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To cite this article: Veerle De Bosscher, Simon Shibli & Jens De Rycke (2021): The societal impact of elite sport: positives and negatives: introduction to ESMQ special issue, European Sport Management Quarterly, DOI: [10.1080/16184742.2021.1955944](https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2021.1955944)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2021.1955944>



Published online: 23 Jul 2021.



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The societal impact of elite sport: positives and negatives: introduction to ESMQ special issue

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ABSTRACT

As nations are increasingly investing large amounts of public money in elite sport development, policy makers often claim that elite sport will not only lead to more medals, but it will also trigger a range of wider societal outcomes. This point is clearly illustrated by the high-performance directors who were interviewed for this introduction. Notwithstanding the many claims, empirical studies that explore the outcomes of elite sport to society are largely fragmented and anecdotal. The six papers within this Special Issue add to our academic understanding of the complexity and multidimensional nature of both investigating and managing the societal impact of elite sport. By testing the papers against a hierarchy of evidence, they resonate with calls for sport management researchers to contribute to the field by utilising robust and appropriate research designs. However, as confirmed by the various studies, causality on this topic is still difficult to establish. We, therefore, call for a future research agenda that shifts away from wondering ‘if’ particular societal impacts attributable to elite sport exist, to answering the question ‘under what circumstances are they most likely to occur’.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 July 2021
Accepted 11 July 2021

KEYWORDS

Social impact; elite sport policy; Olympic success; athlete role models; MESSI

Elite sport has become an increasingly important area of policy concern for governments worldwide (Green, 2009). In an attempt to legitimise their policies and investments, governments argue that elite sport success stimulates a wide range of positive societal outcomes that will ‘trickle down’. However, to date, robust evidence to support this dominant discourse is limited (De Rycke & De Bosscher, 2019; Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Houlihan et al., 2009; Weed et al., 2015). This special issue of European Sport Management Quarterly which focuses on the ‘Societal Impact of Elite Sport’ features six articles that highlight the breadth of the subject area. The initial purpose of this special issue was to refine the investigation into the (assumed) societal impacts of elite sport. It is safe to say that the studies included have theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions that deepen our understanding of the role of elite sport in society. The nature of this special issue is therefore timely as it addresses the critique that public investment decisions are often politically motivated and thus rarely evidence-based or rational.

Our introduction starts with an illustration of the importance of the topic with insight obtained from elite sport performance directors interviewed specifically for this issue. After providing the views of these interviewees, we then present a digest of the literature and a summary of the contributions of the articles and how they assist in developing knowledge on the positive and negative societal impacts of elite sport. We conclude by discussing directions to steer future research and practice in the field.

The societal impact of elite sport: policy makers views

As ever more nations strive for Olympic success, an upwardly competitive spiral, known as ‘the global sporting arms race’ occurs, which in turn stimulates governments to increase their elite sport spending (De Bosscher et al., 2015; Girginov, 2012; Oakley & Green, 2001). More recently, answering the public debate on what the taxpayer gains from supporting national athletes and hosting elite sport events has become routine for many governments (Funahashi et al., 2015; Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Thomson et al., 2019). Hence, there has needed to be a clear shift in discourse amongst these governments from winning Olympic medals to delivering societal outcomes such as togetherness, national pride and identity, wellbeing, and boosting grassroots sport participation. In an endeavour to identify the views of elite sport policy makers on this shift in discourse, we interviewed UK Sport’s research manager and sport directors in Belgium and the Netherlands.¹

The interviews consistently indicated a move from an output-oriented elite sport policy system (e.g. winning more medals) towards an outcome or impact orientation. They confirm the change of direction in nations becoming more aware of elite sport’s societal impact and the acknowledgement that desired positive effects must be levered because they do not occur spontaneously. The interviewees highlight the importance of developing targeted policies and taking affirmative action.

For instance, Maurits Hendrix, sports director of NOC*NSF, the Dutch sports administration (National Olympic Committee*National Sports Federation), mentions a framework with guidelines to establish the ‘ethical and social foundation’ of elite sport in The Netherlands

I suspect that guidelines will be issued here for top sports financing. It will enable us to respond [to] the question: are we doing what we do in a socially responsible way? And that concerns existing elements (e.g. athlete welfare), but also new elements, such as the sustainability issue.

Olav Spahl, the sport director of the Belgium Olympic Committee and Tom Coeckelberghs, high-performance manager Sport Flanders both point to the role model function of athletes and their increased participation in public debates

We see that top-class sport is getting more and more of a voice in society, around inclusion, around human rights ... This is a clear signal that top athletes want to get involved in social issues ... top-class sport is an important source of inspiration that allows top-class athletes to influence as ‘influencers’. As policy makers, we make too little use of how top-class sportspeople can be a good role model to the population, for example through values of perseverance that are very strongly linked to elite sport.

All interviewees referred to the significant environmental damage attributable to elite sport, for example, Jerry Bingham (UK Sport) says

Climate change will become an increasingly important issue. Elite sport is not particularly climate friendly when you think for example about the travel involved. Furthermore, it is possible that climate change will alter conditions for training and competition. Linked to climate change is sustainability and this is an important consideration for venues in particular, which require a lot of resource for their construction.

Finally, Maurits Hendrix (NED) argues that ‘the essence of legitimacy is the fundamental societal contribution of elite sport. This is something you shouldn’t neglect [as a national sport association]’. Nonetheless, he adds as an aside the importance of achieving sporting success in order to generate positive societal outcomes:

Connecting people and inspiring youngsters are by-products of pride in our national ‘Orange’ athletes who strive to be the best in competitions everywhere in the world. If you [national sport association] move your focus away from sporting excellence, our athletes might become less successful. This could result in a situation where athletes are less known to the public and are no longer influential societal role models. If you are going to change the essence of elite sport (which is mastering a sport discipline and winning competitions), it will lose its power to make societal change.

In line with these government perspectives, Grix and Carmichael (2012) argue that ‘if we understand elite policy discourse as a virtuous cycle of sport, it helps explain governments’ over-emphasis on the ability of elite sport success to effect so much change (domestically and internationally)’ (p. 77).

Measuring the societal impact of elite sport

In recent years, researchers have been critical of the overly positive discourse of politicians and justifications of public investments in elite sport. A plausible summation is that the academic knowledge concerning a range of societal benefits ‘evidently’ flowing from elite sport is inadequate. A likely explanation for this situation is that it is generally difficult to measure societal impact effectively, especially intangible outcomes (Lee et al., 2013). Moreover, research on potential negative impacts is unlikely to get financed as it could shed light on negative side aspects of elite sport such as corruption, or transgressive behaviour thereby leaving the ‘dark sides’ of elite sport ignored (Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Houlihan et al., 2009). Currently the empirical evidence base regarding a range of elite sport impacts is fragmented and thereby offers mixed and contradictory results (De Bosscher et al., 2013; Frick & Wicker, 2016; Funahashi et al., 2015; Van Bottenburg, 2013).

Considering the undefined societal potential of elite sport, the recently developed framework ‘Mapping Elite Sport’s potential Societal Impact’ (MESSI) captured a thorough range of empirical evidence on the positive and negative impacts associated with elite sport (De Rycke & De Bosscher, 2019). The framework assumes that elite sport can be a catalyst for change via medal success, role models (e.g. sport stars as personalities), hosting elite sport events, or stakeholders (e.g. sponsors). The MESSI framework includes 79 positive and negative impact areas which are categorised in ten dimensions (Table 1). Although a more detailed body of evidence on the societal impact of elite sport has been developed, the quality of evidence on several outcome areas remains relatively weak.

Table 1 . MESSI dimensions and overview of papers in the Special Issue.

MESSI dimensions	Potwarka et al.	Shibli et al.	Van der Roest et al.	De Cocq et al.	Robertson et al.	Otto et al.
1. Social equality and inclusion						
2. Collective identity, connection and pride	X	X				
3. Ethics and fair play					X	X
4. Happiness and experiences	X					
5. Fans and media						
6. International image and political power						
7. Athletes' quality of life and competencies						
8. Sports participation and inspiration				X		
9. Economic development and partnerships						
10. Local consumption and environment						
MANAGING SOCIETAL IMPACT			X			

When measuring impacts assumed to be triggered by elite athletes, sporting success, or the organisation of major sporting events, it seems that academics have traditionally used study designs where causality is difficult to establish.

In their literature mapping review, De Rycke and De Bosscher (2019) present a hierarchy of evidence (Higgins & Green, 2011; Petticrew & Roberts, 2003) of various investigational methodologies in the 362 papers included in the MESSI model. They found almost no studies with research designs that are generally regarded as robust (e.g. randomised controlled trials (0%), cohort studies (1%), case-control studies (2%)) and even studies incorporating mixed-method designs (11%) were relatively scarce. Similarly, Thomson and colleagues (2019) systematically reviewed major sport event legacy research and detected 12% mixed-method design studies (36/305). There is a strong use of case studies and expert opinion with the subjective perceptions of individuals playing a key role as the main source of evidence. The authors note a dominant use of qualitative methods, which is justifiable given the emergent nature of some of the societal trends under study. Nonetheless, the findings demonstrate the need for a move towards the adoption of mixed-methods designs and holistic research frameworks to uncover complex causal relationships from which to measure the societal impact of elite sport more robustly.

This European Sport Management Quarterly (ESMQ) 2021 Special Issue is published at a significant juncture for those with an interest in the societal impacts of elite sport. It contains six papers that can be divided into three broad themes. Table 1 shows how the six papers fit within the ten dimensions of the MESSI framework. The table shows that five of the papers map directly onto four of the ten dimensions of the model and the paper from Van der Roest and Dijk focuses on the overall social value perspective of elite sport. Their contributions to the literature are discussed in the next section.

Overview of contributions

The first two papers respond to Storm and Jakobsen's (2020) call for large sample national studies, with many data points and examination of culturally important events. The next

two studies are concerned with improving our understanding of the way societal impacts such as stimulating mass sport participation, can be created and supported. We conclude with two papers reviewing and addressing societal negatives in elite sport competition such as unethical conduct (in this case doping) and moral disengagement.

Theme 1 – large sample national studies

First, Teare, Potwarka, Bakhsh, Barrick and Kaczynski demonstrate the value of time series analysis and the use of a significant, nationally representative data sample ($n > 1,000,000$). More specifically, they conducted a time series analysis among Canadian youths (aged 12–19) on the perceived sense of belonging to their community and perceived life satisfaction across four time points before and after the Vancouver Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games of 2010. The results illustrate that youngsters increased their sense of belonging to their local community in the times before and during a major sport event like the Winter Games take place. A similar effect was noticeable concerning life satisfaction. Interestingly, the authors found that regional differences provide support for the notion of an epicentre effect. That is to say, significant changes from pre-event to post-event were observed in a ‘sense of belonging to the local community’ measure in the two host regions of Vancouver and Whistler. Moreover, significant changes in life satisfaction were also observed at the national and host-regional levels. However, positive changes amongst youth in the host communities were, not sustained in the post-event years which underscores the notion of a festival effect that brings about a short-lived sense of ‘feel good factor’ that is unlikely to last in the longer term.

Related to the first study is the paper ‘The Impact of Elite Sporting Success on National Pride In England’ by Shibli, Ramchandani and Davies. Here, the authors utilise data from a representative sample of around 10,000 English adults per year over a six-year period to examine the impact of sporting success on a form of national pride known as ‘sportive nationalism’. The repeated cross-sectional design includes 57 successive monthly time points. The authors conclude that the measure of national pride seems to fluctuate positively and negatively in response to elite sport successes and failures. The biggest increase in sporting pride occurred before and during the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games but even this once-in-a-lifetime event on home soil had no sustained impact on the sporting pride measure. A key finding is that national pride generated by sporting success is of relatively low importance to the English public and that there are far more important and less volatile dimensions of pride, such as pride in the countryside and scenery or the nation’s history. Any variation in national pride brought about by sport is therefore minor relative to other components of pride and are short-lived. These conclusions provide a direct challenge to the UK Government which has used the ‘pride argument’ as a centrepiece of its justification for investment in elite sport. The finding that sporting pride can decline in response to perceived failure is a salutary message to Governments ‘to be careful what you wish for’.

Theme 2 – how societal impacts are created and supported

Van der Roest and Bake propose taking a public value management perspective to understand better the way societal impacts can be created and supported. In their qualitative

study, the authors argue that stakeholder management plays a vital role in an ongoing active process that legitimises elite sport expenditure. In this study, the approach of sports officials and local policy makers in the Netherlands to develop a mutual strategy for elite sport and talent development is explored. It was found that the legitimacy of the elite sport policies was well established because the sport agencies were able to connect with relevant public values in the region. That is, the strategies of broad talent development and fighting poverty were consistent with both the political and sport actors in the region. Van der Roest and Bake conclude that mapping the perceived positive and negative impacts of elite sports could provide advice to public managers in deciding which elite sport policies and actions are valued by their citizens.

The study of de Cocq, De Bosscher and Derom explores the trickle-down effect of elite sport with a case study in hockey using a concurrent nested mixed methods design. It conceptualises and explores when, why and how elite sport has stimulated grassroots field hockey in Belgium. More specifically, the authors analyse how sporting success, athlete role models, elite sport policies, stakeholders, actions and (unintended) interactions in hockey are thought to be linked with boom in sport club memberships. The authors propose a conceptual framework that has the potential to act as a benchmark and starting point for research that examines the relationship between elite sport and grassroots sport. They visualise the dynamics and capture the complex intersectoral dynamics under which these associations may occur and be understood. This study contributes to knowledge by pointing out the need for greater use of strategic management and stakeholder management techniques among practitioners aiming to achieve a trickle-down effect in their sport.

Theme 3 – societal negatives arising from elite sport

The manuscript from Robertson and Constandt about ‘Moral Disengagement in Elite Sport: Identifying and Mitigating Antisocial Behavior in Elite Sport Systems’ is a qualitative study drawing on Bandura’s social cognitive theory, and moral disengagement. Moral disengagement is a widely used theoretical construct that was, until now, rarely used by sport management academics. We follow the argument of Robertson and Constandt’ that

if we accept the premise that individuals are less morally attentive in sport than in everyday life, then the ability for sport managers to identify and mitigate the root causes of antisocial behavior becomes more important than ever.

The authors contribute by skilfully reviewing studies on moral disengagement, both within and outside the sport domain, and advocate two future research directions: (1) to demonstrate the utility of moral disengagement in identifying mechanisms of antisocial behaviour in elite sport; and (2) to propose forms of ethical management which may help mitigate such behaviours from materialising.

The paper Trust in fairness, doping, and the demand for sports, by Otto, Pawlowski and Utz follows the assumption that consumer preferences for watching elite sports on television are based on two inherent features of sporting competitions: top-level athletic performances and fairness of the competition. As athletes’ unethical and illegal conduct such as doping is usually hidden and mostly revealed after a competition,

sport consumers need to be able to trust that athletes compete fairly. Using a two-wave panel survey and a sporting event scenario where doping issues are present, the authors thus examine the role of trust in fairness of a competition on the demand for spectator sports and investigate whether a doping scandal can cause a loss of trust leading to a fall in demand. The two-wave panel survey used in this study is a novel methodology, combining regression analysis with a hypothetical sporting event scenario where doping issues are present. Overall, while awareness about a major doping case negatively affects trust in the fair conduct and integrity of athletes, this does not appear to affect the demand for sports. The paper suggest that athletes can be seen as (dis)trust ambassadors promoting the (un)fairness of a sporting competition to consumers. However, in contrast to popular and political beliefs, a substantial loss of trust after a major doping case might not reduce the demand for sport consumption.

Conclusion

The papers within this special issue add to our academic understanding of the complexity and multidimensional nature of both investigating and managing the societal impact of elite sport. All contributing authors demonstrate that the societal impact of elite sport has become a significant issue for the stakeholders involved. [Table 2](#) characterises the six papers in this Special Issue on the basis of study designs, similar to those used in the MESSI framework (De Rycke & De Bosscher, 2019). This analysis enables readers to be critical about the usefulness of the available research by testing it against a hierarchy of evidence. What the table shows is that the six papers resonate with calls for sport management researchers to contribute to the field by utilising robust and appropriate research designs (Girginov & Hills, 2009; Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Thomson et al., 2019; Weed & Dowse, 2009), as perhaps best demonstrated by two papers using time series with longitudinal data analysis and one cohort study with a two-wave panel survey (see [Table 2](#)).

However, as confirmed by the studies featured in this special issue, there are many elements that complicate the quest for more in-depth insights into the societal impact of elite sport. In particular, they illustrate that causality on this topic is still difficult to establish and further longitudinal data analysis, quasi-experiments or mixed-method designs are required. We respond to Shibli (2012), who concluded a special issue of *Managing Leisure: An International Journal* on 'The management of excellence in sport' as follows:

Research into elite sport management is developing into a growing multi-disciplinary subject. Generalisations that were entirely plausible in the early days of the field are becoming much more nuanced as research becomes available from increasing numbers of nations and differing lines of enquiry. It is often held in elite sport that standing still is the equivalent of going backwards. The same is true for research. (p. 87)

Recent public opinion studies (De Rycke & De Bosscher, 2020; Funahashi & Mano, 2015; Haut et al., 2014) point out that most people perceive elite sport to generate positive impacts on society, but it is not considered a quick fix for complex challenges such as racism, social inequality or aggression. Such studies endorse an argument about the more nuanced value of elite sport in society. The current objective for sport academics

Table 2. Hierarchy of evidence of the studies included in the special issue (based on Petticrew & Roberts, 2003; adapted from De Rycke & De Bosscher, 2019).

Rank	Methodology	Example/description	Potwarka et al.	Shibli et al.	Van der Roest et al.	De Cocq et al.	Robertson et al.	Otto et al.	Total in MESSI model (n=391; 2019)
A	Systematic review/ meta-analysis	Reviews of data that use transparent and rigorous methodology (e.g. statistical analysis of results)							N.A.
B	Randomised Controlled Trials	Clinical trials with clear methodology. They use randomised participants and control groups.							0%
C	Cohort study	A form of longitudinal study. Follows a group of people with a common or defined characteristic. Can be prospective or retrospective.						X	1%
D	Time-series study/trends	A form of longitudinal study (not panel). Revisits a cross-sectional study or similar after a period of time has elapsed and compares the data.	X	X					19%
E	Case-control/experimental	Studies that do not use randomised participants but compare two existing groups (one is a control group).							2%
F	Cross-sectional study/	Provides data on entire populations based on a (representative) sample. Collects data at a defined time.							19%
G	Case study/ programme/ qualitative evaluations	Intensive analysis of an individual, group, intervention or event. Often descriptive or explanatory.			X				27%
H	Economic evaluations/ financial trends/Contingent valuation studies/	Employ economic analysis methods to quantify the economic value of an intervention or activity. Including financial trends analyses.					X		16%
I	Content analysis/ reviews of documents	Forms of content analysis or review of documents or other sources. Including analysis of media coverage.			X				10%
J	Policy brief Expert opinion/ Scientific statement	Including opinions from well-respected authorities based on evidence, data from secondary sources, descriptive statistics.							7%
	Mixed – methods	Use of more than one method of data collection or research. Including research with a set of related studies				X			11%
	Conceptual or Theoretical work	Any forms of non empirical work; including conceptual contributions, developed theoretical frameworks or critical reviews of literature					X		Not included

is to acknowledge the complexity of this field by embracing more innovative research approaches (Skinner & Engelberg, 2018). We contend that what is required to develop the field is cutting-edge, robust research such as longitudinal studies and mixed-method designs based on theories of change, which are more appropriate for establishing causality. Research that pushes forward with (inter – and transdisciplinary) research designs, informed by recognised conceptual frameworks will assist in providing a more solid evidence-base to guide the decision-making of practitioners and policy-makers. Such an approach is consistent with Thomson et al. (2019), who advocate for the ‘utilisation of transdisciplinary approaches that draw on established bodies of theory and emphasise meaningful engagement and co-creation of projects with practitioners in the field provide opportunities to deliver contributions to both theory and practice’ (p. 15).

Intrinsically, elite sport is neither positive nor negative (Coalter, 2007), although there is a prevailing attitude amongst proponents of elite sport that a range of positive societal impacts can occur. A consistent finding across studies in this field is that more needs to be done by all stakeholders involved to secure and demonstrate positive societal outcomes whilst simultaneously reducing the negative outcomes of elite sport. Thus, sport academics can aid practitioners to plan strategically and implement elite sport effectively. As such, we call for two new research directions. First, a shift away from wondering ‘if particular societal impacts attributable to elite sport exist, to answering the question ‘under what circumstances are they most likely to occur?’ Second, a shift away from wondering whether public investment in elite sport ‘can’ be legitimised, to establishing ‘how’ this money can be used more effectively for societal impact purposes. We look forward to seeing how the field has evolved in our next Special Issue a decade from now!

Note

1. Interviews were executed by the authors and additionally by Jan Willem Van Der Roest for the Netherlands’.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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