefore not a plenty confident *habitus*. The *Karateka* athletes that were researched take part in the elite sport; however, they keep attached to the traditional martial approach that karate has, which is rooted in a pedagogy that does not favour them. Since martial pedagogy is added to the sportive culture, women fighters struggle and try hard to belong to this contested terrain. Notwithstanding, the goal is worth it to them, because conquering a place within the environment provides an important feeling of differentiation from others,

finding in it a way to experience self-value. Having the possibility to feel 'special' becomes something intensively pursued when to feel relegated to a second level is commonplace.

Added to this is the quest to be viewed as *real fighters*, as recognized warriors. *Karateka* pursue the male model posed as the best way of fighting, even though it is not achieved by most male fighters. In seeking that, women face prejudices around their sexuality, and so they try to attest that they are *real women*, emphasizing their femininity and being compliant, at times at least, to figures within and general martial education and training that see them as 'others', not working with them equitably, but othering them. They are, from this perspective, not equals, but only allowed to play within the male terrain, pretending that they fight. Even though they fight amazingly, they could achieve higher levels if their sport was approached as specific sport, not as an 'imperfect inferior imitation' of sport displayed by men. Therefore, the comparisons they are subject to are untenable and unfair.

The sports world is a contested terrain of great social power and numerous power struggles, working with people in their entirety and acting on their subjectivities in the interaction of the practiced *habitus*, gendered embodiment, and embodied subjectivity. By knowing and better understanding the nature of athletes' embodied subjectivity, we may become more prepared for proposing changes in benefit of women's sport. Athletes face several difficulties to perform their sport; they embody the culture of the martial context through its traditional pedagogy and a remade *habitus*, and negotiate versions of themselves produced through others' eyes, resisting at times, and giving in on other occasions. It is undeniable that they need to adapt to some norms of *fitting in* to enter and remain in the team. On the other hand, they also defy or confront structures when fighting for aspects of their conception on authenticity, performing in genuine manners. But there are limits to this. They need to know or to learn how to negotiate and balance resistance with yielding to norms, being able to resist more when their results are better, maybe. Then, to perform authentically could be a way of resistance that is, in turn, guided by oscillating orientations between fighting like the ideal warrior and holding back, restricting, demure as the gendered *habitus* presupposes.

Considering this contradictory scenario, the fact that women stand for a place where they are so challenged shows they are able to occupy that space, which can be addressed as a process of deepening in and fighting for subjectivity construction, disrupting objectification. Through awareness and reflection on several limitations, a process that took place alongside the interviews, *karateka* may occupy their place as subjects, feeling empowered and fighting against *accepted* forms of othering. Perhaps this is the first *tide* to fight against; not an easy task, but rewarding. Karate women's embodied subjectivities are built on this contested terrain precisely in the transition between resisting and giving in, needing to find a sort of centre in this movement without destabilizing oneself. This presupposes a position of conscious struggle with power dynamics, a *fight* continually re-elaborated in a process of reflexivity, and in developing a critical and political stance. Therefore, in addition to a defying challenge, there is also an opportunity with potential to be explored in further studies.

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Notes

1 Karate practitioners or environment.

2 We would like to make a point here highlighting that our acknowledgement of the contested terrain (Jackson and Scherer 2013) of sports, and specifically the *karateka* environment, as spaces where the binary gender order prevails refers to itself as a fact. Undoubtedly, it is a fact that that increases the situation of the contested terrain, amplifying contradictions both in number and dimensions. However, in pointing out our awareness of the issue, we are not advocating for an undeliberated mix among all genders for competitions. We mean competitions and not recreational sport. By experiencing competitive sport, where specific criteria matter for performance, and where how to (fairly, we hope) exclude ends up being more emphasized than inclusion, we do think that binarism is an outdated issue that needs to be addressed in sport. Unfortunately, though, we do not have an easy solution to propose for that. At this point, we see disadvantages for both trans and cisgender people, the former mainly related to inclusion topics, and the last to (mainly cis women's) rights in sports, which have been achieved through a journey of struggles far from an end, given female sports' continuous comparison and devaluation in relation to male sport. Yet, specifically thinking about competitive combat sports, and again considering our embodied experience, mixing genders for fighting, even with the rules of sports, can lead to levels of danger in experiences higher than the habitual.

3 Karate debuted in Tokyo 2020 (2021), but is no longer included in Paris 2024.

4 Elite athletes mean here *karateka* that are not amateur and integrate a national squad. They are not necessarily professional though, studying or working in other areas.

5 Martial practice location.

6 Area of practice.

7 Since ethnographies delve on people's experience, they are often linked to the phenomenological approach (Spencer 2009). We are aware of this but have chosen a different path to serve our study's object and go forward to what Fullagar (2017) named as comfortable known qualitative research.

8 For an evolving perspective from us, see also Bargetz and Sanos (2020).

9 Grades after black belt.

10 Fight itself, structured by weight categories.

11 Fight against an imaginary opponent, a *choreography* of martial blows.

12 The graduated teacher.

13 Abbreviation used to the karate uniform (*karategi*).

14 There is a sort of branch of feminism like the one in defence of equity, with which we identify, and that at several times athletes are in accordance with. However, here we consider a contradiction to be in place due to common sense, in Gramscian terms.

15 *Advantage* obtained by scoring the first point.

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Perspective

Evolution of the Olympic Movement: Adapting to Contemporary Global Challenges

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Abstract: This paper explores the diverse impact of the Olympic Movement on society, emphasizing core values like 'excellence', 'friendship', and 'respect'. Traditionally, the Olympic Movement actively promotes global sport through initiatives such as Olympic education programs, instilling moral dimensions, cultural values, and essential life skills. Recent Olympic Games are scrutinized for their organizers' focus on safety, pandemic management, environmental sustainability, and gender equality. This paper addresses crucial policy options, spanning human rights, social inclusion through sport, and the pervasive issue of inactivity affecting public health. Noteworthy successes in leveraging sports for refugees and combating substance use disorders are discussed, alongside joint efforts by the World Health Organization and the International Olympic Committee, to combat inactivity and promote health through sports. Exploration of gender equality in the Olympic Movement recognizes challenges and suggests actions, including increasing female participation and addressing sexual harassment. The intersection of sports, climate change, and environmental responsibility is examined, with a focus on the ambitious 'climate-positive' goals of the Paris 2024 Olympics. However, since most of the IOC actions are rather symbolic and not substantial, many organizations are called upon to take active initiatives. Actionable recommendations urge countries to prioritize physical activity policies, organize exercise programs, and collaborate across sectors for health and environmental sustainability. The Olympic Games should focus on promoting mass sports participation, fostering positive attitudes, enhancing public health through sports, education, peace, and societal values, advocating for a holistic approach that champions ethical values, and promoting Olympic education to build a better world through sports.

Keywords: Olympic Games; Olympic values; health; inactivity; inclusion; gender equality; environment; sustainability

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1. Introduction

The fundamental values of the Olympic Movement have an essential influence on the organization of sport at national and international levels, the image of major sporting events and the impact they have on societies, and the philosophy of sport. Today, therefore, the Olympic Movement appears to consider three core Olympic values as important for its goals: 'excellence', 'friendship,' and 'respect'. Based on these, the Olympic Movement claims that it organizes its actions to promote sport and to disseminate it in culture and education for the benefit of a better world. The value of "excellence" wants to emphasize that competing athletes should constantly strive to become better, and this is an example that all people should follow in their daily lives, i.e., constantly strive to become better. 'Friendship' is also a dominant value in sport, as it is through sport that young people and people of all ages come closer together. Moreover, nations are also coming closer and cooperating, not only in sports venues and major sporting events but also in everyday

life on a political, economic, and social level. "Respect" wants to remind us that through sports, one learns to respect oneself, the opponents, the rules, the environment, and society, and, of course, everyone should do the same in their daily life (International Olympic Committee 2023a). Thus, Olympism, despite the negative criticism it receives, is considered to symbolically emanate a philosophy and a way of life for a peaceful, better world with fair play, understanding, solidarity, and honesty.

Olympic values are cultivated in many ways and one of them is through Olympic Education programs. The basic idea of Olympic education programs is to link the school with society and its institutions, emphasizing the humanistic and moral dimensions of Olympism. The programs aim to inspire and raise awareness among students and to promote positive attitudes and values, such as cooperation, empowerment, critical thinking, and non-discriminatory responsibility. These programs highlight the educational and cultural value of the Olympic Games. Sport, culture, Olympic Truce, fighting social exclusion, respect for multiculturalism, and volunteering are the key elements of these programs. Olympic education seeks to combine the cultivation of physical and social skills, life skills, and moral values, as well as raise awareness on gender equality, environmental protection, combating racism, etc. (Georgiadis 2010, 2020). However, Olympic education programs have not been developed as they should and are implemented sporadically for a short period before the Olympic Games by the host countries.

At each Olympiad, the organizers emphasize some of these Olympic values and define their actions. At the 2016 Rio Olympics, under the Olympic flag, ten refugee athletes participated, giving hope to people displaced by war and social unrest around the world. The IOC stated that it wanted to send the message that sports can bring people together in a spirit of friendship and respect without discrimination, that refugees are our fellow human beings and enrich society, and that they can contribute to society with their talent, skills, and strength of spirit (International Olympic Committee 2016a).

At the Tokyo Olympics, emphasis was placed on equality issues, as for the first time, pressure was put on countries to ensure greater representation of women in the event. Thus, for the first time, the participation of female athletes was 48% at the Olympic Games and 42% at the Paralympics (Tokyo 2020 2020).

The organizers of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games proclaimed their wish to use the event to highlight values that strengthen the cohesion of societies, improve health, contribute to social inclusion, and encourage everyone to take up sports (Paris 2024 2023a). Their aim is to halve the CO_2 emissions resulting from the event and to accelerate the pace of environmental transition in sport, considering climate and environmental concerns. For Paris 2024, using 95% of existing or temporary venues, they have chosen to minimize their environmental impact. Reducing the number of new construction projects means they are able to significantly reduce their carbon footprint and showcase the richness of French architecture. They also plan to use 100% renewable energy sources during the Games, a circular economy, sustainable food procurement, responsible digital technology, clean mobility solutions for the Olympic fleet, public transport and environmentally friendly transport for spectators, biodiversity protection, and water management (Paris 2024 2023a, 2023b).

In any case, many want to believe that sporting mega-events contribute to the idea of respect and exchange of ideas between countries, common celebration, reconciliation, mutual respect, and social peace. The concept of reconciliation through sport is linked to education, human rights, human dignity, and the improvement of human beings through their own efforts. When human rights violations occur in various parts of the world, the Olympic Movement has an obligation to intervene. The goals of the Olympic Movement are to put sport at the service of the harmonious development of human beings, the promotion of a peaceful society, and the protection of human dignity, and to contribute to building a better world by educating youth through sports in accordance with Olympism and its values (Georgiadis 2020).

Certainly, many doubts are constantly expressed about whether the Olympic Movement achieves its goals, whether it is on the right track, and how it should redefine its role given its significant global influence. The purpose of this work is to provide a new critical perspective adapted to the challenges of the current era on the trajectory of the Olympic Movement and to suggest new views, issues, policies, and actionable recommendations.

2. Bridging Divides: The Role of Sports in Advancing Human Rights and Social Inclusion

From human rights to social inclusion through sport. After the presentation of the Olympic Refugee Team in Rio, some refugee training programs began to appear. The primary objectives of these programs are to actively engage refugees in sports and foster their integration into society. Simultaneously, the initiatives aim to instill values such as respect for human rights, acceptance of diversity, intercultural communication, and the promotion of teamwork and cooperation, which transcend gender, race, religion, and cultural differences. The overarching goal is to advocate for equality and solidarity and combat racial discrimination and prejudice through the powerful medium of sports. The implementation of targeted intervention exercise programs has yielded positive outcomes, particularly in enhancing mental health within refugee reception centers (Filippou et al. 2024; Knappe et al. 2023). By leveraging the influence of sports, these initiatives contribute significantly to dismantling social barriers and fostering a sense of belonging for marginalized groups. Sports, in a broader context, wield the transformative power to facilitate social inclusion for various marginalized communities, with numerous success stories. Another example of inclusion in society relates to the integration of sports into recovery programs for individuals grappling with substance use disorders. The positive impact includes giving individuals opportunities to integrate into the world of sports within these programs, as well as stress and depression regulation, improved quality of life, heightened self-confidence, and enhanced self-esteem (Panagiotounis et al. 2022). Recognizing the potential and authority of the Olympic Movement, it could become a pivotal force capable of mobilizing states, institutions, and organizations at multiple levels to champion such inclusive efforts. The convergence of human rights, social inclusion, and sports not only strengthens communities but also serves as a beacon of change in challenging societal norms.

Beyond a few research studies in the area and isolated programs, there has been little progress on these issues. Social exclusion exists in sports, and high-performance and talented young athletes do not have an equal opportunity to reach the Olympic podium. Although today sport seems to be available for everyone and participation in sport is perceived as a human right, there are still some categories of people who have difficulty accessing it or are excluded from it. These excluded groups include ethnic minorities, poor people, persons with disabilities, older people, and sexual minorities. Several constraints, such as a poor social environment, lack of transport, lack of time, and fears for safety, are associated with this issue (Campos et al. 2024; Collins and Buller 2003; Collins and Kay 2003). It seems that the role of sports in social inclusion is still in its infancy.

Exercise as medicine and the problem of inactivity. Scientific evidence highlights the pervasive threat of inactivity to public health, with both children and adults failing to meet recommended physical activity guidelines (World Health Organization 2022). Governments worldwide are falling short in promoting systematic exercise, especially for women, older individuals, and adolescents, leading to a concerning decline in physical activity from age 15 to 25 (van Sluijs et al. 2021). People with disabilities are at increased risk due to low exercise levels (Ginis et al. 2021). Participation in physical activities is crucial for improving both physical and mental health. Adequate physical activity is linked to reduced all-cause mortality and increased life expectancy, and offers protection against various diseases, including cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and mental health conditions (Lee et al. 2022; Onerup et al. 2023). The global cost of health issues related to inactivity is estimated at approximately USD 47.6 billion annually (Santos et al. 2023). The growing movement of

"exercise is medicine" is supported by documented exercise prescription guidelines from the scientific community (American College of Sports Medicine 2022; Pedersen and Saltin 2015). Finally, studies during the pandemic showed that participation in physical activities was associated with lower rates of hospitalization, severe illness, and death associated with COVID (Ezzatvar et al. 2022). Despite the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommendations on physical activity, there is a notable gap in implementation (World Health Organization 2020a). Simple solutions, like walking, remain underutilized, even though studies link higher daily step counts to lower all-cause mortality (Jayedi et al. 2022; Saint-Maurice et al. 2020). Recognizing the urgency, the WHO and International Olympic Committee collaboratively committed to promoting health through sports and physical activity. Their joint initiatives aim to combat inactivity by integrating physical activity into daily life, leveraging technology, and promoting public health (World Health Organization 2020b). These organizations collectively provide guidance, education, and tools to health and sports organizations, striving to encourage broader participation in sports. The IOC, aligning with its 'Olympism 365' initiative, emphasizes the transformative power of sports in fostering global well-being. By strengthening the role of sport and aligning with Olympic values, this initiative advocates for health, education, gender equality, reduced inequality, sustainable communities, responsible consumption, climate action, peace, and justice (International Olympic Committee 2023b). We consider the issue of sedentary behavior a global problem. The IOC and WHO can simply remind people of it, but their initiatives are not sufficient. Many more stakeholders need to be involved in addressing this.

The Olympic Movement and gender equality: Navigating challenges. Aligned with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Goal 5 prioritizes achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls, advocating for the elimination of discrimination and violence (United Nations 2015). These concerns extend to the realm of sports, where, despite a growing number of women and girls participating, gender inequalities persist. Recognizing this challenge, institutions emphasize that enhancing access for women and girls in sports will positively impact society and public health (Council of Europe 2019). The IOC, in line with the Olympic Charter, urges international and national sports federations to develop action plans for increasing female participation. The Charter underscores the importance of promoting women in sports at all levels to uphold the principle of gender equality. National awareness campaigns and initiatives supporting gender equality in sports should be actively encouraged. Concrete examples of progress include the mixed 4×400 relay in the Tokyo Olympics and the upcoming mixed marathon relay in the Paris Olympics (International Olympic Committee 2023c). Addressing the pervasive issues of sexual harassment and abuse in sports, there is a collective call for those with responsibilities in sports to identify and prevent such behaviors, fostering a culture of dignity, respect, and safety (International Olympic Committee 2016b).

It is concerning that women and girls generally are less active than men and boys (World Health Organization 2022), and significant gaps persist between men and women regarding their involvement in sports and physical activities, as well as in the portrayal of elite sports in mass media and the management of sports governance. Additionally, for sexual minorities and other societal groups, the issue is even more pronounced. Furthermore, women with disabilities often face notably low rates of participation (Giulianotti 2018).

Sports, climate change, and environmental responsibility. The organizers of Paris 2024 have set forth ambitious environmental goals, aiming for a 'climate-positive' event. Acknowledging the profound impact of climate change and the vital role of physical activity in health, sports offer a unique platform to unite nations, enhance quality of life, promote healthy lifestyles, and foster social cohesion. However, climate change poses threats to athletes' health and performance, with extreme weather events impacting competitions. Major sporting events contribute significantly to the CO_2 footprint through factors like transportation, stadium construction, equipment manufacturing, and participant-generated waste. Despite this, sports possess unparalleled social reach, engaging billions of spectators globally. They can serve as catalysts for awareness, attitude change, and the promotion of

high-impact climate solutions (European Union 2023). In alignment with global climate efforts, the Olympic Games ought to be 'climate-positive,' reducing its carbon footprint. A relevant metanalysis indicated that climate change impacts physical activity at a worldwide scale and plays both a mitigation and an amplification role in climate change (Bernard et al. 2021). The Olympic Movement should contribute to public awareness and educate younger generations on global sustainability challenges, echoing its vision of building a better world through sport.

3. Redefining Olympism: Embracing Sustainability, Equality, and Active Lifestyles in the Modern Olympic Movement

A common critique often voiced is that most of the IOC initiatives are rather symbolic and lack substance. It is time for everyone to engage more systematically with modern global issues, such as social inclusion through sport, gender equality, physical inactivity, and climate change. The Olympic Games should promote mass sports participation and active lifestyles, support public health through sports, adopt a holistic approach that champions ethical values and anti-doping efforts, and redefine the principles of Olympic education. Scientists have highlighted the unique and powerful status of sport in society, particularly within the brave new world of global business. New challenges and threats to global sport have emerged, including the integrity of sporting competition, athlete welfare, discrimination, human rights, the impact on the environment, terrorism, and corporatization (Jackson and Dawson 2021).

Within the framework of the Olympic Movement and the prestige of the Olympic Games, numerous initiatives can be undertaken. For instance, in addressing issues of inactivity, an exemplary practice was introduced by the organizers of the Paris 2024 Olympics through the implementation of the engaging program "Get France Moving More". The program aims to get everyone in France moving more and is reaching, as a priority, schoolchildren, women, people with disabilities, senior citizens, and other groups who tend to be less active or socially excluded. Various initiatives have been implemented, such as moving more at school, moving more in cities, moving more at work, and swimming (Paris 2024 2024a). In combination with sustained social marketing campaigns to raise population awareness about physical activity, the original Olympic idea may provide a key leverage point for public health measures attempting to improve active lifestyles by fostering future widespread community participation in sports (Lange 2022). However, such categories of actions are usually temporary. The correct approach is for these initiatives to have permanent operation rather than operating only for certain months before and after the date of the Olympic Games in the hosting country.

Another significant advancement is the increasing participation of women athletes in the Olympics. Since their debut at the 1900 Paris Olympic Games, women have progressively become integral to the event. In the upcoming 2024 Games, an impressive 5250 female athletes will compete, comprising 50% of all participants. This marks a notable achievement in gender equality throughout the history of the Games (Paris 2024 2024b). However, the issue is not the ratio of men to women during the Games, but rather the real equal access to exercise spaces, the promotion of daily exercise for women and girls in all sports, and the implementation of WHO guidelines for an active lifestyle for all genders. All major organizations must contribute to this.

Sport can use its unique profile and platform to influence the attitudes of sports fans and consumers, to promote positive social and environmental action around the world, and to contribute to sustainable development in areas such as health and well-being, poverty, education, gender equality, decent work, responsible consumption, and climate action (McCullough et al. 2022). The Olympic Values Education Program (OVEP) aims to guide young people to find common ground and engage in activities that embrace the core Olympic values of Excellence, Respect, and Friendship and to focus on promoting universal participation in sports and physical activity, as well as the development of appropriate educational tools to engage and empower young people (International Olympic Committee

2016c). However, Olympic education programs have not been developed as they should and are implemented sporadically for a short period before the Olympic Games by the host countries. Olympism could be transformed into a philosophy that has the flexibility to be adapted to varying contexts and serve as a motivation for learning activities in all aspects of life (Binder 2012; Chatziefstathiou 2012). Education for sustainable development is essential and can be promoted through the Olympic Value Education Program (OVEP). The OVEP can act as a tool for sustainable development and has the potential to allow for the effective acquisition of sustainability capabilities (Park and Lim 2022). Now, it is time for this program to be enriched with new topics and initiatives against inactivity and other sustainable development goals.

The Olympic ideals can be seen as living concepts, regarding sports as a cultural and developmental pursuit for individuals who aspire to be well-balanced, educated, and ethical. This encompasses moral considerations and equality, aiming at the cultivation of virtuous dispositions (Parry 1998). The UNESCO initiative to actively engage in dialogue with the Olympic and Paralympic authorities and relevant stakeholders to identify synergies in a spirit of complementarity and to promote sport and Olympic values through already-launched initiatives on education, peace, quality physical education, social inclusion, dialogue, and respect for human rights, is of particular interest (UNESCO 2023).

4. Recommendations

The Global Status Report on Physical Activity (World Health Organization 2022) underscores the impending health challenges for nearly 500 million people from 2020 to 2030, which can be mitigated through increased physical activity. Countries must prioritize the development and implementation of policies, national guidelines, and monitoring systems for sports and physical activity across all age groups. It was suggested that organizations involved in sports could benefit from applying a deeper, more critical perspective to their activities (Giulianotti 2015) and that we need strategies that effectively lead large segments of the population to question and call for evidence-based planning, transparency, and accountability in sports (Coakley 2015). The shift of sports organizations towards promoting public health through sports and physical activity deserves support from everyone, and the critical analysis of social responsibility in sports deserves focused attention.

In the new era, more effort by policymakers, sports stakeholders, and civil society is needed to mobilize sports towards the goals of development and peace—such as gender empowerment, health promotion, education, poverty reduction, and conflict resolution—and to organize sports in socially and politically beneficial ways (Darnell 2018).

To combat inactivity, the IOC, sports organizations, and international bodies should focus on organizing exercise programs. National health systems must provide advice and support and adopt 'exercise as medicine' policies. Policymakers should employ behavioral theories to boost sports participation rates, utilizing Olympic-level athletes as ambassadors for WHO-recommended exercise programs. Sports and active lifestyle are interconnected with medicine, education, happiness, performance, business and innovation, history, society, culture, and politics. The development of appropriate policy and practice recommendations for sport and active living is crucial for making a more sustainable world (Millet and Giulianotti 2019).

Collaboration among environmental, urban planning, education, and recreation sectors is essential to promote physical activity, healthy lifestyles, and mobility. For example, designing or transforming urban environments to incorporate pedestrian-friendly spaces and cycling infrastructure is crucial for societal well-being, fostering environments that actively encourage and support an active lifestyle.

The Olympic Games present an opportune time for national campaigns promoting physical activity, as they attract millions of spectators, inspiring them to follow the examples of athletes to strive in sport and life. The two weeks of exposure to sports images and stories encourage viewers to engage in sports and have an impact on creating positive attitudes towards sports and physical activity (Sallis et al. 2016). It is time to leverage it

effectively, given the strong influence of TV and social media on shaping public opinion. The Olympic Movement should extend its focus beyond sports, emphasizing daily exercise for everyone. National Olympic Academies and Committees, policymakers, and sports organizations should champion social inclusion programs, exercise initiatives, and gender equality policies; promote exercise programs for health and quality of life; develop strategies for all age groups and individuals with disabilities to increase participation in sport; and introduce action plans and recommendations for educational, sporting, and governmental bodies. National government agencies can support policies to promote gender equality and greater sports participation for girls and women.

National Olympic Academies and Committees should utilize internet and mobile technologies to promote active lifestyles. They should also support school-based programs involving parents to encourage physical education, individualized activity plans, and active breaks to address sedentary behavior (van Sluijs et al. 2021; Edwardson et al. 2023).

Environmental sustainability efforts must align with sports mega-events and infrastructure projects, prioritizing walking and cycling access. Raising awareness of climate change, combined with health promotion through sports and physical activity, is a critical challenge for the next decade (Cain 2023). It has been proposed that to lower agency costs, the IOC should involve qualified third parties in host selection, clarify mandates in the Host City Contract, and introduce significant sanctions for failing to meet environmental objectives (Geeraert and Gauthier 2017). Finally, ethical values in sports, anti-doping efforts, and Olympic education should be integral goals for all Olympic Movement stakeholders, fostering a holistic approach to sports and societal well-being.

5. Conclusions

The Olympic Games have an important impact on societies. The prestige and momentum of the Olympic Games and the Olympic Movement have not been fully utilized up to now, as they can contribute to public health by promoting physical activity and supporting the implementation of similar initiatives by the World Health Organization. Mass participation in sports is a strategy not only for health promotion and disease prevention but also for education, peace, promoting the ideas of equality, acceptance, respect, tolerance, justice, and solidarity in society, as well as raising awareness of climate change issues. National Olympic Academies and Committees should encourage exercise programs for health and quality of life, promote strategies for all age groups, and develop action plans for educational, sporting, and governmental bodies. Given society's increasing concern for human rights and environmentally sustainable Olympic Games, the IOC will need to truly embrace and practice its core values to avoid increasing criticism about its complicity in prioritizing power and profit over human rights and the environment (Boykoff 2019; Chappelet 2021; Davidson and McDonald 2018; Geeraert and Gauthier 2017). The IOC and Olympics have a lot of potential to contribute to advancing health and education, improving equity, inclusion, and sustainability, and to global development and peace initiatives.

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Sport for Social Cohesion: Transferring from the Pitch to the Community?

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Abstract: European sport policies and programmes have increasingly focused on promoting social cohesion. Often presented as a multi-dimensional concept, social cohesion is considered the 'glue' that holds societies together and is seen as essential to addressing common challenges. However, the term remains contested, and it is not always clear how programmes conceptualize or support social cohesion. Thus, this paper explores how three European sport programmes conceptualize and foster social cohesion. Findings are generated from a thematic analysis of interviews, group discussions, observations and documents. The themes developed show how organizations adopt an individual-centerd view of social cohesion, focusing mainly on social relations, tolerance and mutual help. In turn, this translates to an individual-focused practice of social cohesion, emphasizing personal skills, behaviors, and social relations, with the transfer of social cohesion to the broader community left mostly in participants' hands. Due to a number of systemic barriers, programmes struggle to implement more holistic and structural approaches. As such, if we want to facilitate a move towards more structural or interventionist approaches, we as researchers must play an active role in questioning, challenging, and reshaping the systems that underpin sport-based social interventions.

Keywords: sport for development; social cohesion; social capital; social inclusion; Europe

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, social cohesion has gained increasing prominence as both an academic concept and policy objective (Moustakas 2022; Fonseca et al. 2019). The growing prominence of social cohesion has also translated to the field of sport, with numerous policies, programmes and researchers claiming to focus on the concept (Moustakas 2021; Svensson and Woods 2017; Schulenkorf et al. 2016). For instance, about 25% of sport for development (SFD) literature, and 10% of programmes, have been classified under the banner of social cohesion (Schulenkorf et al. 2016; Svensson and Woods 2017).

However, as Raw et al. (2021) note, the way social cohesion has been applied in sport "means that it is often used as a catch-all to describe a broad range of sociological concepts and that this has led to exaggerated claims about how well this area has been researched" (p. 19). Indeed, in one scoping review of 35 articles on sport for social cohesion, around half of the articles did not define the term (Moustakas and Robrade 2022). And when social cohesion is defined, it is often conflated with individual-focused ideas about social capital (Sabbe et al. 2020; Raw et al. 2021; Cubizolles 2015). In other words, though social cohesion is a broad and multi-dimensional concept, its application in literature is often reduced to a focus on the quantity and quality of individual social relationships.

Meanwhile, while the term is contested and debated in the general literature, research has been dominated by top-down, positivist definitions and measurements of social cohesion (Fonseca et al. 2019; Schiefer and van der Noll 2017; Bruhn 2009; Delhey et al. 2018). Together, this has allowed the concept of social cohesion to be taken for granted or, worse, let academics and policymakers impose their understandings on programmes and

communities, excluding the voices and experiences of local practitioners and participants (Raw et al. 2021; Bernard 1999).

To unpack the connections between sport and social cohesion, it is essential to explore individual experiences and the practice of social cohesion (Novy et al. 2012; Raw et al. 2021; Sabbe et al. 2019, 2020). Looking at the perspectives of practitioners and participants can help elucidate how social cohesion is understood in practice, how programmes work to support it and the assumptions underlying that practice. Against this background, this paper seeks to answer three related research questions: (1) how are social cohesion and its causes defined within European sport for social cohesion programmes; (2) what practices or activities do these programmes employ to promote social cohesion; and (3) how do programmes support social cohesion in their broader communities? In the following, I present the results of qualitative research carried out with three European sport for social cohesion programmes. Exploring these different contexts can help unearth potential commonalities, shared struggles and differences, thus contributing to ongoing discussions around the meaning and practice of social cohesion in sport.

Moving forward, this paper progresses in four steps. First, I will discuss some of the existing literature focusing on the understanding and experience of social cohesion in sport. Second, I will present the organisations I worked with and the overall methodology. Third, I will present the themes resulting from my analysis and discuss these against the broader social cohesion literature. Finally, I will conclude by suggesting potential research avenues in this area.

2. Sport and Social Cohesion at the Community Level

The concept of social cohesion has a long and complex intellectual history that dates at least to the 19th century and has since continuously been influenced by the assumptions and boundaries of various scientific disciplines, from political science to sociology, to psychology, to anthropology, to the health sciences (Bruhn 2009; Spaaij 2013; Kearns and Forrest 2000; Taylor and Davis 2018; Fonseca et al. 2019; Schiefer and van der Noll 2017; Dragolov et al. 2016). In turn, this has led social cohesion to be conceptualized with a wide array of dimensions, including shared values, shared experiences, civic participation, mutual help, trust in others, place identification, perception of fairness, social networks, social order, acceptance of diversity, well-being, equality and social mobility (OECD 2011; Bruhn 2009; Fonseca et al. 2019; Schiefer and van der Noll 2017; Jenson 1998; Delhey and Dragolov 2016; Moustakas 2022).

The multi-disciplinary and contested nature of the term has spurred numerous researchers and policymakers to attempt to summarize or (re)define the term. These efforts have led to either maximalist, all-encompassing definitions, or more narrow conceptualizations. On the maximalist side, Fonseca et al. (2019) proposed a model that incorporates ideas of well-being, belonging, social participation, tolerance and equal opportunities. In this view, all elements representing or contributing to social cohesion are mapped in a framework at the individual, community and institutional levels. Likewise, many prominent policy definitions take similar views, integrating a wide range of dimensions, including inequality, well-being and social mobility (OECD 2011; Council of Europe 2010). These expansive definitions have, however, been critiqued for including dimensions that may be better characterised as antecedents or consequences of social cohesion (Friedkin 2004; Moustakas 2022; Chan et al. 2006; Schiefer and van der Noll 2017).

The goal here, however, is not to adjudicate the definitions or conceptualizations of social cohesion. Suffice it to say, despite the variety of definitions and understandings, at a minimum, literature on social cohesion revolves around three core components: a sense of identity or belonging, social relations and orientation towards the common good (Schiefer and van der Noll 2017; Dragolov et al. 2016). Namely, social relations refer to the quality, tolerance and trust within different social networks. A sense of belonging denotes feelings of attachment or identity towards a social or geographic entity. Orientation towards the common good connects to ideas of mutual help, the feelings of responsibility towards others

and an acceptance of the social order (cf. Schiefer and van der Noll 2017). Likewise, literature around sport and social cohesion tends to coalesce around social relations, a sense of belonging, and an orientation towards the common good (Moustakas and Robrade 2022).

More critically, the debates on social cohesion are dominated by top-down and positivist approaches to defining and measuring the term. Discussions on the appropriate definition of the term are primarily located within the policy and academic spheres (Schiefer and van der Noll 2017; Chan et al. 2006; Fonseca et al. 2019), while measurement tends to rest on the positivist application of survey and statistical tools (Delhey et al. 2018; Delhey and Dragolov 2016; Langer et al. 2017).

Within sport-related literature, many scholars use more constructionist or critical qualitative approaches to explore the logic, assumptions and practices embedded within specific programmes (e.g., van der Veken et al. 2021; Trejo et al. 2018). However, there has been relatively little literature grappling with the understanding and practice of social cohesion within sport for social change programmes (Sabbe et al. 2020; Raw et al. 2021). And this, despite social cohesion being presented as a crucial organizing concept within programmes (Svensson and Woods 2017), literature (Schulenkorf et al. 2016) and policy (Moustakas 2021). Thus, the following analysis aims to summarize and contextualize the relevant sport literature exploring social cohesion within different contexts.

Indeed, there is a small but growing body of work exploring the understanding, experience and practice of social cohesion, in the sport context. Here, notions of social relations, tolerance, the acceptance of diversity and a sense of belonging are omnipresent, with many studies or organizations focusing on minority or migrant groups (Cockburn 2017; Kelly 2011; Raw et al. 2021; Sabbe et al. 2019, 2020; Meir and Fletcher 2019). For example, many programmes focus explicitly on helping diverse adults and young people forge social relations and build trust (Kelly 2011; Cockburn 2017; Fehsenfeld 2015).

In the above literature, there is a recognition of some of the structural aspects of social cohesion, such as socioeconomic inequality or relations to public institutions, and the need to improve the overall conditions of participants. Still, many organizations and individual practitioners struggle to negotiate these more structural aspects. In an account of their struggles implementing a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach within a sport for social cohesion programme, Meir and Fletcher (2019) document how unclear programme goals and a lack of support for the participants' day-to-day struggles inhibited their efforts. Likewise, within programme activities, practitioners face challenges integrating structural components such as inequality or systemic racism, often focusing instead on a narrower set of individual-focused approaches and social cohesion goals (Sabbe et al. 2020; Flensner et al. 2020).

Because of this, many programmes have the effect of placing high amounts of responsibility on the shoulders of their predominantly 'vulnerable' target groups. Sabbe et al. (2020) note this explicitly as a theme in their research, whereby many practitioners believe that "participants can transcend their living circumstances, as long as they continuously engage themselves in activities" (p. 266). Likewise, Cockburn (2017) notes how minority youth are often put in the position of intermediaries between adult members of their ethnic group and the majority group. In a cumulative sense, these individual-focused programmes risk de-emphasizing structural factors and instead highlight perceived individual deficits (Kelly 2011).

3. The Project and the Organisations

The three organizations highlighted in this study are, first and foremost, united by their shared participation in a European Social Cohesion Project. Launched at the start of 2021, the project brings together partners from the NGO, university and advocacy sectors to promote social cohesion in diverse settings and support practitioners delivering sport for social cohesion programmes. Recognizing current debates and gaps around social cohesion, the project set out to explicitly explore and understand the definition of social cohesion embedded in the respective communities. Supporting that goal, the project

implements a living lab approach (see, e.g., Galway et al. 2022; European Network of Living Labs 2021) to directly engage programme participants, generate an understanding of the elements that promote social cohesion in a sport setting and to co-create relevant tools to allow for the exploration, understanding and improvement of social cohesion outcomes. Formally, living labs are understood as "user-centred, open innovation ecosystems based on systematic user co-creation approach, integrating research and innovation processes in real-life communities and settings" (European Network of Living Labs 2021). This living lab approach also provided a valuable, participatory framework to engage practitioners and participants in the research documented here.

Three organizations from Ireland, Germany and the Netherlands are the focus of this paper. All three have a longstanding involvement in delivering sport for social cohesion activities in their respective urban communities. The Irish organization, which has been in place for over 20 years, focuses on combatting racism and providing opportunities to various groups across their city, including working-class youth, refugees and immigrants. To do so, they host a range of weekly sport sessions, regular festival-type events, and thematic workshops in public and community facilities. In the Netherlands, the organization has worked with municipal and non-governmental stakeholders for over three years and attempts to reach diverse groups, including immigrant parents and their children, through regular sport, cultural and artistic activities. These activities vary according to the partners or stakeholders involved and reach a wide range of target groups to foster familiarity and social encounters. Finally, the German organization operates directly in local primary schools and is integrated into the regular curricula. Concretely, this means that students in these schools participate in the programme once a week for all four years of their primary education. Through this, they use modified sports and games to support interaction between the children as well as develop emotional and intercultural competences.

These organizations were chosen as they not only work on a common objective but also represent the diversity of target groups and settings. In particular, these organizations work across the community, club and school settings that are inherent to many European sport for social cohesion programmes, or sport for development projects more broadly (Moustakas et al. 2021; Svensson and Woods 2017). In addition, these organizations are embedded in numerous pan-European projects and initiatives and exchange regularly with programmes, NGOs, higher education and youth. This engagement gives the organizations a chance to influence and be influenced, suggesting that their views and approaches relative to social cohesion did not emerge in isolation but through iterative and longstanding interaction with the larger European SFD ecosystem. As such, the targeted organizations are likely to provide a suitable basis for developing comparable or transferable findings.

4. Methodology

4.1. Design and Research Background

This study is based on a mix of interviews, focus group discussions, documents and observations that explore how the three European sport programmes conceptualize and act to support social cohesion in their communities. The qualitative design of this study and explicit focus on social cohesion were chosen to center the perspectives and experiences within the programmes. Thus, I situate this research somewhere between the constructionist and transformative paradigms. In other words, for this topic, I understand social reality and knowledge as perspective and context-dependent, and I also recognize that cultural, historical and political forces influence our knowledge and reality (Mertens 2007; Chilisa 2020; Braun and Clarke 2022). Having said that, I hesitate to fully align with the transformative paradigm, as the interactive link between the researcher and participants in defining the problem was not fully realized (Mertens 2007).

My background differs from many of those involved in the programmes and this research. As a white, male, cisgender, heterosexual Canadian immigrant living and working in Germany, I come from a position of relative privilege and affluence. Still, my experiences moving within and between countries as a child and young adult—sometimes by choice,

sometimes not—influence my perspectives on this topic. I have felt varying levels of belonging, trust and identity within the often changing (sport) communities I inhabited, giving this topic a somewhat personal resonance. Professionally, I have also worked on the design, implementation and evaluation of sport for development programmes, at the NGO and academic levels. Combined, these experiences influence my perspectives on this topic and, hopefully, provide me with insight to ask pertinent questions and explore relevant topics.

4.2. Data Collection

For interviews, participants were recruited from individuals and stakeholders involved, either now or in the past, with the three targeted organizations. These individuals were targeted as they could provide a range of insights into the targeted organizations, including from the perspective of managers, coaches and (former) participants. Previous professional connections, as well as connections through the project, facilitated many of these contacts. In other words, a mix of convenience and snowball sampling approaches were used. In general, participants were either approached at events, meetings, via e-mail or through other contacts. This allowed me to reach various participants and stakeholders but also restricted my ability to reach certain groups in certain locations (e.g., programme participants in the Netherlands). Before each interview, I explained the general purpose of the research to the participants and assured them that their statements would remain anonymous. Verbal and/or written consent was obtained for all interviews, and the participating organizations provided written support for this research beforehand. Ethics approval was also obtained from my university for this research. When logistically feasible, interviews or discussions were recorded with a digital recorder, and participant approval was obtained to do so.

In total, 24 individuals participated in interviews (n = 20) or group discussions (n = 4) between April 2021 and June 2022. These interviews occurred during site visits to the organizations, as well as during project meetings and through scheduled online interviews. As such, interviews took place in a number of settings, including at cafés, offices, community centers, during neighborhood walks or online. These interviews sought to generate conversations that would help unearth how individuals understand and experience the programmes, social cohesion and the perceived links between the programme and social cohesion (cf. Smith and Sparkes 2019). Of note, participants were asked about the goal and structure of the programme, their programme's understanding of social cohesion and the status of social cohesion in their communities. For the German context, a research assistant facilitated or co-facilitated discussions with seven individuals. To ensure consistency and quality, the interview guidelines were reviewed with the RA, and the first two interviews were co-facilitated to provide practice and feedback opportunities. Notes were taken following each interview, and verbatim transcripts were produced for most, though some interviews could not be recorded due to external factors (e.g., loud public spaces, weather conditions). An overview of interview participants is provided in Table 1.

Complementing these interviews, I visited, observed and interacted with the organizations throughout the project, including through meetings (5), sport or other activity sessions (20) and site visits (6). My presence as a researcher was always known and explicit, and I oscillated between passive and active observation depending on the setting and occasion. At times, I was largely on the sidelines and passively watched (e.g., a sport workshop, a meeting between local stakeholders), while at other moments, I played a more active role (e.g., playing football, coordinating a project meeting). This participation and observation gave me a first-hand glimpse of how the organization's views on social cohesion translated to their everyday activities and a better sense of their overall approach. In addition, this provided me with an opportunity for numerous smaller, informal interactions with various participants and stakeholders, thus bringing in numerous complementary perspectives. During and following these interactions or observations, I took notes to document the physical environment, participants, exchanges, activities and my personal reflections.

Further observations were also made by a research assistant, who regularly visited the German programme over six months. Finally, I obtained access to several programme documents, including manuals, activity guides, presentations, evaluations and project notes, and these further helped organize and contextualize my analysis. These documents were obtained through searches of organization webpages as well as through communications with interviewees and other programme members. Along with the programme websites themselves, these documents included activity handbooks (two), presentations (six), external communication materials (two), and internal research documents (three).

Table 1. Overview and description of interview participants.

Pseudonym	Country	Gender	Age	Group	Description
Tommy	Ireland	Male	18–30	Minority	Former participant, current coach.
Pedro	Ireland	Male	18–30	Minority	Former participant, current coach within programme.
Line	Ireland	Female	18–30	Minority	Former participant, current coach and coordinator.
Amy	Ireland	Female	18–30	Minority	Former participant and coach, current member of management team.
Alan	Ireland	Male	18–30	Minority	Former participant and coach.
Bernard	Ireland	Male	50+	Majority	Current member of management team.
Kelly	Ireland	Female	50+	Majority	Current member of management team.
Ben	Ireland	Male	50+	Majority	Former member of management team.
Fred	Netherlands	Male	50+	Majority	Current member of management team.
Charlie	Netherlands	Female	18–30	Majority	Current member of management team.
Marie	Netherlands	Female	50+	Majority	Current member of management team.
Merle	Netherlands	Female	50+	Majority	Current municipality staff member.
Vina	Netherlands	Female	30–50	Majority	Current member of management team.
Lisa	Netherlands	Female	30–50	Majority	Current municipality staff member.
Max	Netherlands	Male	30–50	Majority	Current coach and coordinator.
James	Germany	Male	30–50	Majority	Current member of management team.
Alicia	Germany	Female	18–30	Majority	Current member of management team
Tina	Germany	Female	18–30	Majority	Current coach and member of management team
Maike	Germany	Female	18–30	Majority	Current coach within the programme.
Alexandra	Germany	Female	18–30	Majority	Current coach within the programme.
Annika	Germany	Female	18–30	Majority	Current coach within the programme.
Katrin	Germany	Female	18–30	Majority	Current coach within the programme.
Johannes	Germany	Male	30–50	Majority	Current school staff member
Leonie	Germany	Female	50–30	Majority	Current school staff member

4.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke 2022). RTA offered the possibility to develop an analysis that allowed me to give voice to the perspectives and experiences of on-the-ground stakeholders often left out of discussions about social cohesion. At the same time, this approach allowed me to locate and analyze these experiences against existing literature and concepts relating to sport and social cohesion, and identify patterned meanings.

I primarily used the MaxQDA 2022 to organize my data, write memos, develop codes, and generate themes. Throughout, I maintained documents to diarize my thought processes and reflections and tracked all interactions with the respective organizations in a separate table (Nowell et al. 2017). These documents, combined with extensive handwritten notes, form the basis of an extensive audit trail meant to enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the analysis. Overall, the analysis followed the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022), though this process is inherently recursive and iterative.

First, I familiarized myself with the dataset, reading and re-reading transcripts, interview notes, observation notes, and programme documents. Throughout, I took memos associated with specific data items and separately compiled thoughts, impressions and reflections related to the entire dataset.

As a second step, I coded the interview transcripts and observation notes. Codes were primarily developed inductively, though they were influenced by existing literature on the conceptualization of social cohesion and the delivery of sport for social cohesion programmes. The codes captured a wide range of semantic (e.g., types of activities delivered by programmes) and latent (e.g., assumptions embedded in certain activities) concepts. The initial coding process generated over 75 codes, and I generated a short definition to accompany each code. However, some of these codes captured minor nuances. As such, before moving to the third step of theme identification, I revised, reviewed and merged codes, to avoid duplication or exceedingly small distinctions. Concretely, that meant reviewing coded segments and code definitions, merging similar codes and adjusting definitions, accordingly.

Once this was finished, I moved on to the process of theme development. Here, themes should be understood as coherent patterns "of shared meaning organised around a central concept" (Braun and Clarke 2022, p. 77). To develop these, I reviewed code excerpts and used in-built visual tools (e.g., code maps, code relations) to explore patterns and connections across the data. In particular, I used the MaxMaps function to draw my thematic maps, organize codes, and identify patterns of meaning. In other words, these maps helped clarify the relationship between codes and between themes (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2022; Trainor and Bundon 2021). This process fed into the fourth and fifth steps, as I revised my thematic maps, refined my themes, wrote theme summaries and eventually settled on the themes presented here. Finally, the sixth step involved the actual writing of the results, which are presented in the sections below. As this paper focuses specifically on the understanding and practice of social cohesion, I concentrate on three themes related to the understanding and delivery of social cohesion through sport.

5. Findings

Based on the process described above, I generated three themes that illustrate how the programmes conceptualize and support social cohesion: "together with appreciation", "the skills to come together . . . for some", and "what you do is up to you". Together, these themes illustrate how the programmes adopt an individual-focused understanding and practice of social cohesion, placing significant responsibility for the development and transfer of social cohesion onto so-called vulnerable groups. In that sense, the notion of an individual-focused social cohesion can be described as the central organizing concept of the analysis, and the themes demonstrate how this individual focus translates to the conceptualization, implementation and, perhaps most crucially, the transfer of social cohesion outcomes. In the below section, the main findings, supporting quotes and related analysis are all presented together. As such, this should be understood as a qualitative report that combines results and discussions, and allows the results to be situated in the context of wider research and theory (Braun and Clarke 2022).

5.1. Together with Appreciation

This first theme exemplifies the core ideas embedded in the programmes' understanding of social cohesion, and contributes to answering the first research question. Though academic literature often presents social cohesion as a contested term (Fonseca et al. 2019; Schiefer and van der Noll 2017), the responses here show a high level of consistency. Participants did not always spontaneously bring up social cohesion, and not everyone felt completely secure defining the term. Nonetheless, the answers did coalesce around common areas. For the people here, social cohesion can be summarized as peaceful social relations based on an appreciation of diversity that breeds a sense of identity and networks of mutual support.

> *"A peaceful, appreciative interaction of several groups of our society, from any dimension of the diversity model, with different backgrounds"* (Transcript, James, Management, Germany)

> *"When talking about social cohesion, she mentions networks of people that help each other out"* (Interview Notes, Vina, Management, Netherlands)

> *"Social cohesion is about people living together, isn't it? About getting on together, about having areas where they can better themselves, isn't it? And learning from each other."* (Transcript, Kelly, Management, Ireland)

To some extent, this consistency may even suggest that debates about the meaning of social cohesion have been overinflated by policymakers and academics, and these conceptual debates may not resonate with practitioners on the ground. One interesting contrast with many current definitions (cf. Schiefer and van der Noll 2017) is the general aversion to the term "tolerance". Across these responses, individuals explicitly go beyond the notion of tolerance and instead favor ideas of appreciation or respect. Essentially, many view tolerance as having a negative connotation, that people only tolerate things they inherently do not like them: "I hate this word tolerant, I would say more respectful. Because I think tolerant is a negative" (Transcript, Bernard, Management, Ireland).

Despite this relatively consistent and progressive view of social cohesion, a strong individual or micro focus underpins this understanding. This manifests itself in two ways. First, structural meso or macro level items in other definitions of social cohesion, such as inequality, the perceptions of fairness, social mobility or trust in institutions (Schiefer and van der Noll 2017; Delhey and Dragolov 2016; OECD 2011), are mostly absent. Certainly, some participants connect greater social cohesion with notions of greater equality, but this is not the norm: "it's to stop racism and discrimination and bring equality among us" (Transcript, Alan, Former Participant/Coach, Ireland).

Second, the underlying causes of social cohesion, or a lack thereof, are viewed as primarily the result of individual characteristics. In particular, there are strong ideas about discrimination and prejudice being rooted in individual attitudes or behaviors and that these individual characteristics must be addressed. Thus, these organizations do not explicitly take a systemic view of racism or discrimination, whereby these are not merely surface-level phenomena rooted in ignorance or hate but a system driven by the self-interest of particular groups (Feagin 2013; Kendi 2019). Documents often highlight goals such as "intercultural competence" (Handbook, Germany) or "life skills" (Handbook, Ireland). Within interviews, discrimination or racism are likewise perceived as a matter of individual attitudes, behavior and upbringing:

> *"There needs to be more awareness (. . .) Like, it all starts with from home. Yeah, like parents."* (Transcript, Alan, Former Participant/Coach, Ireland)

> *"[When] I don't like someone else because it's actually something in me."* (Transcript, Tina, Management/Coach, Germany)

In other words, these illustrate how the programmes define this core element of social cohesion and reveal how they perceive the root causes of social cohesion. Likewise, other issues, such as a perceived lack of social skills, are viewed as a product of individual environments and not systemic issues. As I will discuss next, this individual-focused understanding of social cohesion and its causes translates directly to the type of activities or mechanisms favored by the programmes.

5.2. The Skills to Come Together . . . for Some

As social cohesion is seen as closely connected to social relations and individual attitudes or behaviors within those social relations, programmes consciously provide opportunities for mutual interactions and the development of the perceived skills needed to promote social cohesion. In other words, as the antecedents of social cohesion are conceptualized on an individual level, activities to promote social cohesion are as well. For one, this means establishing regular sporting activities that target various community members and emphasizing an open atmosphere. These activities seek to bring different groups together and allow participants to form bonds across ethnic or geographic divides. For instance, I actively participated in a weekly open football session hosted by the Irish

organization, and I also took part in an activity session for parents and children hosted by the Dutch organization. This, of course, is hardly a new approach within the SFD sphere, as the ideas around using sport as a platform for mixed-group interaction are well established (cf. Schulenkorf and Sherry 2021). And, certainly, for some participants, this had an apparent effect on building up their social networks: "that's pretty much what stands out to me, because, you know, just get to make new friends" (Transcript, Pedro, Coach, Ireland).

Alongside these mixed group activities, the organizations implement a variety of modified sports or games that are used to develop a range of life skills, such as communication skills, emotional competences, or intercultural awareness, considered essential for greater social cohesion. The German organization explicitly integrates games and activities meant to develop intercultural or emotional competences, whereas the Irish and Dutch organizations occasionally use modified sport approaches, including football matches based on the football3 methodology (see Fox et al. 2013): "[the project] uses sport and exercise as pedagogical tools to promote the emotional, social and intercultural skills of the participating children" (Handbook, Germany).

Crucially, these activities do not merely focus on the individual level but mostly on only certain individuals. Interviewees or documents variously described the target groups of their programmes as "immigrants", "refugees", "asylum seekers", "vulnerable", or "socially weak". During my observations, I was similarly struck by the absence of majority group participants in activities. As a result, the interactions promoted within the activities tend to be predominantly 'outgroup-outgroup' oriented. Though these programmes rely on intergroup contact, the contact generated does not align with the ingroup-outgroup mix initially suggested by Allport (1954) but instead focuses on bringing minorities from different groups together: "this was actually brought up by one person (. . .) they said that like, the team could also be perceived as grouping those that are different together" (Transcript, Amy, Management, Ireland).

This is largely by design. All of the organizations have made conscious choices to work in neighborhoods with particular demographic characteristics, or have designed activities meant to target specific groups that are seen as lacking certain skills or opportunities. The Dutch organization may be the most explicit about this. They work in what they consider highly "diverse" neighborhoods (Presentation, Netherlands) and aim to bring disparate ethnic groups together to form bonds and networks of mutual support: "the neighbourhood is diverse, but bigger ethnic groups don't interact with each other, and smaller groups are left out" (Interview Notes, Charlie and Marie, Management, Netherlands).

On the one hand, this outgroup focus reflects the explicit focus on vulnerable or marginalised groups inherent to many European sport or social cohesion policies (Dobbernack 2014; Moustakas 2021). On the other hand, this may reflect an implicit or explicit recognition that focusing on building relationships between diverse groups, especially amongst outgroups, may seem less threatening to the majority population or institutions, as this divorces them from any need to reflect on, engage with, or take responsibility for issues in their communities (Ahmadi 2018; Nixon 2019).

That is not to say that these activities did not generate improved social relations or skill development among participating individuals. Increasing instances of mutual help and emotional communication were noted throughout observations in Germany. For instance, over time, observations noted the children offering help or support to others, be it with tasks such as cleaning up or assisting distressed peers. Nonetheless, by concentrating almost solely on these "vulnerable groups", programmes may reinforce notions that these groups are primarily responsible for any perceived lack of social cohesion and, in turn, discount the role played by privileged ingroups or institutions (Nixon 2019).

5.3. What You Do Is up to You

Embedded in social cohesion are notions of a broader community of people than those involved in an organization or programme. The very nature of the term suggests

that it manifests itself not only at the individual or small group level but at the meso or macro levels (Fonseca et al. 2019). Thus, how programme outcomes transfer and manifest themselves in the community could be expected to be a key concern for these organizations. After all, the programmes are relatively explicit about having goals at the meso or macro levels, be it to "contribute to more social cohesion" (Presentation, Netherlands) or "challenge discrimination" throughout Ireland (Presentation, Ireland). However, as their understanding of social cohesion is related to a number of individual skills and attitudes, the development or transfer of social cohesion to the broader community is often left in the hands of individual participants. In other words, individual participants move from being the core focus of programme activities to being ostensibly left to their own devices—the programme is, simply put, no longer part of the equation. Despite this, there is an expectation or hope that participants will carry programme outcomes to their wider communities and foster greater social cohesion. Likewise, the programmes do not take sustained action at the advocacy or policy levels to help change the underlying conditions faced by participants. Essentially, the programmes adopt a 'ripple effect' type approach, whereby a focus on individual beneficiaries is expected to spread out to further layers of society (cf. Sugden 2010).

To varying degrees, programmes place responsibility for the development of social cohesion in the community on the shoulders of their participants. For some, there is a more laissez-faire approach where programmes might provide an initial platform to support the development of social relations or skills as a starting point. Afterwards, practitioners hope for further development to be led by participants outside of the programme context:

> *"[The goal is] to connect with youth to let them see the power of sports (. . .) and hopefully that they host their own sports activities"* (Observation Notes, Netherlands)

> *"However, if individuals take those connections or friendships beyond those events is 'up to them'"* (Interview Notes, Line, Coach, Ireland)

Others are more explicit about placing responsibility directly on the individual participants. In particular, this is seen within the notion that specific skills or behaviors are essential to personal success and greater social cohesion: "if I start with my emotional competencies, the social competencies will grow, for sure. And I think this is the best approach to foster social cohesion" (Transcript, Tina, Coach/Management, Germany). Such statements not only reflect the idea that the causes of social cohesion reside within individual behaviors or skills, but also show how the responsibility for improved social cohesion is implicitly placed on changed individual behaviors.

For many, this focus on individual development and transfer can be connected to the limitations faced by their programmes. For instance, some in the German programme feel conflicted about the school setting. Though this offers regular contact with the children over four years, it is also a very structured and controlled setting that reduces opportunities for informal contact: "in the programme, I often feel that some [participants] don't have enough time or attention" (Focus Group Notes, Annika, Coach, Germany). Funding and related issues in staff turnover are also a recurring topic and are noted as critical limiting factors for the programmes: "you know, is there more that can be done? Definitely. But again, it comes down to how much money you have, how much you can finance into these projects" (Transcript, Line, Coach, Ireland).

6. Discussion

Through the three themes developed here, I have shown how the programmes adopt an individual-focused definition and practice of social cohesion, placing significant expectations on individuals to develop social cohesion in their communities while not necessarily providing support outside the programme context. The first theme highlights how the organizations have adopted a fairly consistent view of social cohesion that centers on peaceful social relations and appreciation of diversity that promote a sense of identity and networks of mutual support. This understanding likewise highlights how individual

factors are viewed as the main source of that social cohesion. The second theme builds on that and shows how programmes implement practices that aim to develop the individual characteristics seen as essential to social cohesion. This theme also exemplifies how they target groups, like migrants or minorities, who are perceived as lacking these characteristics. Finally, the third theme highlights how programmes expect individuals to take responsibility for social cohesion in their broader communities. Flowing from this analysis, there are both theoretical and research implications worth noting.

Theoretically, these themes hint toward a tension between meso or macro-level concepts, such as inequality or trust in institutions, present in academic or policy conceptualizations of social cohesion and those at the programme level (cf. OECD 2011; Schiefer and van der Noll 2017; Fonseca et al. 2019; Council of Europe 2010). This signals that different conceptualizations exist in practice and perhaps gives further credence to the argument that broad definitions of social cohesion conflate the causes of social cohesion with factors that inhibit or promote social cohesion (Chan et al. 2006). Though there were nuances between individual and programme understandings of social cohesion, these differences were relatively minute and indicate that, in practice, the term is not nearly as contested as within the literature. As such, this highlights the need to continue exploring how local practitioners and participants understand and experience social cohesion within their communities, as opposed to simply taking existing top-down definitions for granted.

More broadly, the findings, along with those in the literature documented above (Flensner et al. 2020; Kelly 2011; Sabbe et al. 2020), show a common focus on individual-level outcomes and processes. Thus, the "vulnerable groups" targeted are expected to support social cohesion independently, although the programmes seldom acknowledge or challenge the systemic discrimination or inequality that may limit that cohesion in the first place. To an extent, as the interviewees recognize, this is driven by funding, material and structural constraints. Paradoxically, the programmes also engage in many activities aimed at working beyond the individual level, even though they recognize these limitations. Namely, the organizations are well-established in their communities, primarily operate outside of the much-critiqued project-based approach (Lindsey 2017), work with a variety of local stakeholders, including higher education institutions and municipal officials, and are developing an increasingly participatory culture through the implementation of a living lab approach.

Despite these efforts, programmes have struggled to develop more structural approaches called for by numerous researchers over the last decade. Many have advocated for structural or transformative approaches that move beyond a micro-level focus to combat the exclusionary mechanisms faced by participants, emphasize social justice and empower individuals to succeed within existing social systems, while also actively working for change (Giulianotti 2011; Hartmann and Kwauk 2011; Sabbe et al. 2021). On a practical level, this can mean having programmes work with groups beyond those deemed "socially vulnerable" populations. As it stands, the constant focus on only marginalised groups reinforces notions that these groups are primarily responsible for their condition (Nixon 2019). Programmes should move away from a practice of social cohesion that singles out supposedly challenging groups for change (Dobbernack 2014; Dierckx et al. 2022). A more structural approach might mean integrating groups associated with privilege or wealth within activities or, as Sanders (2016) contends, taking a more prominent role in the realms of advocacy and policy.

Yet, the convergence of approaches also likely suggests that broader, pan-European systemic factors may be pushing programmes towards similar, micro-level approaches. That means that, as researchers, we must not only thoroughly describe what a structural programme approach could look like but also research, challenge and support systems that can underpin such structural approaches. As a start, that may mean more deeply interrogating existing structures and questioning how sport can challenge or change those structures. In that sense, I very much echo the call from Darnell and Millington (2019), who argue that sport sociology should interrogate and foreground power relations in policy

and practice. Along this vein, there are numerous avenues worth pursuing related to sport and social cohesion. Policy and related funding mechanisms often have a narrow focus on pre-defined groups and advocate for primarily neoliberal, technical, and individual-focused mechanisms (Moustakas 2021; Hayhurst 2009). There remains a need to understand how those receiving funding reflect on, adjust to and challenge the assumptions embedded within these funding programmes and associated policies (Hayhurst 2009). Such exploration should not be limited to international or European policy, as has been the case so far (e.g., Hayhurst 2009; Moustakas 2021; Lindsey and Darby 2019), and should look more closely at national and institutional policies and funding mechanisms.

The pedagogy of sport-based social interventions should also be researched and interrogated more closely. Indeed, numerous authors have questioned sport-based social interventions and have proposed more critical curricula or approaches (Spaaij and Jeanes 2013; Meir 2022). Many studies have also explored the development, tensions and power dynamics associated with critical pedagogical approaches (Meir 2022). Yet the content and logic embedded in the growing number of education programmes, online courses (McSweeney et al. 2021) and practitioner manuals (e.g., Scott et al. 2020; Jobse et al. 2019) should likewise be questioned. These educational programmes and materials are increasingly prominent, directly influence the practice of programmes on the ground, and often reproduce neoliberal and individual-focused approaches and understandings. As researchers, we must critically reflect on how such neoliberal approaches have been reproduced at scale through these materials, especially considering that academics are often integrated into developing and delivering such educational content. In short, when we are called upon to contribute to developing policy or educational materials, we must consciously work to combat these neoliberal tendencies and instead focus on concepts of equality, social justice and system change.

7. Limitations and Conclusions

There are certainly limitations in the above analysis. The voices of participants are largely missing from this research. Yet, their understanding and experience of social cohesion and their programmes are essential to unpack how sport-based social interventions can contribute to social cohesion. Relatedly, the multi-organizational approach used here certainly carries benefits in terms of analysis and comparison, but it inhibits the in-depth immersion inherent to research contained in a single location, especially as it relates to relationships directly with participants.

Despite this, this study supports trends highlighted in existing literature, whereby sport-based programmes take a predominantly individual view on social cohesion and its development. Namely, the programmes focus mainly on components connected to social relations, appreciation of diversity, identity, and mutual help. In turn, this translates to an individual-focused practice of social cohesion, emphasizing individual skills, behaviors and social relations, with the transfer of social cohesion to the broader community left mainly in participants' hands. Though the programmes are taking conscious steps toward more meso or macro-level approaches, numerous systemic factors are likely limiting this transition.

If we want to facilitate a move towards more structural or interventionist approaches to sport-based social interventions, we as researchers must play an active role in questioning, challenging and reshaping the systems that underpin sport-based social interventions. We must also critically (self-)reflect on why the structural approaches we have called for have not materialized. And perhaps most crucially, we cannot limit our work and advocacy to academic circles and must also engage policymakers, practitioners, educators, funders and more.

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