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# The Corruption Formation Process in Iranian Football

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A) conception and design of the study
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## Abstract

This study investigates the corruption formation process in Iranian football. Data was collected using library studies as well as 18 in-depth and semi-structured interviews with football industry stakeholders. The research data were analyzed through the coding process in three stages: open, pivotal and selective. Grounded Theory was used to determine the initial list of corruption causes. Then, interpretive structural modeling and MICMAC analysis were utilized. Having analyzed the data, the researchers classified the variables into four different levels, and after MICMAC analysis, we divided the variables into two groups of independent and dependent variables. None of the variables were included in the group of autonomous and linkage variables. The results showed that at the highest level, corrupt governance of football (including weak football federation statutes, government control of football, and weak governance in football) was the most influential factor. At the third level, the key factor was structural dysfunction which was underpinned by both weak management and supervision in football. At the second level, defective agreements and monitoring (consisting of weak rules and regulations and inefficient national and club contracts) was significant. At the first level, financial dysfunction (including money laundering and economic and financial factors), bias and opportunism (by journalists and agents), and corruption of human resources (comprising coercion and nurturing corrupt forces) were influential. The findings showed that the managerial level has a major role in preventing corruption.

**Keywords:** Corruption, transparency, accountability, structural-interpretive modeling, governance, sport

## Introduction

Corruption is calculated crime, normally perpetrated for economic gain (Agatiello, 2010). Corruption occurs when "an agent deviates from moral rules considered relevant and consolidated in a particular social context, while the integrity involves acting according to basic moral values and rules" (Monteduro, Hinna & Moi, 2016, p. 36). Elsewhere, corruption refers to the abuse of entrusted power for undue and private gain (Hauser & Hogenacker, 2014). Corruption incorporates many types of behaviours and activities (Graycar 2017). Corrupt behaviours include bribery, extortion, misappropriation, self-dealing, patronage, abuse of discretion, misuse of information, creating or exploiting a conflict of interest, as well as nepotism, clientelism, and favouritism.

Corrupt activities include appointing personnel, procuring services, making things (construction and manufacturing), rebuilding things (after a disaster), controlling activities (i.e., licensing, regulating, issuing of permits) and administering justice.

There is a consensus that corruption has multidimensional and detrimental impacts including economic instability, social inequality, inefficiency and resource waste (Monteduro, Cecchetti, Ylenia, & Allegrini, 2021). Corruption can destroy a firm's reputation, and subsequently degrade social capital, compromise its market position, or devalue the firm (Kim & Wagner, 2020). Widespread corruption is considered a sign of weak governance, and poor anti-corruption processes can undermine the process of economic growth and development (Nunkoo et al., 2018).

Sport is no stranger to corruption. The evolution of sport into a complex industry encourages opportunism and corrupt behaviours (Buraimo et al., 2012). Corruption threatens the integrity of sports (Moriconi, 2020). Consequently, corruption is a major challenge for sports managers (Kihl et al., 2017) and sport managers must be prepared to deal with all kinds of corruption (Gorse & Chadwick, 2011). The influx of money into a globalized sport industry has led to some corrupt practices, and a so-called dark side of sport. Common examples of corruption in sport include manipulating the results, selling votes, conflicts of interest, bribery, collusion, extortion, and betting (Philippou, 2019; Mansouri et al., 2019; Andreff, 2018; Kihl et al., 2017; Brooks et al., 2013; Gorse & Chadwick, 2011). Within in international football, Pielke (2013) points out that bribery and vote-buying are part of FIFA's structure. In addition, the concentration of power in the hands of very few people, lack of supervision and accountability, and extraordinary profitability of football all contribute to FIFA's integrity issues. Even the Olympic Games has been linked to such practices (Matheson et al., 2018).

Corruption is problematic for sport for at least four reasons. First, corruption violates sport and its fair play ethos (Andreff, 2018). Second and third, corruption undermines the rule of law and those who engage in corruption engage in deviant behavior (Weitz-Shapiro, & Winters, 2017). Corruption is powerful enough to destroy not only institutions or a system but also the entire legal and social structure of a country (Olmos, Bellido & Román-Aso, 2020). The public, the media, and politicians are all aware of the long-term and harmful effects of corruption on the economy and society (Dimant, 2014). The mass media's interest in corruption and the emergence of anti-corruption movements have highlighted public and academic discourses on corruption in sports and major events (Müller, 2015). Finally, all of these have the potential to impact negatively the image of the sport and the sport's governing organizations (Hallmann, Dickson, & Giese, 2020),

Corruption in sport exists at two levels: competitive and organizational. Competitive corruption tries to affect the results of the competitions, and organizational corruption attempts to negatively affect the organizational structure and planning of major sporting events (Nunkoo et al., 2018). In Iran, both competitive and organizational corruption is observed (Mansouri et al., 2019; Ghorbani et al., 2019).

Corruption in sports (in all its forms and levels) is a global phenomenon, Corruption in sport has been studied in a variety of countries. These include Romania (Constantin, & Stănescu, 2021), Zimbabwe (Dandah & Chiweshe, 2021), USA (Kihl, Ndiaye, & Fink,, 2018), Sri Lanka (Madhushani, 2019), the Balkan countries (Manoli, & Janečić, 2020), Greece and Turkey (Manoli, Yilmaz, & Antonopoulos, 2021), Brazil (Marchetti, Reppold Filho, & Constandt, 2021), India (Ghai & Zipp, 2020), Taiwan (Tzeng & Lee, 2021) and sub-Saharan African nations (Stathopoulou, Quansah, & Balabanis, 2021). Studies by Najafi et al. (2020), Mansouri et al. (2019), Ghorbani et al. (2019), Mahmoudi et al. (2019), and Goodarzi et al. (2010) explore sport-related corruption in Iran. These studies highlight the government control of Iranian sports, opportunism, cultural factors, weak rules and regulations, lack of proper monitoring, lack of competence among sports managers, betting, collusion, and lack of transparency as the influential factors underpinning of corruption in Iranian sport.

This study is guided by two related research questions. First, we ask, what is the appropriate categorization of corruption formation in Iranian football? Separation of the system into different levels helps clarify the role of each variable and the interaction between and amongst variables. This question is addressed using Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM). Second, we ask, what are the effective independent and linkage variables and influential dependent and autonomous variables in the formation of corruption in the Iranian football industry? This question is answered on the basis of a MICMAC analysis.

The results of this study have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study identifies the influential dependent variables in the corruption equation. In the practical part, having identified these variables, policy makers can better implement anti-corruption policies. This study can also be used by organizations and regulatory authorities to benchmark appropriate behaviours, practices, and policies. In turn, this will promote stakeholder confidence in the Iranian football industry.

## Methods

This study provides a model explaining the formation of corruption in the Iranian football industry. Using grounded theory elements, the study first identified the causes of corruption in football. Then, the data were analyzed through Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) and the Cross-Impact Matrix Multiplication Applied to Classification (MICMAC) methodologies.

### Data Collection

We deployed a purposive/judgmental approach to sampling. Participants were selected on the basis of their expertise within the sport football industry. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 experts. The experts were selected based on purposive sampling. In terms of the level of education, seven individuals had professional doctoral degrees, three were Ph.D. students, two had master's degrees, and two had bachelor's degrees. Their age range was between 31 and 68 years. According to studies by Ramesh, Banwet and Shankar (2010) and Leby & Hashim (2010), the number of participants in ISM studies is usually between 14 and 20.

### Interpretive Structural Modeling

With ISM, the relations among the components and the leveling among them are presented (Warfield, 1974). ISM helps researchers to better understand what is both known and not known (Farris & Sage, 1975). ISM uses a complex system to analyze and solve problems in decision-making to visualize, create, and understand a hierarchical structure. It is a structural approach, so the overall structure derived from the complex set of relationships (Azar et al., 2020). ISM identifies and regulates the complexity of the relationships among the various factors, providing a blueprint for the relationships between and amongst the factors.

We followed well-established guidelines for conducting ISM (Poduval et al., 2015; Pramod & Banwet, 2013; Attri et al., 2012; Sushil, 2012). In ISM, each stage is related to the previous stage and cannot be omitted. The ISM technique consists of six well-defined steps.

**Step 1: Identifying the Factors.** In the first step, the research components were identified. In this study, the components were identified using the Grounded Theory analysis.

**Step 2: Structural Matrix of the Variables' Internal Relations.** In this step, using the components obtained in Step 1, the respondent was asked to specify the type of relationship between the two variables. The states and signs used in designing the matrix are as follows:

V: Element i leads to element j (variable i affects j)

A: Element j leads to element i (variable j affects i)

X: The relationship between i and j is mutual (the relationship is mutual)

O: There is no relationship between i and j (no relationship)

**Step 3: Initial Reachability Matrix.** The Structural Self-Interaction Matrix (SSIM) relationship symbols are converted to zero and one according to the following rules:

(1) If the (i, j) input in the SSIM matrix is equal to V, the (i, j) input in the reachability matrix becomes 1, and the (j, i) input becomes 0.

(2) If the (i, j) input in the SSIM matrix is equal to A, the (i, j) input in the matrix is 0, and the (j, i) input is 1.

(3) If the (i, j) input in the SSIM matrix is equal to X, the (i, j) input in the matrix becomes 1, and the (j, i) input becomes 1.

(4) If the (i, j) input in the SSIM matrix is O, the (i, j) input in the matrix is 0, and the (j, i) input is 0.

**Step 4: Structural Self-Interaction Matrix.** This matrix was completed with the help of experts and specialists in the core process. In this matrix, the secondary relations must be controlled for further assurance. For example, if A leads to B and B leads to C, then A must lead up to C. In other words, the matrix must reflect the totality of relationships.

**Step 5: Level partitioning.** In this step, reachability, antecedent, and intersection sets are derived for all the variables. Here, two accessible sets and a set of prerequisites are defined to determine the level of criteria. The first line, where the intersection of the two sets is equal to the accessible set, takes precedence over the first level. After determining the level, the criterion or criteria whose level is specified from the table is removed and the process repeated until all the remaining variables' levels are determined.

**Step 6: Plotting the model.** The ISM network structure is then plotted based on the specified levels and the final matrix. Therefore, all criteria are placed in a hierarchy based on their influence and degree of dependence.

## Findings

*Determinants of Corruption*

The main determinants of corruption in Iranian football are summarized in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Main determinants of corruption in Iranian football

| Category | Subcategory |
|---|---|
| (A) Corrupt governance of football | Weak football federation statutes; Government control of football; Weak governance |
| (B) Defective agreements and supervision | Weak rules and regulations; Inefficient national and club contracts |
| (C) Corruption of human resources | Coercion; Nurturing corrupt forces |
| (D) Bias and opportunism | Biased journalism; Opportunistic agents |
| (E) Structural dysfunction | Managerial weakness in football; Weak supervision in football |
| (F) Financial dysfunction | Money laundering; Economic and financial factors |

*Structural self-interaction matrix*

The Structural Self Interaction Matrix is displayed in Table 2 below.

**Table 2.** Structural self-interaction matrix

| Index | A | B | C | D | E | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Corrupt governance of football | | V | V | V | V | V |
| Defective agreements and supervision | | | V | V | A | V |
| Corruption of human resources | | | | A | A | X |
| Bias and opportunism | | | | | A | X |
| Structural dysfunction | | | | | | V |
| Financial dysfunction | | | | | | |

**Initial Reachability Matrix (RM)**

The reachability matrix is prepared using the self – interactive structural matrix; that is, using the zero-and-one placement rule, the SSIM matrix is converted to a zero-and-one matrix in the form of Table 3.

**Table 3.** Initial reachability matrix

| Index | A | B | C | D | E | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dominance of corruption | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Defective agreements and supervision | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Corruption of human resources | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Bias and opportunism | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Structural dysfunction | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Financial dysfunction | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |

**Final reachability matrix**

The final reachability matrix was obtained by considering the transferability relationship. Thus, to obtain the final reachability matrix, we added the initial matrix to the unit matrix and then bring the resulting matrix to the power of n. The results are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Final reachability matrix

| Index | A | B | C | D | E | F | Influence |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Corrupt governance of football | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| Defective agreements and supervision | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Corruption of human resources | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1” | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Bias and opportunism | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Structural dysfunction | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Financial dysfunction | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Dependence | 1 | 3 | 6 | 6 | 2 | 6 | |

**Level Partitioning**

The structure of the ISM network was then plotted using the specified levels and the final matrix. Therefore, all criteria are placed in a hierarchy according to their influence and degree of dependence, which are presented in Tables 5 and 6.

**Table 5.** The first repetition of the reachability matrix’s level segmentation

| Level | Intersection set | Antecedent set | Reachability set | Variable |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 1 | 1-2-3-4-5-6 | Corrupt governance of football |
| | 2 | 1-2-5 | 2-3-4-6 | Defective agreements and supervision |
| 1 | 3-4-6 | 1-2-3-4-5-6 | 3-4-6 | Corruption of human resources |
| 1 | 3-4-6 | 1-2-3-4-5-6 | 3-4-6 | Bias and opportunism |
| | 5 | 1-5 | 2-3-4-5-6 | Structural dysfunction |
| 1 | 3-4-6 | 1-2-3-4-5-6 | 3-4-6 | Financial dysfunction |

**Table 6.** The second to the fourth repetition of the reachability matrix’s level segmentation

| Level | Intersection set | Antecedent set | Reachability set | Variable |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4 | 1 | 1 | 1-2-5 | Corrupt governance of football |
| 2 | 2 | 1-2-5 | 2 | Defective agreements and supervision |
| 3 | 5 | 1-5 | 2-5 | Structural dysfunction |

**Interpretive structural model**

At this stage, an initial model is plotted using the levels of the variables and the final reachability matrix. A final model is then obtained by removing the transferability in the initial model.

**Influence and Dependence Degree of “MICMAC Graph Plotting”**

At this stage, the variables are classified into four groups. The first group consists of autonomous variables which have low influence and low dependence (Quadrant 1). The second group comprises dependent variables which have low influence and high dependence (Quadrant 2). The third group – linkage variables – have both high leverage and high dependence (Quadrant 3). In Quadrant 4, the independent variables have strong influence and low dependence. According to Figure 1, the corrupt governance of football, defective agreements and supervision, and structural dysfunction were placed in the independent cluster (Quadrant 4), and the variables of corruption of human resources, bias and opportunism, and financial dysfunction were situated in the dependent cluster (Quadrant 2).

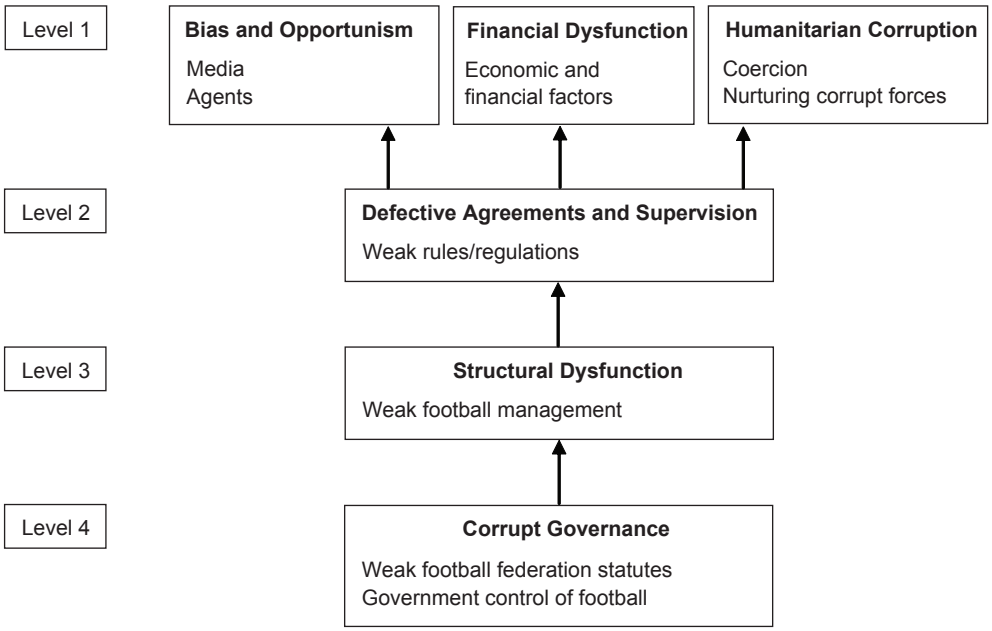


**Figure 1.** The interpretive structural model of corruption formation in Iranian football

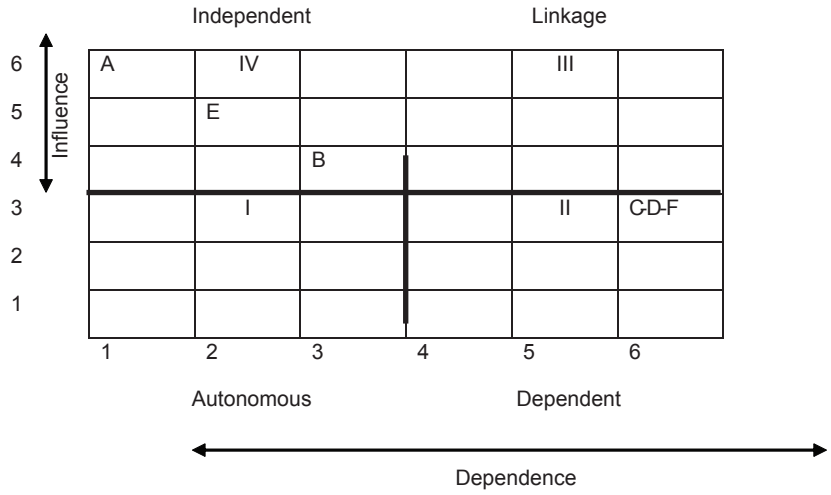


**Figure 2.** MICMAC graph

Note: (A) Corrupt governance of football; (B) Defective agreements and supervision; (C) Corruption of human resources; (D) Bias and opportunism; (E) Structural dysfunction; (F) Financial dysfunction.

In Figure 2, Quadrant 2 contains the dependent variables in the model. These variables have very strong dependence on the other variables (A, E, B) but weak influence. Quadrant 4 contains the variables with high influence and low dependence on the other variables (C, D, F)

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to use an interpretive structural modeling approach to explore the formation of corruption in the Iranian football industry. According to the results of this study, corruption is underpinned by corrupt governance and more specifically, weak federation statutes, government control of football, and weak governance. Corrupt governance creates structural dysfunction which is reflected in poor football management and flawed supervision. Defective agreements and supervision ensue from this structural dysfunction. Most notably,

the defective agreements include weak rules/regulations and inefficient national and club contracts. The results of this study are consistent with the results of Najafi et al. (2020), Mansouri et al. (2019), Ghorbani et al. (2019), Mahmoudi et al. (2019), Shafiee et al. (2018), Goodarzi et al. (2010), Nunkoo et al. (2018), Brooks et al. (2013), and Mason, Thibault and Misener (2006). The key variables that cause financial corruption in the Iranian football industry – corrupt governance of football, defective agreements and supervision, and structural dysfunction all have high influence and low dependence.

According to the structural-interpretive diagram, corruption of human resources (i.e., coercion and nurturing corrupt human resources), bias and opportunism by journalists and agents, and financial dysfunction (i.e., money laundering and economic and financial factors) were located in the dependent cluster (Quadrant 2). The results of this finding are consistent with the results of Ghorbani et al. (2019), Mahmoudi et al. (2019), Mohammadi et al. (2020), Andreff (2018), and Kihl (2017). The dependent variables have high dependence or high performance but have low influence or importance. Moreover, independent variables are highly influential in the formation of these dependent variables. Therefore, any attempts at eliminating corruption that do not address these independent variables (i.e., corrupt governance of football, defective agreements and supervision, structural dysfunction) will likely be unsuccessful. Eliminating these independent variables ought to be the priority.

Good governance, or at the very least, corruption free governance, is an integral part of sustainable development for any organization (Bebchuk et al., 2013). However, in this study, the lack of good governance in the football industry has allowed corruption to permeate all aspects of the Iranian football industry. The weakness of the statutes of Iran's Football Federation is well recognized. Such weaknesses enable dismissals and recruitments to be based on political ideals and individual preferences without specialized knowledge. When there is weakness and ambiguity in the law, corruption and illegal behaviours will likely emerge. Thus, to optimize the context of football so that it enjoys governance and discipline, it is necessary to pay attention to proper governance and the adoption of appropriate, all-inclusive laws.

Corruption in Iranian football is facilitated by the government's control of football in Iran. Most of the professional football clubs in Iran can be divided into three groups: affiliated with state-owned industry, affiliated with the military, and affiliated with the Ministry of Sports and Youth. This impacts the independence and law-based and codified state of proper governance. As long as Iranian football is run by government-appointed officials, Iranian football will continue to be inefficient and ineffective. Such appointments, also make it difficult for stakeholders to criticize such appointments. It is also problematic that media organizations lack independence from the Iranian government. Hence, public scrutiny of state-controlled football teams remains a challenge.

In the remainder of this section, we propose a number of recommendations. Club privatization is a likely solution to reducing government control. Privatization can significantly increase the productivity of organisations and industries alike. In addition to solving the public-sector problems, privatization can go a long way in increasing public participation, competition, clubs' profitability, and the economic prosperity of the football industry. Transferring ownership of football clubs to individuals and the private sector is considered normal and legal in most countries of the world. Still, this issue has not yet found legal and executive validity in Iran. The issue of the state-ownership of professional football clubs is highly unreasonable, and in many jurisdictions, entirely illegal (Khabiri, 2003). For example, FIFA has issued a directive to the national member federations that a company can only own one club. The concern here is the potential for financial misconduct or collusion (Morrow, 1999). Now, if government is viewed as a single entity, the simultaneous ownership of several clubs by a government is arguably in contravention of FIFA policy.

In terms of defective agreements and supervision, the football federation should endeavor to eliminate the weak management practices. This includes, but is not restricted to the clubs' lack of attention to meritocracy and the professional competencies of the managers, their staff, and the coaches. The football federation must improve its supervision of officials and other employees in the industry. Proper management is integral to improving Iranian football (Gohari et al., 2021). This supports the argument that improved laws, better governance, and more competent managers results in less corruption (Nezlek et al., 2019).

A new Iranian football industry characterized by good governance, independence from government, and effective contracts and agreements will not emerge in a vacuum. Preventing corruption in Iranian football requires a national will to do so. Anti-corruption plans need to have short-term, medium-term, and long-term horizons. These plans must be developed independently of government. If privatization occurs, then the media should at least be allowed, and perhaps even encouraged, to expose corrupt behaviours. The academic community should also leverage whatever academic freedom they have to provide public commentary and empirical support for the value of good governance and the harm of poor and or corrupt governance. Sport management academics should also lend their expertise to helping Iranian football teams to privatize.

## Conclusion

This study identifies three factors that are key to sustaining corruption in the Iranian football industry: the corrupt governance of football (i.e., weak federation statutes, the government's control of football, and weak governance in football), defective agreements and supervision (i.e., weak laws and regulations; inefficient national and club contracts), and, finally, structural dysfunction (i.e., poor management and inadequate supervision in football). As long as these factors remain, efforts to reduce or eliminate corruption will be ineffective. Our findings provide the government and other regulatory bodies with specific issues to address. The findings send a clear message that good governance is essential for preventing corruption in football.

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# Prevalence of Bullying in Grassroots Soccer in Spain: Victims, Bullies, and Bystanders

**Authors' contribution:**

A) conception and design of the study
B) acquisition of data
C) analysis and interpretation of data
D) manuscript preparation
E) obtaining funding

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## Abstract

Bullying is a social problem that has been studied most in schools but affects other social contexts. However, there is a general lack of studies on bullying in sports. The aim of this study was to determine the prevalence of bullying among youth soccer players. Participants were 1,980 soccer players (88.2% boys) aged 8 to 13 years ($M_{age}$ = 10.5, SD = 1.68) from 25 clubs in Catalonia, Spain. An ad hoc questionnaire was administered to analyze the prevalence and characteristics of bullying from the perspective of victims, bullies, and bystanders. The overall bullying victimization rate was 8.9%, with higher rates observed in the younger categories ($p < .001$); 5.2% of victims experienced bullying in both their soccer club and at school. The bullying and bystander rates were 14.8% and 34.7%, respectively, with significant differences between boys and girls (15.5% of boys and 9% of girls were bullies [$p < .05$], while 36.4% of boys and 21.9% of girls were bystanders [$p < .001$]). Verbal bullying was the main type of bullying reported. The locker room and pitch were the most common locations, and victims were more likely to deal with bullying on their own than to ask for help. Bullying is present in grassroots soccer, and anti-bullying programs are needed to instill ethical and moral values in athletes and equip coaches with the necessary skills to prevent, detect, and address bullying situations.

**Keywords:** Bullying, soccer, sport, victimization, youth

## Introduction

The earliest research into bullying, conducted by Olweus in the 1970s, focused on aggression in schools (Olweus, 1978). Research has grown in recent decades, and bullying is now considered a global problem present across cultures and socioeconomic classes (Nery et al., 2020). Bullying is defined as a specific type of peer aggression repeated over time that involves the intention to harm and an imbalance of power between the bully(s) and the victim(s) in which the victim(s) cannot easily defend themselves (Olweus, 2013). Traditional bullying can be physical (e.g., hitting), verbal (e.g., jeers), or social/relational (e.g., spreading rumors); bullying can be direct or indirect, depending on whether there is physical interaction (Olweus, 2006). Cyberbullying has appeared in more recent years

with the growing use of new technologies (Smith, 2019b). Prevalence rates of 35% and 15% have been reported for traditional bullying and cyberbullying in the school environment, respectively (Modecki et al., 2014).

Although the bulk of bullying research has focused on schools, bullying is present in many other social contexts (Monks & Coyne, 2011). Organized sports outside of the school environment offer opportunities for social interaction among peers and account for a considerable share of young people's leisure time (Jones et al., 2016). Sports provide numerous benefits for children and teenagers, promoting physical, psychological, and social development and helping prevent disease. If not accompanied by adequate educational processes, however, it can promote the emergence of negative behaviors, including bullying (Logan et al., 2019). An overly competitive environment with an excessive focus on winning can also provide a space for bullying, particularly among younger athletes (Menesini et al., 2018). This environment is often tolerated and accepted as part of the norm by the sports community (Nery et al., 2021). Prevalence rates for bullying among young athletes also vary widely according to methodological differences. In a study of bullying among young male athletes in different sports in Portugal, Nery et al. (2019) found a victimization rate of 10%, a bullying rate of 11%, and a bystander rate of 35%. By contrast, Mishna et al. (2019) reported in a study of Canadian athletes corresponding rates of 48%, 31%, and 62% for traditional bullying, and 7%, 9%, and 15% for cyberbullying. Studies that have analyzed the same sample at school and in organized sports outside of school have reported a higher prevalence of bullying at school (Evans et al., 2016; Volk & Lagzdins, 2009). Studies have also found that some students are targeted in both places, known as double victimization (Collot & Dudink, 2010; Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2019). Risk factors for being bullied in sports include disability (Danes-Staples et al., 2013), obesity (Bacchini et al., 2015), belonging to an ethnic minority (Kentel & McHugh, 2015) or sexual minority (Baiocco et al., 2018), and being less skilled (Kerr et al., 2016; Mishna et al., 2019; Vveinhardt et al., 2019b). Male athletes are more likely to bully and be bullied than female athletes (Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2019), and studies of team sports have found that boys are more likely to be pure bullies (Evans et al., 2016; Tilindienė et al., 2008), whereas girls are more likely to be both bullies and victims (Mishna et al., 2019). Verbal bullying is the most common form of bullying in sports, while cyberbullying is the least common; furthermore, the locker room is the place where most bullying occurs (Mishna et al., 2019; Nery et al., 2019). Bullying rates in sports have not been found to vary by age, but older athletes tend to engage in more subtle or indirect forms of bullying, such as social isolation or harming a person's reputation (Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2019).

Soccer is one of the most widely played sports, with 265 million practitioners worldwide (Kunz, 2007), and it is the most played sport by children and adolescents in Europe (Hulteen et al., 2017). However, no studies to date have analyzed the presence of bullying in such a widely played sport as soccer. This study aimed to analyze the prevalence of bullying in youth soccer in Catalonia, Spain from three perspectives – victims, bullies, and bystanders – and investigated additional factors such as emotions, places of occurrence, and the relationship between bullying in soccer clubs and at school. The results could be of interest to coaches, sports psychologists, and physical education providers as they provide insight into the reality of this phenomenon in sports and can contribute to the design of bullying prevention programs.

## Methods

### Participants

We studied 1,980 grassroots soccer players (88.2% boys) aged between 8 and 13 years ($M_{age}$ = 10.5 years, SD = 1.68) from 25 clubs across Catalonia, Spain. The sample included male and female soccer players from clubs across Catalonia with a margin of error of 2.9% and a confidence level of 99%. Overall, 29.8% (80.3% boys) played in the U9 category, 40.1% (89.1% boys) in the U11 category, and 30.1% (94.8% boys) in the U13 category. The vast majority (95.6%) were born in Spain, 70.2% had been playing at the same soccer club for two or more seasons, 96.7% trained two or three days a week, and 6.2% played at the top level in their category.

### Measures

Drawing on other questionnaires used to analyze bullying in sports (Adler, 2014; Evans et al., 2016; Martínez, 2016; Nery et al., 2019), we designed an ad hoc questionnaire to analyze the presence of bullying among young soccer players in clubs. The questionnaire was sent to a panel of experts – five men and two women, all with a PhD in physical activity and sports science – for validation. They were asked to rate the suitability of each item on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all suitable) to 6 (very suitable). Interrater agreement was evaluated using Free-Marginal Multirater Kappa, and the resulting kappa value of .97 was considered satisfactory. The

questionnaire was then piloted among 62 soccer players (3.2% girls) from the same age categories as the target population. The players were informed about the purpose of the study and, after they agreed to participate, were asked to give their critical opinions on the content of the questionnaire. Their comments led to some minor modifications. The questionnaire items addressed bullying situations from the position of victims, bullies, and bystanders during the current and past soccer season. The first section included sociodemographic information (three items: gender, age, and birthplace) and details of soccer practice (four items: years playing soccer, number of training sessions per week, age category, and level of competition). The next section investigated experiences with being bullied. The players were asked how often they had experienced bullying at school (one item) or in the club (one item) in the past couple of months. Then, they were asked how often they had experienced different types of bullying situations, including verbal, physical, social, and cyberbullying, at their club (19 items). The options were "never," "sometimes" (only one or twice), "often" (two or three times a month), and "very often" (about once a week). Finally, they were asked where these situations had taken place (one item), how many people had bullied them (one item), how they had felt (one item: emotions), how they responded (one item: coping and communication strategies), and whether they had thought about leaving the team or club because of these incidents (one item). The third section was designed to gather information about bystander experiences in the past couple of months. Players were asked how often they had witnessed bullying situations in the club (one item). The options were "never," "sometimes" (only one or twice), "often" (two or three times a month), and "very often" (about once a week). In addition, players were asked how many players they had seen victimized (one item) and how they had felt and responded in such cases (one item). The fourth and final section was designed to analyze experiences with bullying from the perspective of the perpetrator. In this case, players were asked how often they had engaged in any bullying situations in the club (one item) or at school (one item). The options were "never," "sometimes" (only one or twice), "often" (two or three times a month), and "very often" (about once a week). Then we asked how they had felt (one item), why they had engaged in bullying (one item), and whether they had also engaged in bullying at school (one item). Questions about where bullying had occurred, how players felt about and responded to bullying situations, and reasons for bullying had multiple-choice options.

### Design and Procedure

We performed a descriptive, cross-sectional study. The questionnaires were administered three months after the start of the soccer season. Once the clubs had agreed to participate, an informed consent form was sent to the parents/tutors of all the players explaining the set-up, purpose, and voluntary nature of the study and providing assurance of anonymity and confidentiality. Members of the research team then visited each club on a previously arranged date to administer the questionnaire. In most cases, it was completed before the start of training. Before asking the children to complete the questionnaire, the researcher explained what was meant by bullying and cyberbullying and gave some examples. The children were assured that their answers would be anonymous and treated confidentially. The players had been previously seated at a sufficient distance from each other to guarantee privacy. The study protocol was approved by the ethics committee of the Catalan Government's Sports Council (17/2019/CEICEGC). Signed informed consent from the players' parents or tutors was required in all cases.

### Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used to report the data, and associations were analyzed using Pearson's chi-square test or the likelihood-ratio test, as appropriate. Statistical significance was set at a level of $p < .05$, and all analyses were performed in SPSS software (version 21.0).

## Results

### Victims

In total, 8.9% of players stated they had been bullied at their soccer club (7.4% sometimes, 1.4% often, and 0.2% very often). No significant differences were observed for gender or level of competition. We did, however, observe a significant difference for the age category, with higher victimization rates in the younger categories: 13.4% in U9s, 8% in U11s, and 5.9% in U13s ($\chi^2$ [6, N = 1978] = 24.01, $p < .001$). Significant differences were also observed for place of birth, with a higher victimization rate among those born outside Spain (14.9% vs. 8.7% for those born in Spain; $\chi^2$ [3, N = 1950] = 8.01, $p < .05$). Concerning the interaction between place of birth and gender,

12.7% of boys born outside Spain reported having been bullied versus 9% of those born in Spain. The difference was even more pronounced for female players (25% vs. 6%). A significantly higher proportion of players reported having been bullied at school (19%) than in the club ($\chi^2$ [9, N = 1978] = 326.43, $p < .001$; 15% sometimes, 1.8% often, and 2.2% very often). Overall, 5.4% of respondents had been bullied in both places.

**Types of Bullying**

Verbal bullying (52.7%) was the most common form of bullying experienced in clubs, followed by physical bullying (33.3%), social bullying (15.9%), and cyberbullying (7.1%). Boys were more likely than girls to experience verbal bullying (55.4% vs. 30.8%; $\chi^2$ [1, N = 1972] = 17.62, $p < .001$) and physical bullying (35.7% vs. 15.5%; $\chi^2$ [1, N = 1972] = 37.77, $p < .001$). The numbers and percentages of victims by type of bullying are shown for the group as a whole and for boys and girls separately (together with statistical differences) in Table 1. In total, 22.6% of players experienced just one type of bullying, 20.0% experienced two, 12.2% experienced three, and 2.7% experienced four; 42.5% of players did not experience bullying of any type.

**Table 1.** Frequency and percentage of types of bullying overall and by gender

| | Total | | Boys | | Girls | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Type of bullying | n | % | n | % | n | % | $\chi^2(p)$ |
| Verbal only | 378 | 19.17% | 330 | 18.98% | 48 | 20.60% | |
| Social only | 9 | 0.46% | 5 | 0.29% | 4 | 1.72% | 9.24 (< .01) |
| Physical only | 52 | 2.64% | 47 | 2.70% | 5 | 2.15% | |
| Cyberbullying only | 7 | 0.35% | 6 | 0.35% | 1 | 0.43% | |
| Verbal & social | 62 | 3.14% | 45 | 2.59% | 17 | 7.30% | 14.96 (< .001) |
| Verbal & physical | 307 | 15.57% | 294 | 16.91% | 13 | 5.58% | 20.06 (< .001) |
| Verbal & cyberbullying | 19 | 0.96% | 18 | 1.04% | 1 | 0.43% | |
| Social & physical | 4 | 0.20% | 4 | 0.23% | 0 | 0.00% | |
| Social & cyberbullying | 0 | 0.00% | 0 | 0.00% | 0 | 0.00% | |
| Physical & cyberbullying | 3 | 0.15% | 1 | 0.06% | 2 | 0.86% | 4.99 (< .05) |
| Verbal & social & physical | 182 | 9.23% | 172 | 9.89% | 10 | 4.29% | 7.69 (< .01) |
| Verbal & social & cyberbullying | 3 | 0.15% | 3 | 0.17% | 0 | 0.00% | |
| Verbal & physical & cyberbullying | 54 | 2.74% | 51 | 2.93% | 3 | 1.29% | |
| Social & physical & cyberbullying | 1 | 0.05% | 1 | 0.06% | 0 | 0.00% | |
| Verbal & social & physical & cyberbullying | 53 | 2.69% | 50 | 2.88% | 3 | 1.29% | |
| None | 838 | 42.49% | 712 | 40.94% | 126 | 54.08% | 14.51 (< .001) |
| Total | 1972 | 100.0% | 1739 | 100.0% | 233 | 100.0% | |

*Note:* $\chi^2$ = Chi-squared test; ($p$) = p-value.

The most common bullying situations involved insults (34%), being told to shut up (30.6%), negative comments about mistakes made while playing (29.5%), hitting/kicking (20.4%), and name-calling (15.3%). Boys were significantly more likely than girls to be insulted ($\chi^2$ [3, N = 1966] = 30.07, $p < .001$); told to shut up ($\chi^2$ [3, N = 1967] = 9.53, $p < .05$); receive nasty comments about their skin color or religion ($\chi^2$ [3 , N = 1970] = 8.83, $p < .05$), appearance ($\chi^2$ [3, N = 1969] = 17.10, $p < .001$), or sexual orientation ($\chi^2$ [3, N = 1966] = 9.13, $p < .05$); be deliberately hit or kicked ($\chi^2$ [3, N = 1970] = 27.84, $p < .001$); have objects thrown at them ($\chi^2$ [3, N = 1970] = 10.22, $p < .05$); be threatened ($\chi^2$ [3, N = 1966] = 9.34, $p < .05$); have things get broken or wet ($\chi^2$ [3, N = 1970] = 14.64, $p < .05$); or be deliberately locked in the locker room or shower ($\chi^2$ [3, N = 1968] = 10.45, $p < .05$). Most of the bullying situations occurred in the locker room (39.4%) or on the pitch (38.0% during training and 15.1% during a match), but bullying also occurred off the pitch (14.5%), at school (10.1%), and through digital technologies (the Internet/mobile phones; 3.2%). The breakdown by place and gender is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Distribution (%) of bullying episodes according to place of occurrence by gender

| Place | Boys | Girls | $\chi^2$ (1, 1072) | *p*-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Locker room | 41.3% | 21.9% | 14.87 | < .001 |
| School | 10.9% | 2.9% | 6.69 | < .01 |
| Pitch (training) | 37.1% | 47.6% | 4.42 | < .05 |
| Pitch (matches) | 13.9% | 26.7% | 12.12 | < .001 |

*Note:* $\chi^2$ = Chi-squared test; (*p*) = p-value.

The victims responded to bullying in different ways: they ignored the bully or bullies (42.4%), asked them to stop (24.5%), asked someone for help (coach, 11.5%; family member, 7.5%; teammate, 4.3%; another friend, 3.6%), cried (4.3%), or ran away (3.2%).

**Bystanders**

Overall, 34.7% of players said that they had witnessed bullying at their club (29.9% sometimes, 3.3% often, and 1.5% very often). Statistically significant differences were observed for gender (36.4% vs. 21.9%; $\chi^2$ [3, N = 1972] = 20.59, $p < .001$), with a higher proportion of male bystanders. There were no differences for age category or level of competition. Girls were significantly more likely to feel sad (37.2% vs. 21.6%; $\chi^2$ [1, N = 684] = 6.53, $p < .05$), angry (31.4% vs. 15.2%; $\chi^2$ [1, N = 684] = 9.05, $p < .01$), or sorry for the victim (64.7% vs. 49.8%; $\chi^2$ [1, N = 684] = 4.22, $p < .05$). When the bystanders were asked what they did when they saw someone being bullied, 42.3% said that they defended their teammate by trying to put a stop to the situation, 39.3% did nothing but felt bad, 19.1% asked an adult for help, 14.1% pretended not to see what was happening, 5.7% joined in, and 4.8% did nothing, but found it amusing. The only significant difference observed between boys and girls was for pretending not to see what was happening (15% vs. 2%; $\chi^2$ [1, N = 684] = 6.66, $p < .01$). The most common action taken by bystanders in the younger age categories was to try and stop the situation (46.6% for U9s and 47.3% for U11s vs. 33.5% for U13s; $\chi^2$ [2, N = 684] = 11.60, $p < .005$). The older players were significantly more likely to do nothing but feel bad (47.5% vs. 32.7% for U9s and 37.3% for U11s; $\chi^2$ [1, N = 684] = 10.76, $p < .001$). Significant differences were also observed for joining in (8.7% for U9s, 5.8% for U11s, and 2.5% for U13s; $\chi^2$ [1, N = 684] = 7.93, $p< .005$) and asking an adult for help (26.4% for U9s, 21.6% for U11s, and 10.2% for U13s; $\chi^2$ [1, N = 684] = 20.38, $p < .001$).

**Bullies**

Overall, 14.8% of the players stated that they had bullied someone (13.6% sometimes, 0.8% often, and 0.4% very often). Boys were significantly more likely than girls to be bullies (15.5% vs. 9%; $\chi^2$ [3, N = 1963] = 7.86, $p < .05$). No significant differences were observed for age category or level of competition. The most common feelings mentioned were feeling bad (34%), not feeling anything (28.5%), feeling worried about being reprimanded (21.3%), and feeling sorry for the person being bullied (20.3%). Less common feelings were feeling amused (7.2%), good (6.2%), or superior (2.4%). The only significant difference between boys and girls was feeling sorry for the victim, mentioned by 47.6% of girls and 18.2% of boys ($\chi^2$ [1, N = 290] = 10.39, $p < .001$). The main reasons given for engaging in bullying were "they provoked me" (39.5%), "I don't know" (29.9%), "they deserve it" (19.6%), "it's fun" (3.4%), "it makes me feel good" (3.4%), "I'm superior/better than the others" (3.1%), and "I'm jealous" (2.7%). The only significant difference observed between genders was for the answer "I don't know," mentioned by 71.4% of boys and 26.8% of girls ($\chi^2$ [1, N = 290] = 18.50, $p < .001$). Overall, 20.9% of players admitted to bullying at school (18.75% sometimes, 1.1% often, and 1.1% very often), and 9.5% engaged in bullying both at school and in their club ($\chi^2$ [1, N = 1965] = 389.59, $p < .001$).

**Bullying Profiles**

The different bullying profiles identified are shown in Table 3 for the group overall and by gender. We identified "pure" roles (i.e., players who were a bully, a victim, *or* a bystander) and combined roles (i.e., players who filled more than one role). In total, 2.8% of the players surveyed were pure victims (more girls), 4.3% were pure bullies (more boys), and 21.8% were pure bystanders (more boys). The most common combined profile was that of bully-bystander, while the least common was bully-victim; 2.5% of the players filled all three roles (victim-bully-bystander).

**Table 3.** Frequency and percentage of bullying profiles

| | Total | | Boys | | Girls | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Role | n | % | n | % | n | % | $\chi^2$ (*p*) |
| Pure victim | 56 | 2.8% | 44 | 2.5% | 9 | 3.9% | |
| Pure bully | 85 | 4.3% | 78 | 4.5% | 7 | 3.0% | 57.84 (< .001) |
| Pure bystander | 429 | 21.8% | 394 | 22.8% | 34 | 14.7% | 7.91 (< .01) |
| Victim & bully | 13 | 0.7% | 12 | 0.7% | 1 | 0.4% | |
| Victim & bystander | 59 | 3.0% | 55 | 3.2% | 4 | 1.7% | |
| Bully & bystander | 144 | 7.3% | 133 | 7.7% | 10 | 4.3% | |
| Victim & bully & bystander | 49 | 2.5% | 46 | 2.7% | 3 | 1.3% | |
| None | 1135 | 57.6% | 968 | 56.0% | 164 | 70.7% | 18.20 (< .001) |
| Total | 1970 | 100.0% | 1730 | 100.0% | 232 | 100.0% | |

*Note:* $\chi^2$ = Chi-squared test; (*p*) = p-value.

## Discussion

The main finding of this study was the presence of bullying in grassroots soccer. The prevalence of victimization observed (8.9%) is similar to that reported for young male athletes in Portugal (Nery et al., 2019) and much lower than that observed in Canadian athletes (Mishna et al., 2019). These discrepancies could be due to methodological differences such as sample characteristics, definitions of bullying, and, most likely, the use of different measurement tools (Smith, 2019a). The lack of a standardized, validated instrument makes it difficult to compare different aspects of bullying in sports across countries. Bullying was less common in sports than at school in our series, which is in line with previous findings (Collot & Dudink, 2010; Evans et al., 2016; Nery et al., 2019; Volk & Lagzdins, 2009). At school, children are more exposed to potential bullying situations due to the amount of time they spend there and the higher number of interactions they have with other children or adolescents (Nery et al., 2021).

The most common type of bullying was verbal (e.g., insults, name-calling), perhaps because soccer involves close interactions and is played on a large field where many comments may not be heard by the coach. Young athletes are also exposed to negative comments about how they play during matches, particularly by members of other players' families (Sánchez-Romero et al., 2020). These comments can come to be seen as normal and even reiterated by players during training or matches (Flores et al., 2021; Prat et al., 2020). The second most common type of bullying observed was physical bullying. Soccer is a physical game and intentional acts of aggression could go unnoticed or be interpreted as being part of the game. In a study of bullying among young amateur athletes in organized sport, Vveinhardt and Fominiene (2019) found similar victimization rates for verbal bullying among male and female athletes and higher rates for physical bullying among males. Rates may vary depending on how the data are analyzed. In our series, for example, we found no significant difference in the prevalence of pure verbal bullying between boys and girls, but the combination of verbal and physical bullying was much more common among boys. Our results may be related to gender role behavior, as soccer is an important contributor to the construction of masculine identity and can normalize and even reinforce certain negative behaviors such as verbal and physical bullying (Steinfeldt et al., 2012). Social bullying is probably less likely in sports than in other settings, particularly among younger athletes, as there are fewer opportunities for deliberately excluding a player from activities because coaches are largely responsible for forming groups. Cyberbullying was the least common type of bullying possibly because of the young age of the children (i.e., they would be less likely to be users of digital technologies; UNESCO, 2019) or because physical activities that involve competition can help develop defense mechanisms against cyberaggression (Benítez-Sillero et al., 2021).

In line with reports by Collot and Dudink (2010) and Vveinhardt and Fominiene (2019), our findings show that players can be bullied both at school and in organized sports. Schools and clubs should work together, particularly as many students, especially those living in rural areas, both go to school and play for clubs. Our findings show higher victimization rates among players born outside Spain, supporting reports of higher victimization among immigrant students due to cultural factors such as language, physical appearance, low social status, and limited peer

support (Stevens et al., 2020). Bullying in sports and in physical education classes mostly occurs in locker rooms and playing areas (Mishna et al., 2019). Locker rooms are typically small spaces that provide ample opportunity for social interaction before or after training, normally without adult supervision (Kerr et al., 2016; Nery et al., 2020; Vveinhardt et al., 2019a). Insults and homophobic comments are common here, particularly among boys, and are often considered part of the norm (Iida & McGivern, 2014). This, combined with the effects of peer pressure, can impose a code of silence ("what happens in the locker room stays in the locker room"), meaning coaches may often be unaware that bullying is taking place (Prat et al., 2020; Vveinhardt et al., 2019a). Victims of bullying generally try to cope on their own and rarely turn to others (e.g., teammates, family members, or coaches) for help (Collot & Dudink, 2010; Nery et al., 2019; Vveinhardt et al., 2017); the main emotions reported were anger and sadness. Studies are needed on the short – and long-term psychological effects of being bullied and possible mood disorders such as depression and anxiety in later years (Moore et al., 2017). The bystander rate in our series is similar to that reported in other studies of bullying in sports (Nery et al., 2019; Vveinhardt et al., 2018) and at school (Callaghan et al., 2019; González-Cabrera et al., 2020) and shows that a considerable number of bullying situations are witnessed. The bystanders mostly reported negative emotions in relation to bullying; they were more likely to try to stop the situation themselves (direct action) than to ask an adult for help (indirect action), and some reported doing nothing. Sports clubs and teams should work on promoting emotional learning and development and strive to forge a climate that enhances group cohesion and friendship and encourages players to take direct or indirect action to put a stop to bullying situations.

The proportion of players who stated that they had engaged in bullying is similar to the rates reported by other researches (Nery et al., 2019; Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2019). We also found that boys were more likely to be bullies than girls (Evans et al., 2016; Tilindienė et al., 2008; Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2019), contrasting with reports by Mishna et al. (2019). The discrepancies are probably due to methodological and conceptual differences and highlight the need for a more exhaustive analysis of gender differences in different types of bullying and in bullying in general (Smith, 2019a). Bullying appears to be less common in sports than in schools, again probably because players spend much less time in clubs than at school and interact with fewer people in clubs. Negative emotions such as feeling bad or sorry for victims were more common than positive emotions such as feeling good, superior, or amused. The fact that bullies are aware of the negative effects of their actions is promising, as this awareness could be used in emotional learning programs to help young people recognize their emotions and link them to taking action.

Finally, all the bullying profiles except that of the pure victim were more common in boys than girls. In a study of Spanish adolescents, González-Cabrera et al. (2020) also found that girls were more likely to be pure victims. Girls may be better at recognizing and exposing bullying behaviors, whereas boys are more likely to feel a greater need to demonstrate their power (Vveinhardt & Fominiene, 2019). Our results for the combined profile of victim-bully-bystander are similar to those reported by Nery et al. (2019), but more research is needed on the prevalence of different roles, how they interact, and how they change over time (Smith, 2018).

## Conclusions

The present study aimed to fill a gap in Spanish research on bullying in sports by determining the prevalence of bullying in organized youth soccer. Our findings confirm the presence of bullying in grassroots soccer, show its effects on victims, bullies, and bystanders, and identify links between different roles. One limitation of our study is that we surveyed young players currently playing club soccer, thereby potentially missing the experiences of players who might have already quit because of bullying. This problem could be overcome by conducting similar studies at schools, which would provide greater insights into the scope of bullying in soccer that could be integrated with findings from other sports to create a general map of the situation.

### Practical implications

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and its subsequent adaptation to bullying in sports by Nery et al. (2020), we propose a series of general actions and specific guidelines for analyzing, preventing, and addressing bullying in sports at the micro-, meso- exo-, and macro-levels. It is essential to create a climate of trust to break the code of silence that often exists within teams and to foster proper communication between players and their coaches (Evans et al., 2016; Volk & Lagzdins, 2009). This can be done by designing programs that instill ethical and moral values in athletes (Gendron & Frenette, 2016) and equip coaches with the

skills needed to detect and address bullying situations (Collot & Dudink, 2010; Mishna et al., 2019). It is encouraging that coaches have expressed interest in receiving training of this type (Flores et al., 2021); however, few programs targeting coaches exist (McCloughan et al., 2015). Meso-level actions should target families, who have also expressed concern about coaches' lack of preparation for dealing with bullying and the apparent lack of clear protocols (Flores et al., 2021). Exo-level actions should aim at creating regulatory frameworks and protocols within sports clubs and increasing awareness through the media. Finally, macro-level actions should seek to create state-level legal structures and policies that foster education and to design, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs.

**Ethics approval and informed consent**
The study protocol was approved by the ethics committee of the Catalan Government's Sports Council (17/2019/CEICEGC).

**Competing interests**
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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# Effect of Customer Experience Quality on Loyalty in Fitness Services

**Authors' contribution:**

A) conception and design of the study
B) acquisition of data
C) analysis and interpretation of data
D) manuscript preparation
E) obtaining funding

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## Abstract

Customer experience quality is an important and relatively new concept for service businesses in gaining a sustainable competitive advantage. Although the literature on customer experience quality is expanding, there is a gap concerning the antecedent and consequences of customer experience in fitness services. In this context, we tested a model that explains the precursors and implications of customer experience quality in the context of fitness services. This study was based on a non-experimental, depictive, and descriptive design. Within the scope of this study, 287 participants (216 male, 71 female) selected through a convenience sampling technique applied a self-administered questionnaire. Data were analyzed through confirmatory factor analysis and a structural equation model. The findings show that service result quality, customer–employee interaction quality, and customer–customer interaction quality affect customer experience quality, which in turn affects customer loyalty. These results show that improving the service outcome quality results in customers who experience high-quality customer–employee and customer–customer interactions becoming loyal customers.

**Keywords:** Interaction quality, experience quality, customer loyalty, fitness services.

## Introduction

The health and fitness industry has been one of the fastest-growing industries worldwide over the last decade. According to the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association (IHRSA), this global "movement" generated industry revenue of approximately EUR 79.7 billion in 2019, serving more than 184 million members in more than 210,000 health and fitness facilities (IHRSA, 2020). Similarly, the European health and fitness industry, which includes 28 European Union member countries as well as Norway, Russia, Switzerland, Ukraine, and Turkey, continues to grow systematically (the market grew by 3.0% to EUR 28.2 billion, in 2019). The number of fitness customers of the European health and fitness industry has increased by 72% (64.8 million members) in the last 10 years (Deloitte, 2020). Germany and the United Kingdom are Europe's largest national health and fitness markets in terms of income and membership (Deliotte, 2020; IHRSA, 2020). On the other hand, Turkey has substantial market potential, with a penetration rate of 8% and 2.6% growth (Deloitte, 2019). One of the most significant reasons for

the positive developments in the health and fitness field is the change in and improvement of Generation Y's sports habits (e.g., increase in income and membership numbers). However, almost 50% of the adult population (Baby Boomer and Generation X) currently lead a sedentary lifestyle, with over 60% estimated to be overweight (Batrakoulis, 2019). Apart from demonstrating that the sector still has considerable growth potential (Eskiler & Altunisik, 2021), this also places significant obligations on companies to attract new customers and maintain existing ones. In other words, it is crucial to support and increase customer engagement through a positive exercise experience and customer experience.

Firms are moving from the traditional marketing of features and benefits to creating experiences for their customers. Today, experiences are the basic building blocks of the exchange process (Schmitt, 1999; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Creating a superior customer experience and ensuring its sustainability now seems to be one of the main goals of service companies (e.g., fitness centers). Within the framework of strategic marketing management, many companies have adopted the concept of customer experience management and included this concept in their mission statements (Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros, & Schlesinger, 2009). As a matter of fact, offers such as commodities, goods, and services are no longer sufficient for long-term profitability under the current competitive conditions, but these offers are meaningful when presented alongside experiences (Cetin & Dincer, 2014; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Schmitt (1999) states that customer experience results from direct observation of or participation in various events (before, during, and after purchasing). According to Meyer and Schwager (2007), this experience is strictly personal and is associated with a client's interest at different levels (rational, emotional, sensory, physical, and spiritual) as a result of their interaction with a product, firm, or part of its organization (Walls, 2009). Furthermore, consumer experience is holistic in nature (Verhoef et al., 2009), encompassing cognitive and emotional assessments of both direct and indirect interactions with the company that affect the customer's purchasing behavior (Klaus & Maklan, 2013).

In the literature, the concept of customer experience is considered and defined by different industry experts in diverse ways. In summary, the concept of customer experience can be considered a phenomenon that develops as the consumer interacts with the service provider (e.g., while exercising) and then leads to perceptions of service quality (Gronroos, 1988). Indeed, experiences create unique value for customers, are difficult to imitate, and strongly affect consumer satisfaction, loyalty, and recommendation behavior (Funk, 2017; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). In this context, customer experience quality (CEQ) is likely to determine the perceived value of the service (Kim & Choi, 2013), and researchers have found that CEQ has a significant effect on consumers' cognitive and emotional purchasing behavior (Cetin & Dincer, 2014). Some studies show that providing a superior customer experience is one way to achieve successful marketing results and competitive advantages (Cetin & Dincer, 2014; Gao, Melero-Polo, & Sese, 2020; Kim & Choi, 2013; Klaus & Maklan, 2013; Verhoef et al., 2009). However, no study has been conducted to empirically test the precursors and results of CEQ in fitness services. Moreover, although CEQ has received significant attention in recent years, creating and managing experiences is still among the biggest challenges for the fitness industry as in other service industries (Cetin & Dincer, 2014; Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011). Fitness centers offer an experience intensive service. Customers (members) see the quality of output (technical quality) and the quality of their interactions with service providers and other customers as part of their experience. Indeed, experiences are not universally the same in various service contexts. In particular, consumer behavior for fitness services should also take into account behaviors that drive members hedonically and emotionally, rather than purely rational models (Cetin & Dincer, 2014). In addition to this conceptual approach, it can be stated that more studies are needed for consumer experience considering the rapid progress and competitiveness in the fitness industry (Baena-Arroyo, Gálvez-Ruiz, Sánchez-Oliver, & Bernal-García, 2016; García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruiz, Sánchez-Oliver, Fernández-Gavira, Pitts, & Grimaldi-Puyana, 2020). As a result of the relevant literature review, the conceptual analysis of service outcome quality (SOQ), customer–employee interaction quality (CEIQ), and customer–customer interaction quality (CCIQ) suggested by Verhoef et al. (2009) and tested by Kim and Choi (2013) constitutes the starting point of this research. In this context, the aim of the study was to test the structural relationships between the customer experience in a hedonic environment (i.e., fitness services), SOQ, CEIQ, CCIQ, and customer loyalty (CL). Additionally, we aimed to contribute to the knowledge and theory of CEQ specific to fitness services. Therefore, our results provide fitness center managers with a better understanding of the quality perceptions attributed to members and the outputs of CEQ.

**Literature review and hypotheses development**

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) generally state that consumption should be seen as an experience that includes a continuous flow of fantasies, emotions, entertainment, and different customer perceptions (Jain, Aagja, &

Bagdare, 2017). In this context, customer experience includes various entertainment activities, sensory pleasures, dreams, aesthetic pleasure, and emotional responses (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). According to Walls (2009), experiences have unique and personal qualities that occupy them emotionally and are remembered, require the perception and participation of the customer, and can be shared with others. Similarly, exercising has cognitive and emotional benefits, such as enhancing one's life experiences, promoting fun, enabling self-realization, and recharging one's life energy. In this state, the benefits obtained from exercise are subjective and related to personal experiences (Baena-Arroyo, García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruiz, & Grimaldi-Puyana, 2020; Eskiler, Yildiz, & Ayhan, 2019). In other words, fitness services as an action, effort, or performance are an experience (Eskiler & Altunisik, 2019). In this case, the customer experience can be evaluated as enjoyable, interesting, and unforgettable activities and moments (Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007) for individuals participating in exercise at a fitness center. Fitness services, like other services, have intangible, inseparable, perishable, and heterogeneous features that cannot be owned, and members pay not only for the core product (fitness membership) but also for "non-refundable" experiences in the fitness environment (Eskiler & Altunisik, 2019). Therefore, the participation decision, participation, and consumption action of individuals participating in exercise should be considered integral components of CEQ. Lemke, Clark, and Wilson (2011) state that customer experience consists of three dimensions – communication, service, and usage encounters – while Baena-Arroyo et al. (2020) discuss the service experience as hedonic, social, and utilitarian experiences. On the other hand, Verhoef et al. (2009) and Kim and Choi (2013) conceptualize CEQ as a collective construct, as customer experience is shaped and integrated at all points of interaction with the business. Customers' holistic customer experience perception in the retail world has four essential precursors, according to Verhoef et al. (2009): social environment, service interface, retail store atmosphere, and previous customer experience. Kim and Choi (2013) state that three dimensions (SOQ, CEIQ, and CCIQ) are more important than others in various service types (e.g., those provided by cinemas, bowling alleys, sports centers, and city tours). For this reason, we consider SOQ, CEIQ, and CCIQ as the precursors of CEQ to be achieved in fitness services.

Interactions between the phenomena of service quality and customer satisfaction and the expected repetitive purchasing or loyalty phenomena as a natural result of the interaction and satisfaction among them are critical to sports marketing and have been explored by numerous researchers (e.g., García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruíz, Pitts, Vélez-Colón, & Bernal-García, 2018b; Howat & Assaker, 2013; Walker, Farren, Dotterweich, Gould, & Walker, 2017). In particular, Oliver (1993) states that satisfaction is a psychological consequence resulting from an experience or emotional response to experiences associated with a purchase. On the other hand, although practitioners see customer experience as a significant factor in creating satisfaction or loyalty, the importance of customer experience has been emphasized in a limited number of studies (Baena-Arroyo et al., 2020; Behnam, Sato, & Baker, 2021; Kim & Choi, 2013). The literature can be enriched with such research. Therefore, SOQ is considered as one of the determinants of CEQ in this study. According to Brady and Cronin (2001), SOQ expresses the perceptions of customers regarding the superiority of what they achieve during service encounters (Kim & Choi, 2013). We argue that there is a positive relationship between SOQ and CEQ provided that the customer experience is considered the subjective response of the customer to holistic direct and indirect encounters with the company (Lemke et al., 2011).

$H_1$: Customer experience quality is positively affected by the quality of service results as perceived by fitness center customers.

As mentioned before, customer experience is evaluated as a result of interactions between customers and the company (service process), service providers (employees), and other customers. In the interaction between the customer and the employee, the customer experience is entirely personal (Meyer & Schwager, 2007), and the service provided is not standard because human performance is the essential product (Ko & Pastore, 2004). In this context, fitness services are a value creation process created through the interaction between the customer and the employee. Indeed, value creation can encourage service reuse in fitness centers, thereby leading to the behavioral loyalty of customers (Behnam et al., 2021). High-quality interactions that enable a fitness client to create unique experiences with their service provider (e.g., trainer) are "key to unlocking new sources of competitive advantage," according to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004, p. 7). Moreover, García-Fernández et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of customer–employee relationships and interactions for CL in CrossFit users. Therefore, the quality of the interaction between the customer and the employee (CEIQ) in the process of the co-creation of the experience is vital for both customers (satisfaction, emotional pleasure, stimulation, etc.) and companies (repeat purchasing, positive verbal communication and advice, loyalty, etc.; Akaka, Vargo, & Schau,

2015). Lemke et al. (2011) conceptualize CEIQ as the customer's judgments or perceptions of the superiority or excellence of the service provided. Therefore, it is possible to state that the judgments regarding CEIQ are the result of the communication and interactions that take place at multiple contact points, from the first contact with company employees (receptionist, trainer, etc.) to the service delivery and afterward. It is critical that employees exhibit good interaction skills in terms of attitude (importance to their job, etc.), behavior (friendly, polite, etc.), and levels of expertise (knowledge, application skills, etc.) in their interactions with customers (Ko & Pastore, 2004). As a matter of fact, customers' perception of a high level of interaction quality may accordingly increase the possibility of experiencing a high level of experience quality (Kim & Choi, 2013). In this context, we argue that there is a positive relationship between CEIQ and CEQ.

$H_2$: Customer experience quality is positively influenced by the quality of interaction as perceived by fitness center customers.

In many service contexts, customers receive services while other customers are also being served (Wu, 2007). For this reason, fitness services in particular are a social process in which active sports participation is realized and customers affect and interact with each other. According to Kim and Choi (2013), the interaction between customers is a part of their overall experience evaluations. Moreover, a customer's perception of the quality of the service provided can be influenced by other customers' attitudes and behaviors (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Eskiler & Altunisik, 2019; Ko & Pastore, 2004). This situation can be explained with the social influence approach. For example, Gao et al. (2020) state that customer interaction or exposure to the shared experiences of other customers enhances a customer's perception of his or her experience quality with the business. Moreover, it has been stated that the quality of interaction has strategic importance in both group lessons and low-cost fitness centers (García-Fernández et al., 2018b, 2020). Nevertheless, a limited number of studies take into account the interaction between customers (Huang & Hsu, 2010; Kim & Choi, 2013; Nicholls, 2010; Wu, 2007). Wu (2007) states that customers who are knowledgeable in tourism services can influence other customers' experiences by transferring useful information. Similarly, in the fitness environment, positive communication with other customers, such as situations in which customers help each other, can positively affect customers' service experience. However, the interaction between customers can have a negative effect on experience quality as well. When a customer misdirects another customer in a fitness facility, it may result in athlete injuries or more severe issues. In a sports environment, the inappropriate attitudes and behaviors of customers (speaking loudly, harassing verbally or with eye contact, etc.) may cause negative perceptions and disrupt the customer service experience. In the light of these explanations, we argue that there is a positive relationship between CCIQ and CEQ.

$H_3$: The quality of interaction between customers as perceived by fitness center customers positively affects the quality of the customer experience.

CL represents a customer's willingness to strive and sacrifice to maintain and improve their relationship with the company. Previous research has used repeat or repurchase and recommendation (engaging in positive verbal communication) intentions as indicators of CL (Amoah, Radder, van Eyk, & Elizabeth, 2016; Eskiler & Altunisik, 2021). Although Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996) confirm the link between service quality and CL, customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between service quality and loyalty and customer satisfaction is the primary precursor to CL in later studies (Chen & Chen, 2010; Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000; García-Fernández et al., 2018a, 2018b, 2020; Howat & Assaker, 2013). On the other hand, CEQ has been claimed to significantly impact consumers' cognitive and emotional purchasing behavior (Cetin & Dincer, 2014; Kim & Choi, 2013; Verhoef et al., 2009). For instance, service experience had a positive effect on behavioral intentions in a study conducted on group and virtual fitness class customers (Baena-Arroyo et al., 2016). According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), successful experiences are those that the customer finds unique, memorable, and sustaining over time, instill a desire to repeat and improve, and spread enthusiastically by word of mouth (Pullman & Gross, 2004). As such, we propose that CEQ is a precursor of CL and ensures and maintains long-term CL. In this context, companies that offer high-quality services (SOQ, CEIQ, and CCIQ) to create pleasant and interesting experiences can increase their CL and achieve successful marketing results.

$H_4$: Customer loyalty is positively affected by the quality of the customer experience as perceived by fitness center customers.

In the light of the explanations, the conceptual research model in Figure 1 was proposed for this study.

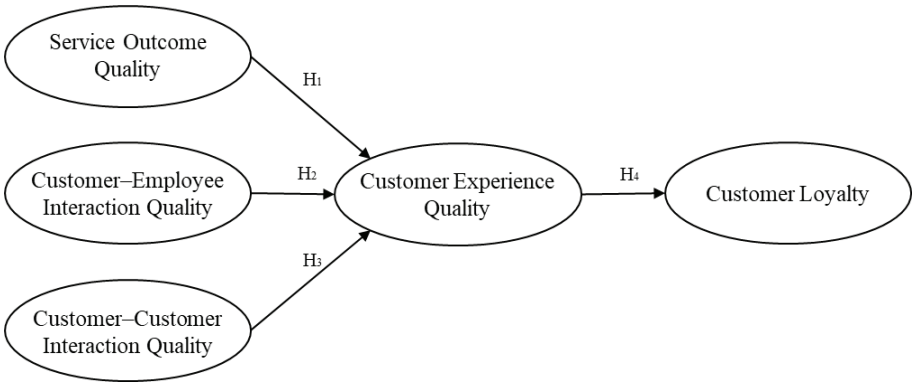


**Figure 1.** Proposed research model

## Method

This study aimed to test interactions between variables (SOQ, CEIQ, CCIQ, CEQ, and CL) based on a non-experimental, depictive, and descriptive design.

**Sample group and procedure**

In the first stage, 19 different fitness centers were contacted and the purpose and scope of the study were explained to each manager. Customers who were members of six different fitness centers and approved the application were included in the study. The data were collected through a questionnaire form applied by the researchers using the easy sampling method on different days and times of the week over four weeks in 2019. It was planned to apply 360 questionnaires in proportion to the number of members in the fitness centers. Participation in the research was voluntary. For this reason, customers were asked if they wanted to participate in the study and were provided brief information about the research at fitness center exits. Of the questionnaire forms distributed, 343 were completed and delivered to the researchers. The surveys took about 7–10 minutes to complete. After the completed questionnaires were examined (fixed signs with the same value, inconsistent marks for control questions, elimination of questionnaires with missing values or errors), a total of 287 were included in the analysis. To acquire an appropriate sample size, the number of participants should be at least 10–20 times the number of items in the scale if multivariate statistical tests are carried out (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). The sample size/number of items in the current study was 287/15 and provided the minimum criteria specified by the researchers.

Participants were in the 18-45 age range ($\overline{X}$ = 23.78 ± 6.36); 75.3% (n = 216) were male, and 24.7% (n = 71) were female. Most of the participants, at 53.3% (n = 153), were university graduates; 41.5% (n = 119) were high school graduates; and 5.2% (n = 15) had a postgraduate degree. The monthly personal income of the participants was 2,300£–8,000£ ($\overline{X}$ = 2886.34 ± 1141.22). In terms of membership duration, 40.8% of the participants (n = 117) had a membership for 6 months or less, 37.3% (n = 107) had one for 6–12 months, 12.5% (n = 36) had one for 1–2 years, and 9.4% (n = 27) had one for 2 years or more. An examination of weekly participation times in the centers showed that 2.8% of the participants (n = 8) exercised 1–2 times a week, 69.9% (n = 199) exercised 3–4 times a week, and 27.9% (n = 80) exercised 5 or more times a week. Furthermore, 17.4% (n = 50) used the fitness center for less than 1 hour per visit, 55.7% (n = 160) used it for 1 to 2 hours per visit, and 26.8% (n = 77) used it more than 2 hours per visit. Group lessons (spinning, step aerobics, etc.) were the most popular activity, followed by weight training. The main reasons the participants chose the fitness center were the friendly staff, knowledgeable trainers, adequacy of the physical facilities, program diversity, and cleanliness.

**Data collection tools**

In accordance with the purpose of the study, a questionnaire form was created by examining previous studies (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Kim & Choi, 2013; Lemke et al., 2011; Mohr & Bitner, 1995; Zeithaml et al., 1996). This form consisted of three parts. The questionnaire included questions for determining demographic characteristics (gender, age, duration of participation, etc.) and 15 items for measuring research variables. In the first part, nine

items suggested by Kim and Choi (2013) were included. These nine items are based on the work of Brady and Cronin (2001), Mohr and Bitner (1995), and Lemke et al. (2011). The second part consisted of three-item scales to evaluate CEQ (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Kim & Choi, 2013) and CL (Zeithaml et al., 1996). The back-translation method was used to test the language equivalence of the items in the scales. Before the data collection tool was finalized, an expert panel was made to ensure the scope and appearance validity. For possible answers, participants were asked to respond on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "totally disagree" (1) to "completely agree" (5).

**Data analysis**

The data were analyzed with the IBM SPSS and AMOS 20 programs. First, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, skewness, kurtosis) were calculated using IBM SPSS 20. The data were checked for normality using the criteria of skewness and kurtosis between ±2 (George & Mallery, 2016) and Mardia's multivariate kurtosis coefficient (Mardia, 1985). The structural equation model (SEM), which is a multivariate analysis method, was used along with other tools for causality analysis in the study. SEM examines the causal relationships between latent variables or between latent variables and observed variables (Hair et al., 2010). First, the maximum probability estimation procedure and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were evaluated for the measurement model. A study in which various latent variables were correlated was used to determine the measurement model's construct validity. The reliability of structures was measured using the values of Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha > .70$) and composite reliability (CR > .70) (Hair et al., 2010). Convergent validity were measured by composite reliability, and average shared variance (AVE > .50 / CR > AVE). Discriminant validity was tested through average variance extracted (AVE), maximum shared variance (MSV), and average shared variance (ASV); (MSV < AVE, ASV < AVE) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). CR, AVE, MSV, and ASV values were calculated using Gaskin's Excel-based Statistical Tools Package (Gaskin, 2016). Then, for the current study, a structural model analyzing the predicted relationships between variables was tested. The suitability of the data to the measurement and structural model was evaluated using various fit index values. In this study, the fit index (GFI ≥ 0.95), normed fit index (NFI ≥ 95), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI≥95), comparative fit index (CFI ≥ 0.95), standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR ≤ .05), and the root-mean-square of the prediction errors (RMESA ≤ .05) were used as model fit index values, and the Chi-square ($\chi^2$/df) test results were reported (Brown, 2006; Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008; Kline, 2015; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Chi-square values according to degrees of freedom ($\chi^2$/df) should be less than 3 (Hooper et al., 2008; Kline, 2015).

## Results

The CFA method was used to verify the structures in the measurement model with the measured expressions. The CFA results showed that the model fit the available data at a satisfactory level ($\chi^2$/df[160.52/80] = 2.01, SRMR = .033, RMSEA = .059 [90% CI = .046–.073], GFI = .93, NFI = .97, TLI = .98, CFI = .98). An RMSEA of .05–.08 and GFI index value in the range of .95–.90 are indicative of the suitability of an acceptable model (Brown, 2006; Hooper et al., 2008). Therefore, the RMSEA and GFI values were at acceptable levels. On the other hand, having the SRMR value less than .05 and NFI, TLI, and CFI index values above .95 showed that the model had good fit values (Hair et al., 2010; Kline, 2015). Finally, the $\chi^2$ statistic was significant ($p < .01$), and the ratio of statistics to degrees of freedom was lower than the suggested 3.0 criterion (Hooper et al., 2008; Kline, 2015).

In Table 1, the standardized regression coefficients ($\lambda$) show the relationship of each item with the relevant structure (factor) and the squares of these coefficients. The standardized regression coefficients of all items were between .803–.943 ($\lambda > .70$), and the t values ranged between 18.36–29.96, indicating that each item significantly represented its respective structure.

All tests that were used to evaluate the model in terms of reliability and validity are presented in Table 2. Accordingly, Cronbach's alpha (between .910-.948) and CR values (between .917–.949) were over 70, which is the acceptable level (Hair et al., 2010). These values showed that the model was reliable.

The AVE values tested for affinity validity (between .780–.841) were higher than 50, and the CR values were higher than the AVE values (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). For the discrimination validity test, AVE values of each factor were compared with MSV (between .450–.738) and ASV values (between .488–.671). Both MSV and ASV values for all factors did not exceed AVE values (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). In this case, the findings supported the model's similarity and discrimination validity. Descriptive statistics and interstructural correlations of the variables are summarized in Table 2. According to this information, all structures were

**Table 1.** Regression weights, *t*-values, $R^2$

| Construct | Items | Estimates | S.E. | *t*-values | Standardized loadings (λ) | $R^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Service Outcome Quality | SOQ 1 | 1.000 | – | – | .891 | .794 |
| | SOQ 2 | 1.209 | .049 | 24.777 | .931 | .867 |
| | SOQ 3 | 1.074 | .043 | 24.733 | .928 | .861 |
| Customer – Employee Interaction Quality | CEIQ 4 | 1.000 | – | – | .915 | .837 |
| | CEIQ 5 | 1.019 | .040 | 25.420 | .926 | .857 |
| | CEIQ 6 | .893 | .049 | 18.361 | .803 | .645 |
| Customer – Customer Interaction Quality | CCIQ 7 | 1.000 | – | – | .933 | .871 |
| | CCIQ 8 | .971 | .032 | 29.956 | .943 | .889 |
| | CCIQ 9 | .887 | .034 | 26.432 | .906 | .821 |
| Customer Experience Quality | CEQ 1 | 1.000 | – | – | .909 | .826 |
| | CEQ 2 | .840 | .039 | 21.795 | .864 | .747 |
| | CEQ 3 | 1.025 | .039 | 26.305 | .937 | .878 |
| Customer Loyalty | CL 1 | 1.000 | – | – | .899 | .808 |
| | CL 2 | .991 | .038 | 26.336 | .943 | .889 |
| | CL 3 | .755 | .040 | 18.657 | .816 | .666 |

Note: $\chi^2/df_{(160.52/80)} = 2.01$, SRMR = .033, RMSEA = .059 (90% CI = .046–.073), GFI = .93, NFI = .97, TLI = .98, CFI = .98.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics, correlations among the constructs and the results of reliability and validity

| | α | CR | AVE | MSV | ASV | Construct¥ | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | SOQ | CEIQ | CCIQ | CEQ | CL |
| SOQ | .938 | .941 | .841 | .702 | .573 | **.917** | | | | |
| CEIQ | .909 | .914 | .780 | .602 | .488 | .776 | **.883** | | | |
| CCIQ | .948 | .949 | .860 | .450 | .671 | .589 | .550 | **.927** | | |
| CEQ | .929 | .930 | .817 | .738 | .589 | .800 | .726 | .671 | **.904** | |
| CL | .910 | .917 | .788 | .738 | .588 | .838 | .722 | .624 | .859 | **.888** |
| $\bar{X}$ | – | – | – | – | – | 5.34 | 5.63 | 5.10 | 5.24. | 5.41 |
| SD | – | – | – | – | – | 1.45 | 1.27 | 1.59 | 1.48 | 1.62 |

Note: $\bar{X}$ = mean; SD = standard deviation; SOQ = service outcome quality; CEIQ = customer-employee integration quality; CCIQ = customer-customer interaction quality; CEQ = customer experience quality; CL = customer loyalty. ¥Numbers on the diagonal (in bold) represent the square root of the AVE. Off-diagonal numbers represent the correlations among constructs. Reliability = α > .70 and CR > .70; Convergent validity = CR > AVE and AVE > .50; Discriminant validity = MSV < AVE and ASVAVE.

moderately and highly positively correlated and statistically significant ($p < .01$). SOQ ($\bar{X} = 5.34 \pm 1.45$) had the highest average, while CCIQ ($\bar{X} = 5.10 \pm 1.59$) had the lowest average.

The SEM was used to test the relationships and interactions between the variables presented in Figure 1. The first analysis showed that the model fit indices were weaker than expected. The analysis was repeated by performing only one modification within the framework of the modification index values. When the general fit of the post-modification research model was examined ($\chi^2/df_{[186.79/82]} = 2.28$, SRMR = .041, RMSEA = .067 [90% CI = .054–.080], GFI = .92, NFI = .96; TLI = .97, CFI = .98), the model was found to fit well with the current data set (Hooper et al., 2008; Kline, 2015), and no other modification was required.

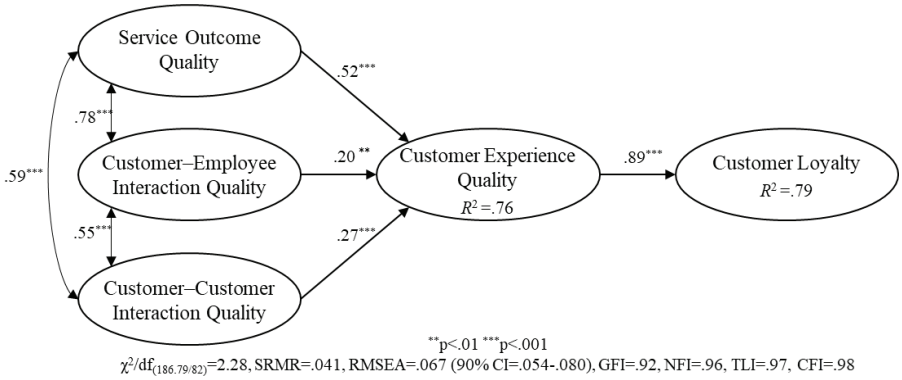


**Figure 2.** Standardized estimates of the structural model with identified path coefficients

The model depicted in Figure 2 indicates that SOQ (β = .52; p < .001), CEIQ (β = .20; p < .01), and CCIQ (β = .27; p < .001) were positive and significant predictors of CEQ. Therefore, hypotheses $H_1$, $H_2$, and $H_3$ were confirmed. On the other hand, the correlations between the CEQ determinants SOQ, CEIQ, and CCIQ were positive and significant (r = .78, r = .59, r = .55; p < .001). SOQ, CEIQ, and CCIQ structures explained 76% of the variance related to CEQ ($R^2$ = .76). In addition, CEQ (β = .89; p < .001) predicted CL positively and significantly. This finding revealed that hypothesis $H_4$ was also confirmed. The findings, the CEQ, and the predecessors explained 79% of the variance related to CL ($R^2$ = .79).

## Discussion

For years, CL has been one of the most fundamental concepts in long-term business profitability and sustainability. As a matter of fact, perceived quality, perceived value, and satisfaction in both the general service sector (Chen & Chen, 2010; Cronin et al., 2000) and the fitness sector (García-Fernández et al., 2018a; Howat & Assaker, 2013) increase CL, and customer satisfaction is the primary precursor of CL. However, over the last decade, researchers have emphasized the importance of creating a superior customer experience (Bueno, Weber, Bomfim, & Kato, 2019; Fernandes & Pinto, 2019; Jain et al., 2017; Kim & Choi, 2013; Lemke et al., 2011; Pullman & Gross, 2004). Moreover, due to the nature of the fitness industry, creating a superior customer experience is of paramount importance to businesses. However, little effort has been made to examine the premises and results of CEQ. In other words, despite the increasing interest in different sectors (Jain et al., 2017), empirical evidence that CEQ can contribute to CL is quite insufficient. Therefore, the current research analyzes the relationships between SOQ, CEIQ, CCIQ, CEQ, and CL through a holistic model and contributes to the sports marketing literature. In particular, this research expands the literature on the relationships of relevant variables in the sports context and offers various clues for other sectors. The findings show that, in general, fitness customers' perceptions of CEIQ, SOQ, and CCIQ are quite positive. Similarly, it should be emphasized that CEQ perceptions and CL levels have positive and high mean scores.

Findings from fitness center customers reveal that SOQ, CEIQ, and CCIQ are essential precursors of CEQ. In other words, CEQ is influenced by customers' perceptions of service results as well as their interactions with staff and other customers. In addition, consistent with the holistic nature of the customer experience, there was a moderate to high positive relationship between SOQ, CEIQ, and CCIQ. In this case, the variable that had the most critical effect on CEQ was SOQ, followed by CCIQ and CEIQ, respectively. Therefore, the obtained results were consistent with the work of Gao et al. (2020), Klaus and Maklan (2013), and Kim and Choi (2013). Our findings also provided empirical support for the proposition of Verhoef et al. (2009) on the relationship between CCIQ and CEQ.

The high impact of SOQ could result from fitness center customers being primarily concerned with the outcome of the service and their dominant needs (such as being healthy, losing weight, and looking fit) being at the forefront. Our results support the view that customers' perceptions of the superiority of what they achieve (to what extent their expectations are met) during service encounters (Brady & Cronin, 2001) are important. At this point, in addition to determining customer expectations and designing appropriate exercise programs, the physical environment in which the service is provided and presented can affect the customer experience positively or negatively. For this

reason, understanding customer expectations correctly and realizing the conditions and practices that will make them feel valuable can make it easier for them to have positive perceptions of experience.

Previous research has placed significant emphasis on creating positive interactions between businesses and customers or employees and customers in general (Kim & Choi, 2013). Our findings indicate that interactions between service providers and consumers significantly affect CEQ in the fitness industry. The interaction between an employee (e.g., personal trainer) and the customer is unique and is seen by business management as a unique value creation process. According to Berry and Carbone (2007, p. 27), customers consciously or unconsciously perceive or feel the environment through a series of cues and state that everything perceived or felt – or is noticeable in its absence – is a clue to the experience. In this context, employees also contribute various clues and messages to their surroundings. These tips and messages come together to provide customers with unique experiences. Communication should not be a monologue and should promote originality in creating a unique customer experience, as the interaction between each customer and employee will be different. Ko and Pastore (2004) point out the importance of good interaction skills in terms of employees' attitudes, behavior, level of expertise, and so on. Business management can provide in-service training to their employees on how to take into account different customer characteristics and decide on the correct interaction in the framework of these features and how to apply them. In addition, the recruitment process, promotion, employee motivation, empowerment, and retention capability of business professionals are gaining importance. For example, if a fitness instructor does not have the right skills or is not sufficiently motivated or trained, they may have difficulty interacting with customers or may endanger their health. For this reason, it is suggested that enterprises minimize employee turnover in order to achieve high CEI (Cetin & Dincer, 2014).

CCIQ is the second phenomenon that has the most significant impact on CEQ, and it is the mode of interaction that marketers have the least control over. Through various initiatives (in-service training, etc.), enforcement, implementation, and monitoring for impact can be carried out for CEIQ and SOQ. However, businesses must develop new strategies to manage communication and the interaction between customers or predict their results. As a matter of fact, Pullman and Gross (2004) state that interaction between customers can be a manageable component of service experience design that aims to design unforgettable customer experiences through careful planning of physical and relational elements in the service environment. Preventing adversities that may arise in fitness service environments with high interaction between customers can increase customers' perceptions of the quality of the experience. Emphasizing that CCI has a substantial impact on customer experience, Huang and Hsu (2010) state that developing appropriate interactions between customers can differentiate the marketing strategies of businesses. Heinonen, Jaakkola, and Neganova (2018) state that their CCI is versatile, complex, and related to both proposals and processes. Moreover, dysfunctional and abusive customers in the service environment and a heterogeneous customer base can negatively affect customer experiences (Wu, 2007; Verhoef et al., 2009). For this reason, fitness center managers can encourage collaboration among customers with exercise programs that require teamwork (such as particular interest or group activities) and bring likeminded customers together, especially in the service environment. We anticipate that market segmentation could be planned and implemented correctly within the framework of basic marketing principles to ensure this cooperation. Similarly, Gao et al. (2020) state that online or offline brand communities can be used to encourage interactions and conversations between customers, and these platforms can be reliable sources of information for products and services.

It is a well-known reality that loyal customers make more purchases and are less price sensitive. For this reason, building a loyal customer base is essential in fitness centers as in every business. When the relationship between CEQ and CL was examined, CEQ was an important determinant for CL. In a comparative analysis study of instructor and virtual fitness classes, service experience was one of the important determinants of customer satisfaction and future intentions (such as loyalty, willingness to pay more, and complaints). In this study, empowerment actions that contributed to creating the customer experience led to greater satisfaction and, in turn, CL (Baena-Arroyo et al., 2020). According to Pullman and Gross (2004, p. 553), "properly applied experiences will promote loyalty not only through a functional design but also by creating an emotional connection through an engaging, compelling and coherent context." In this case, when a holistic approach is adopted by taking into account the sum of all direct and indirect interactions in a fitness center, customers will display a positive attitude and thus become more loyal depending on their perception of the quality of the service experience. Likewise, previous studies suggest that consumer experience leads to behavioral loyalty (Baena-Arroyo et al., 2016, 2020; Behnam et al., 2021). Additionally, Srivastava and Kaul (2016) state that customer experience affects both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty in the retail industry, while Roy (2018) notes that customer experience for a hedonic service (restaurant chain) has a greater impact on consumer attitudes than for a utilitarian service (banking). When fitness services are considered largely

as a sector in the hedonic context (Lemke et al., 2011), it is possible to state that these research findings provide evidence for previous research.

It has been stated that CEQ attracts less attention from business management and researchers according to the concepts of service quality and customer satisfaction (Kim & Choi, 2013). Moreover, Bueno et al. (2019) state that customer experience studies focus primarily on tourism services (hotels, hotel restaurants, museums, and travel sites), followed by studies on healthcare and retail services, respectively. This study is important for focusing on the precursors and results of CEQ in fitness services. Based on the study findings, more attention could be paid to the precursors of CEQ in fitness services and efforts to create CEQ. In this way, it may be possible for fitness centers to gain a long-term competitive advantage. Customers interact directly and indirectly with the business through many channels and at different times (Funk, 2017). As a matter of fact, Lemke et al. (2011, p. 865-866) state that "The superiority of experience examples from hedonic contexts in the practitioner literature has the advantage of showing that the experience is created together with the business rather than delivered by itself." In support of this view, García-Fernández et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of ease of use of services and immediate solutions to potential problems. In this context, it is recommended that fitness center managers design pleasurable and user-centered interactions in which experiences are created together. Indeed, the authors point out that the customer experience can be gradually built through improvements in SOQ and repeated interactions with the service provider and other customers (Roy, 2018; Verhoef et al., 2009). The creation of a high CEQ as a result of this gradual construction will have positive effects on the development of a loyal customer base and long-term operating profitability. Fitness centers that optimize and effectively manage interactions with customers at all contact points before, during, and after purchasing can increase engagement, revenue, and future purchases and minimize losses by having a loyal customer portfolio (García-Fernández, 2020; Pullman & Gross, 2004).

**Limitations and future research**

Our study had some limitations that should be taken into account. The model tested in the study was analyzed using a cross-section data acquisition technique and self-administered questionnaire data. Research results based on an experimental design in which positive and negative experiences could be kept under control could help the results of this study be more clearly understood. The study was restricted to fitness centers that volunteered to participate and participants chosen from among these centers' customers using an easy sampling method. Therefore, national-level conclusions based on the results of the study should be put forward carefully. Research findings may offer insight to both practitioners and academics, but we anticipate that future research may help generalize current findings. As previously reported, Turkey's fitness industry has a rapidly evolving market structure, and consumer perceptions can shift continuously (Eskiler & Altunisik, 2021). For this reason, it is strategically important to measure consumer demands and expectations in developing markets systematically and to organize business practices in line with this information. Finally, this research included a total of five variables, three CEQ precursors (SOQ, CEIQ, and CCIQ) and one outcome variable (CL). A model can be developed in future studies using different variables. For example, there is a need for studies to determine the relationship between customer experience and business performance or how it affects marketing results such as market share and profitability (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). This study was conducted with a focus on private fitness centers. Therefore, further studies could be performed in different types of public and private sports facilities or sectoral comparisons could be made with larger sample groups. Lastly, future studies could assess additional factors (e.g., male and female participants, low – and high-cost fitness centers, low and high involvement) (Eskiler & Altunisik, 2021; García-Fernández, 2018, 2020) as moderating variables.

## Conclusion

This study reveals the positive relationships and interactions between the research variables. Our findings show that customers who perceive a high-quality experience attributable to high CEIQ and CCIQ might also be more likely to become loyal customers thanks to the improvement of SOQ. The results can contribute to the development and improvement of marketing strategies for increasing CEQ in fitness centers, creating the customer experience, and managing the process. Additionally, the findings have implications for fitness center executives or marketing managers who aim to increase CL (or member loyalty) and club effectiveness.

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There are no potential conflicts of interest.

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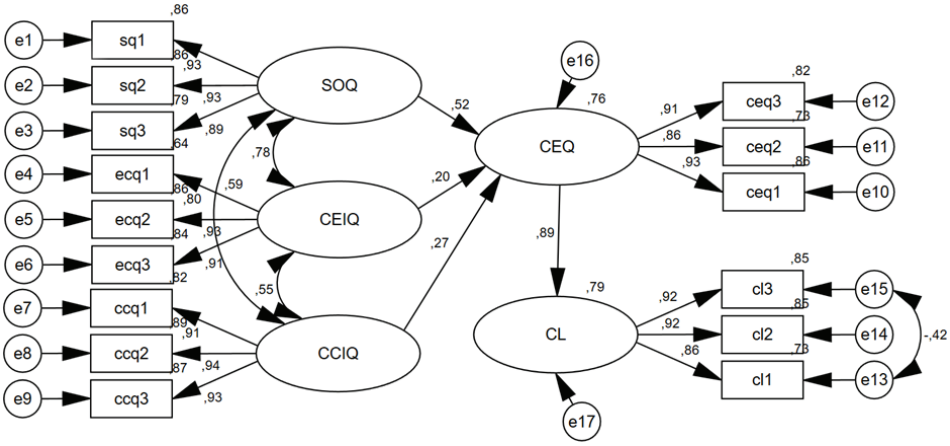


**Suppl. Figure 1.** The structural equation model demonstrates the relationship between service outcome quality (SOQ), customer–employee interaction quality (CEIQ), customer–customer interaction quality (CCIQ), customer experience quality (CEQ), and customer loyalty (CL)

**Suppl. Table 1.** Standardized direct, indirect, and total effects

| Construct | Standardized Effects | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Direct | | Indirect | | Total | |
| | CEQ | CL | CEQ | CL | CEQ | CL |
| SOQ | .516 | – | – | .458 | .516 | .458 |
| CEIQ | .196 | – | – | .174 | .196 | .174 |
| CCIQ | .269 | – | – | .239 | .269 | .239 |
| CEQ | – | .887 | – | – | – | .887 |

**Suppl. Table 2.** Survey items

| |
|---|
| **Service outcome quality** (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Kim & Choi, 2013; Mohr & Bitner, 1995) |
| I would say that XYZ gives the requested outcome to the customers. |
| I believe that XYZ provides superior outcomes to its customers. |
| feel good about what XYZ provides to its customers. |
| **Interaction quality (**Brady & Cronin, 2001; Kim & Choi, 2013; Mohr & Bitner, 1995) |
| I believe that XYZ and XYZ's employees are caring for the customers. |
| I would say that XYZ and XYZ's employees are interested in the customers. |
| I think that the quality of my interaction with XYZ and XYZ's employees is excellent. |
| **Peer-to-peer quality** ((Brady & Cronin, 2001; Kim & Choi, 2013; Lemke et al., 2010) |
| I think that total contact with other customers at XYZ is excellent. |
| I believe that we get superior interactions with other customers at XYZ. |
| I would say that the quality of my interaction with other customers at XYZ is excellent. |
| **Customer experience quality** ((Brady & Cronin, 2001; Kim & Choi, 2013; Lemke et al., 2010) |
| I think that the total experience procedure at XYZ is excellent. |
| I believe that we get a superior experience at XYZ. |
| I would say that the experience at XYZ is excellent. |
| **Customer loyalty** (Zeithaml et al, 1996) |
| XYZ is my first choice to buy fitness services. |
| I will continue to visit XYZ in the next years. |
| I will recommend XYZ services to others. |

Note: All items were scored on a five-point Likert scale from "totally disagree" (1) to "completely agree" (5).

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# Applying Dyer's Star Theory to Sport: Understanding the Cultivation of Athlete Stardom

**Authors' contribution:**

A) conception and design of the study
B) acquisition of data
C) analysis and interpretation of data
D) manuscript preparation
E) obtaining funding

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## Abstract

Sports stars and heroes have always been a product of the times in which they have existed and, as such, athlete stars, largely constructed by and through the media, have evolved over time. In particular, the meanings of characteristics that have defined stars of different generations have changed as society's expectations and social norms have evolved. This can be understood through Richard Dyer's (1998) star theory, which states that to cultivate their stardom a celebrity must resonate with the ideals, values, and spirit of the time.

This theoretical paper aims to highlight how Dyer's star theory – originally developed as a means of understanding the construction of movie stars by mainstream media – can be used to understand the ways in which athlete stars can promote star attributes to cultivate their stardom by displaying modern values and presenting themselves as both "ordinary" and "extraordinary." By creating a framework for understanding the process of creating athlete stardom, we are also able to begin to understand how athletes' social media activities and stardom will evolve in the future, thus creating an important tool for athletes and their managers responsible for enhancing their brand. To expound and enrich the theory a survey of sports fans is included. The survey responses provide insights into how the expectations of fans can influence social athlete social media strategies and the cultivation of athlete stars.

**Key words:** Stars, stardom, athletes, sport, social media

## Introduction

The idea of athletes as global stars, while not necessarily new, has grown significantly in the global digital age. Increasingly, athlete stars command the kind of attention that elevates them into some of the most recognized brands in the world. Having this level of brand power makes them an increasingly influential tool for the teams they represent and for other brands wishing to align themselves with sporting stars who are increasingly capturing the hearts and minds of young consumers. Indeed, research by Pifer et al. (2015) highlight that young sports fans are often more likely to loyally follow their favorite athletes, rather than their favorite teams.

Stimulating their stardom and power has been the hyper-commercialization of global sport and the associated ballooning of player wages (Pifer et al., 2015). In Europe's top professional soccer leagues, somewhere between 50% and 70% of team revenues is consumed by player wages (Deloitte, 2013), while in American leagues such

as the NBA, MLB, and NFL the figure is close to 50% (Pifer et al., 2015). To leverage the star power of athletes to amplify their own brand value, clubs and teams actively seek to promote and enhance the profiles of their most successful and commercially appealing players. In this sense, star players have been defined and collated alongside a range of other variables associated with the development of brand equity in sports teams (Su et al., 2020).

The relationship between star athletes and the value of the teams they play for has been the focus for a range of studies, including Pifer et al. (2015), who set out to "better understand the seemingly fundamental and important relationship between star players and team's brand equities" by investigating and assessing how star player characteristics affect areas of brand equities that are important to professional teams. Other studies, such as Braunstein and Zhang (2005), have developed frameworks for how we can understand what makes an athlete a star and the characteristics an athlete must possess to become a star. These areas will be elaborated on in the following section.

However, what is not as widely understood or studied is the process by which athletes can cultivate their own stardom by actively promoting their star characteristics. In an attempt to better understand this, the present theoretical study draws on the "star theory" of cinema and film scholar Richard Dyer, who, in his most famous book, *Stars*, first published in 1979, examined how movie stars were created. By linking notions of stardom and star characteristics to Dyer's star theory, we can begin to understand how star characteristics can be harnessed and promoted by athletes on their social media channels to develop and manifest their star status. In doing so, we are able to better understand the social media strategies of athletes and how they are likely to evolve in the future. As a result, we can create an important theoretical tool for athletes and athlete managers to use to guide the development of athlete stardom. To expound and enrich the theory a survey of sports fans is included. The survey responses provide insights into how the expectations of fans can influence social athlete social media strategies and the cultivation of athlete stars.

To fully understand how Dyer's star theory can be used to promote star characteristics and foster athlete stardom, it is first necessary to understand the concept of stardom in a sporting context and the athlete characteristics required to be a star.

**Understanding Stardom in Sport: What Makes a Star?**

As highlighted above, many studies of athlete stars have centered upon concepts of "athlete brands" and various frameworks designed to understand star attributes and characteristics. Given that star athletes are undoubtedly commercial brands, it is important to understand the concept of the "brand" and how it relates to stardom. Aaker (1991) listed four components of brand equity: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty. These have been utilized and expanded upon by others, including Braunstein and Zhang (2005), to make sense of how brand equity is created and sustained, and, importantly, how consumers respond to various brands. According to Aaker, the first phase, "brand awareness," relates to how quickly, easily, and often consumers think of a brand's name. The next phase, "brand image," is often developed through marketing ploys designed to shape the consumer's attitudes to the brand. This is linked to the "brand associations" phase, which provides insight into how a collection of perceptions combine to provide a judgement of the product's overall excellence. Judgements of overall excellence determine a brand's "perceived quality" and, if the overall quality is considered high, the brand will attain significant "brand equity" and "brand loyalty."

But what makes an athlete a star? There is no doubting the value of star athletes. When LeBron James joined the Cleveland Cavaliers, for example, his star status directly assisted the club to increase its average attendance from 11,497 to 20,562 per game. Simultaneously, the team value increased from $258 million to $476 million, the fifth most valuable franchise in the league (Matuszewski, 2010). Yet not every player makes such a significant difference to a franchise and its brand equity. What makes James so influential?

Although the term "star player" is used frequently in sports media, marketing, and public relations, there is a common acceptance amongst academics that it lacks a universal definition and that "ambiguity often surrounds the practitioner's use of the term" (Pifer et al., 2015, p. 93). However, despite this lack of clarity, there is a general acknowledgement that stars possess and exhibit important on-field and off-field characteristics that distinguish them from their peers, for if an athlete were famous for their off-field actions only, they would be a "celebrity," not a star (Rein et al., 1997).

Theories about the characteristics an individual should possess in order to be labeled a star generally began outside the realm of sport. McGuire (1968) argued that our attitudes about others are influenced by the expertise, trustworthiness, and persuasiveness we believe they possess. In 1985, McGuire highlighted that our understanding and acceptance of messaging depend upon similarity, familiarity, and liking of the person delivering the message. This illustrates the importance of trustworthiness, which was discussed by Braunstein and Zhang (2005) in their study of star characteristics. They found that attributes including athletic expertise, social attractiveness, likeable

personality, characteristic style, and professional trustworthiness best represent star qualities, and argued that star athletes have the ability to influence others based on these five-star power factors.

Other researchers such as Pifer et al. (2015) argue that these characteristics do not place enough emphasis on "concepts like winning and in-game performance." Other studies define "stars" through concepts relating to "sports heroes." However, these often place too great an emphasis on the athlete's on-field abilities and performance (Shuart, 2007; Yang and Shi, 2011).

Therefore, the most balanced and accurate definition of a star athlete should encompass both the on-field excellence of the athlete as well as the off-field characteristics that ensure they resonate with the public. As such, for this study a star athlete will be defined as an athlete with considerable on-field talents, which are superior to those of the majority of other participants, and who also possesses Braunstein and Zhang's (2005) five-star power factors: professional trustworthiness, likeable personality, athletic expertise, social attractiveness, and characteristic style.

This study is concerned with the ways in which star attributes are promoted and harnessed to cultivate stardom, and so has to ask in particular: How does an athlete with athletic expertise ensure they are also trusted by the community and seen as likeable, socially attractive, and as having characteristic style? How do they cultivate this image to create their stardom? Further, given the broad characteristic traits outlined above, are star characteristics interpreted differently in different communities, societies, and settings? Do they change from generation to generation? And what makes an athlete relatable, trusted, likeable, and attractive?

To help answer these questions and to understand how athletes can foster and enhance their stardom, it is first necessary to understand Dyer's star theory.

**How Is the Star Constructed? Applying Dyer's Star Theory to Sport**

The cultivation of sports stars can be understood through Richard Dyer's (1998) star theory. This states that a celebrity must resonate with the beliefs, ideals, values, and spirit of the time to capture the public's interest. According to Dyer, the celebrity or "star" is a branded social phenomenon, reflective of their environment and a product of their era and the culture of the time. As such, fans in a particular era are drawn to stars because they relate to them. This, in turn, helps make them seem trustworthy, likeable, and socially attractive. While Dyer was writing about cinema stars, his theory can be applied to sport as a means of understanding the construction of sports stars via their social media platforms. Dyer states that stars represent shared cultural values, and it is by conveying these prevailing beliefs and ideas that their star persona grows. In doing so, stars provide an ideal of what people generally are supposed to be like. This idea also relates to sport. Coakley (2011) discusses this from a sports perspective, outlining how the prevailing structures of sport provide a meritocratic pathway for obtaining power and recognition, which is promoted as the 'ideal' for others to aspire towards. Dyer believes the star persona is largely constructed by the star themselves, or by the media, which today would include the way sports stars cultivate their image via their own social media channels. Furthermore, Dyer proposes that the image of the star is paradoxical: a star is "ordinary" while also being "extraordinary."

To fully understand how notions of stardom can apply to sport and athletes, it is first necessary to understand their place in film studies. As Robert Shail (n.d, p. 1) explains, "the notion of stardom has been one of the medium's defining characteristics," remaining "central to the successful commercial production, distribution and exhibition of films" (p. 1). According to Shail, stars play a significant part in the marketing of cinema. In fact, they are often the primary reason audiences watch movies.

Shail might easily have been discussing the sports industry. In the commercial and professional world of sport, stars are increasingly utilized by sporting organizations to attract fans and help sell their brand. This is also reflective of changing consumer trends – particularly in relation to younger "Generation Z" fans, who are inclined to gravitate toward and follow their favorite athletes rather than a favourite team, changing their team allegiance based on who their favorite athletes are playing for (Duncan, 2020).

Athlete stardom is intrinsically linked to the marketing, promotion, and economic value of the sports industry. Richard de Cordova (1991) emphasizes this point, highlighting that the production of stardom is largely based on the desire of audiences to have more of a product that they have previously enjoyed. Thus, stars are fundamentally important in ensuring sporting audiences are attracted and retained. In this sense, they are a commodity and a product based on satisfying consumer demand.

As Richard Maltby (2003) outlines in his chapter on the star system in *Hollywood Cinema*, while stars are created and cultivated by industry producers, they are also required to embody the characteristics and attributes that make a star appealing to their audience. In this sense, stars as a form of branded social phenomenon are reflective of their environment.

According to Dyer (1998), the star image is constructed by means of various kinds of media texts, including publicity interviews, feature articles, and news reports; in the digital age, such texts would also include social media. The construction of the star is based upon the consistent portrayal of prevailing characteristics and attributes that resonate with and appeal to the audience. Dyer notes that this provides the industry with an opportunity to form a nuanced persona for the star over time. By these means, the star is transformed into a consumer product: fans want to be like them, dress like them, buy the same clothes as them, attend the same sporting events, and go to the same holiday destinations. As Shail (n.d., p. 9) notes, central to the successful creation of stars "is the notion that stars represent something meaningful to those who identify with them," which in the context of the star athlete involves appearing relatable, trustworthy, likeable, and socially attractive.

Dyer (1998) goes a step further and discusses the role of ideology in the construction and cultivation of stars. According to him, stars must embody the dominant ideology of Western society and, as outlined by Shail (n.d., p. 10) "provide an image of how the world is, or should be, usually with an aspect of approval or disapproval built-in." Similarly, Stacey (1994) believes that the conceptualization of stars is carried out through historical developments and that, to understand the process of stardom, it is necessary to contextualize the meaning of the star in the terms of their times and the particular mode of their fame's production and consumption. Thus, their meaning and the values they embody change from era to era, based on shifting ideological, production, and consumption trends in society.

Linking consumer demand and the production of stars is the effectiveness of the character or star in resonating with the public, which can then impact the way the star is perceived in their personal life (Dyer, 1998). For example, many viewers may like a particular actor because of the roles they play in movies. When this happens, the actor's authenticity and the authentication of the characters the actor plays merge. This concept is equally applicable to the athlete and the role they play in a team.

According to Dyer (1998), to truly resonate with their audience, a star must be seen as relatable and ordinary, reflective of shared everyday American or Western values, while at the same time also being seen as extraordinary – reflective of what ordinary citizens should aspire to be like. Thus, stars can be seen to have spectacular lifestyles thanks to their wealth and social capital, but owing to the "ordinary-extraordinary" paradox, this extravagance does not lead to feelings of resentment or jealousy from society. Stars are seen as ordinary people who live a more lavish lifestyle than the average citizen, yet to many they remain relatable. In the eyes of their fans, their wealth has not transformed them, at least not in a negative way. Rather, their wealth and success are justified: they have achieved what many citizens aspire toward and, as such, their extraordinary lifestyle is relatable to those who dream of a rich and famous lifestyle for themselves. Additionally, although they are famous, their fame serves to highlight their best qualities and portrays them as reputable citizens who reflect the prevailing values of society (Dyer, 1998). If we view this idea in the context of Braunstein and Zhang's (2005) five-star power factors, it is clear the "ordinary-extraordinary" paradox serves to enhance the key star characteristics. By appearing "ordinary," the athlete is seen as relatable, trusted, and even likeable, while their "extraordinary" attributes reinforce their athletic expertise and attractiveness since they represent what many others strive to be.

Critics of Dyer have stressed that, in today's vibrant, diverse, and dynamic society, there is no longer a monolithic dominant ideology. Society is more fluid and variable and, as such, stars can take different forms and appeal to different sub-groups of society based on their beliefs, values, and ideology. Furthermore, stars now have far more autonomy in the creation and cultivation of their persona and stardom than they did when Dyer wrote his work. While such persona creation was once the domain of industry producers and publicists, social media means that stars can control their own image far more readily in the digital age.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that, for stars to be successfully created, they must resonate with sections of the community based upon the ideas that they reflect and they must embody key shared characteristics, values, and ideals. This helps ensure fans see them as relatable, trustworthy, likeable, and attractive. It is also clear that the above film-based discussion of stardom can be applied to understand athlete stars. As highlighted previously, athlete stars are an increasingly important marketing tool for sports organizations (Pifer et al., 2015). For athletes to amplify their star characteristics, like movie stars, they must embody the common, shared values of society. Furthermore, just as the meaning of movie stars evolves from era to era based on changing ideological, production, and consumption trends, so too does that of athlete stars. Of particular interest to this study is how social media has impacted the creation, cultivation, and consumption of stars. Today's stars have more autonomy than ever in exhibiting their personality and shaping their stardom (Gibbs, O'Reilly, & Brunette, 2014. They are able to seamlessly engage with their fans, who can provide instantaneous feedback that enables athletes to measure the popularity of their persona and stardom in real time (Gibbs, O'Reilly, & Brunette, 2014; Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). Furthermore, social media enables athletes to portray particular values and ideals that help enhance their star attributes and cultivate their stardom.

**Enhancing Star Characteristics by Reflecting the Beliefs, Ideals, and Values of the Time**

By utilizing Dyer's star theory to interpret how athletes can cultivate their stardom, we can argue that for an athlete to promote the star characteristics of trustworthiness, likeability, athletic expertise, social attractiveness, and characteristic style, they must reflect the prevailing beliefs, ideals, and values of the time, and, more so, they must portray those values in a manner that upholds the star paradox of appearing both ordinary and extraordinary.

Yet, if it is true that stars evolve and change from one generation to the next, it is also true that they differ between communities, depending on the values that bind the latter. Indeed, in a culturally diverse and dynamic society made up of many sub-groups and cultures, star values can hardly be monolithic. Nevertheless, there are shared and commonly accepted values or ideals that most of society aspires toward or, at the very least, understands and respects. In their study on character strengths and virtues, Petersen and Seligman (2004) outlined 24 common values embedded in religions, rituals, literature, and human activities that have been recognized over time across national boundaries and different societies. They grouped these virtues into six key categories:

- Wisdom and knowledge – creativity, curiosity, judgement, love of learning, perspective
- Courage – bravery, honesty, persistence, zest
- Temperance – forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-control
- Transcendence – appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality
- Humanity – love, kindness, social intelligence
- Justice – teamwork, fairness, leadership

If we assume that these values resonate with society from generation to generation, country to country, and community to community, then perhaps the changes in star characteristics from one generation to the next are more nuanced, based on how they are interpreted and understood, or even how they are depicted in the way athletes project these values. For example, while Dyer (1998) outlines that star values were portrayed by the film industry through different media texts, today many movie and sports stars can use their own social and digital media channels to cultivate their stardom. Furthermore, the way society perceives notions such as beauty, bravery, spirituality, modesty, prudence, and humor can be seen as continuously evolving and as taking on different meanings in different eras and even communities. Thus, the way athletes actively live and project society's values must also evolve.

**A Voice on Social Media: Displaying Modern Values Through Social Media**

In today's society, athletes are increasingly engaging in social activism and causes to illustrate how they represent prevailing values and beliefs. According to Coombs and Cassilo (2017, p.426), recent times have seen a "resurgence of athletes engaging activism" that is reminiscent of the 1960s and 1970s. This is in contrast to the 1980s and 1990s, when athletes were less inclined to support social movements. During this period, athletes were becoming bigger national and global brands than ever before, with many establishing commercial agreements with organizations to promote and endorse their brands, products, and services. They generally felt there was too much money at stake to speak out about social injustices as they feared it would offend people with opposing views and potentially compromise their commercial deals (Taylor, 2020). Those who did take sides in social or political debates would often find themselves criticized and marginalized (Coombs and Cassilo, 2017) or told to "stick to what they know best" (Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015, p. 336).

However, this attitude appears to have changed again, with many athletes now being willing to "express an overt commitment to issues of social justice" and "display a degree of social vision – a sensitivity to social injustice" (Edgar, 2021, p. 157). According to Taylor (2020), citing sociologist Harry Edwards, player protests and other forms of activism are now "met with greater public acceptance" largely due to the existence of an audience that "includes people of color and other groups who know what it is to be on the margins." Thus, the actions of athletes reflect the changing demographics and attitudes of their audience. Further driving the resurgence of athlete activism, according to Edwards, is the fact that modern-day athletes are more financially independent than any group of athletes in any previous era of sport (Taylor, 2020). As highlighted earlier in this paper, some athletes are bigger than the franchises they play for, adding millions, or even billions, of dollars of brand equity to their team's value. Thus, some sports organizations need their star athletes at least as much as the athletes need the organization, so providing the athlete with a sense of freedom to advocate for social causes in which they passionately believe.

Kauffman and Wolff (2010, p. 158) outline that while research has been inconsistent in defining athlete activism, athletes themselves have defined it as "starting advocacy organisations, engaging in symbolic protests during competitions and resigning from a team as a form of protest." There has been no shortage of this type of activism in recent years. Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the American national anthem in 2016 in protest at police shootings of African Americans seemingly triggered a resurgence of athletes' social conscience (Coombs and Cassilo, 2017).

Following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of the police, NBA players including Carmelo Anthony, Stephen Jackson, and Damian Lillard joined protest marches, while Chris Paul and LeBron James led campaign efforts to encourage young African Americans to vote in the 2020 presidential election (Taylor, 2020). The NBA purposefully made social justice central to its 2020 season. The league placed social-justice messages on jerseys, allowed players to kneel during the national anthem and stenciled "Black Lives Matter" on the court (Feldman, 2020). Other forms of activism have been more symbolic, including National Collegiate Athlete Association teams putting phrases promoting social justice on their helmets, Major League Baseball teams stenciling "Black Lives Matter" on their home fields, and players wearing BLM T-shirts during batting practice (Taylor, 2020).

Some athletes engage with or even create foundations that are aimed at advancing social causes or addressing injustices. For instance, NFL veteran Michael Bennett, since retiring from the NFL, has dedicated a significant amount of his time to working with Athletes for Impact, an organization encouraging athletes and other sports figures to get involved with worthy causes. According to Bennett, "the idea is that not every athlete has to be another Colin Kaepernick. There are a number of ways, big and small, for athletes to bring about change in their communities" (Taylor, 2020).

Whatever way athletes choose to help advance social causes, by showing sensitivity to injustices and making a positive difference oriented toward the common good, they can be seen to exhibit a range of society's shared values, including wisdom, courage, temperance, transcendence, humanity, and justice. Applying Dyer's star theory to understand and interpret how this can enhance an athlete's stardom, we can argue that, by engaging in activism, athletes appear to reflect modern values, ideals, and sensitivities. In so doing, they demonstrate the "ordinary-extraordinary" paradox. They appear ordinary in that they show that they understand or have experienced the same injustices or challenges as many others in society, but they are extraordinary in that they are seen to be actively making a difference in addressing issues or advancing causes. In doing so, their star characteristics are enhanced—they are viewed as trustworthy, likeable, and socially attractive.

**Owning Their Voice on Social Media**

While Dyer (1998) stated a star's characteristics were presented via a range of traditional media texts, today athletes have the power to engage directly with their fans with highly controlled and strategic messages via social and digital media (Su et al., 2020; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Geurin, 2017). In doing so, their voice has become far more prevalent, enabling their power and recognition to transcend societal barriers and segmentation.

Researchers have explored the ways in which athletes manage their images on social media (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Kunkel, Funk, & Hill, 2013; Kunkel, Funk, & Lock, 2017). Su et al. (2020) illustrate that athlete brands are impacted by the sports, teams, leagues, and affiliations they represent. These brands then further manifest in the increasing production of interaction and engagement between athletes and fans (Gibbs, O'Reilly & Brunette, 2014; Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015), expanding athletes' profiles beyond the sporting arena to their off-field pursuits and personal lives (Su et al., 2020).

Social media thrives on the notion of voyeurism, with excited fans following their favorite athletes to gain a glimpse into their personal and professional lives (Su et al., 2020). Some athletes actively feed off this voyeurism to engage and interact with fans, posting images of themselves attending movie premieres, eating in restaurants, traveling on holidays, or attending other major sporting events (Gibbs, O'Reilly, & Brunette, 2014; Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). The impact of this is significant. Athletes now have a voice. Social and digital media provide them with an avenue to express their views and cultivate their image, release important information and engage with their fans. Some do this more naturally than others, with some athletes employing social media experts to develop content strategies in the hope of fostering a particular image of themselves that serves to improve their commercial value and even increase their marketability (Hutchins, 2011). To cultivate their image, athletes are thus increasingly bypassing traditional media and instead choosing to use their own social media channels or the official channels of their club or team.

**Survey Insights: Fans' Perceptions of Star Characteristics**

Based on the above analysis, for an athlete to cultivate their stardom, they must first appeal to, and resonate with, their fans. By posting social media content that portrays them as upholding the prevailing values of society, the athlete will appear as "relatable" and both "ordinary" and "extraordinary." In doing so, their star characteristics of being trustworthy, likeable, socially attractive, and athletically exceptional will also be promoted, which will assist them in cultivating their stardom. As already highlighted, activism is an important component in athletes displaying the shared values of society and establishing their "ordinary-extraordinary" status.

Dyer (1998) argues that, in the process of cultivating stardom, the demands of audiences must intersect with the production of content and other media texts, which then combine to produce the "athlete star." As such, it is important to understand where and how fans engage and interact with athletes, what type of athlete content they most enjoy engaging and interacting with, and, crucially, whether or not they believe the athletes they engage with reflect society's values or the same values as their fans. To gain insights into these consumer demands and perceptions and how the expectations of fans can influence the cultivation of athlete stars, a survey was made of sports fans.

## Methodology

The research participants were undergraduates studying sports media and sports business in Melbourne, Australia. The use of this student sample was considered appropriate given that the students have a strong interest in sport and athletes, reflect modern trends, practices, and values, represent a demographic often targeted for brand-related research (Biswas & Sherrell, 1993), and represent a significant portion of sports fans and consumers at the university (Ross et al., 2006). The sample consisted of 150 students, with a completion rate of 71.3% (107 respondents). Almost three-quarters (74.77%) of respondents were aged between 18 and 24, 22.43% were aged between 25 and 34, while 3% were aged 35 or above. 86% were male, while 14% were female. A screening question was included where respondents needed to identify that they did follow athletes on social media.

Based on a review of relevant literature, a survey questionnaire of 15 questions, including both categorical (multiple choice) and ordinal (Likert scale) responses, was designed through a "star theory lens," with all questions grouped under fundamental star theory themes.

In particular, the survey was designed to provide insights based on the following star theory-related questions:

- What type of content do sports fans enjoy seeing from their favorite athletes on social media?
- Does this content help athletes appear to reflect the common values of society?
- Does the content that athletes post, and the content that fans desire from their favorite athletes, help athletes appear both ordinary and extraordinary?
- Is content relating to athletes engaging with or leading social and political debates perceived positively by fans? Does it assist athletes in cultivating their image as reflective of the prevailing values of the time and thus enhance the star characteristics of trustworthiness, likeability, and social attractiveness?

Demographics, fandom levels and variables about sport consumption were collected as potential control variables to be used in the analysis, however the relatively small sample size did allow for the identification of socio-demographic or socio-cultural impacts. For a research project attempting to attain more categorical conclusions relating to athletes' social media use and fan expectations, a much larger sample size would be appropriate. Therefore, this theory led study does not attempt to draw any definitive conclusions, however, it does provide important and interesting insights regarding the use of Dyer's star theory to understand the process of cultivating athlete stardom.

### The Process of Cultivating the Star: Results and Discussion

*Following Athletes on Social and Digital Media*

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of survey respondents (97.2%) follow professional athletes on social media, while 30.84% visit athlete-to-fan websites either "often" or "sometimes"; 39.25% "rarely" visit these websites, while 29.91% "never" do. The fact that an overwhelming majority of respondents follow professional athletes on social media is significant. Dyer's star theory states that an athlete must reflect modern society, both in the characteristics that define and create the star's image, and also in the media texts used to cultivate that image. By being on social media, athletes are communicating using the same platforms as their fans. This helps make them appear as "ordinary" and "accessible" in that they communicate via social media channels just like other citizens and even engage with fans. This is a distinctly different approach to pre-digital times, when athletes were only accessible to fans in traditional media texts such as press conferences, interviews, feature articles, and publicity campaigns.

*Athlete Content on Social Media*

The type of content athletes post on social media should, according to Dyer, enhance the "ordinary-extraordinary" paradox.

When asked what type of content fans enjoy seeing most from the athlete social media accounts they follow, 78.5% of respondents stated they enjoy seeing content about what the athletes are doing in their personal and

private lives. Next most popular is general content about the sport the athlete plays (77.57%) and news about them specifically (71.96%).

These insights highlight the importance of social media content in cultivating an athlete's stardom. Furthermore, if we apply Dyer's star theory framework to these insights and also link them to Braunstein and Zhang's (2005) star power factors we can interpret them as illustrating how athletes can portray themselves as relatable and both "ordinary" and "extraordinary" to cultivate their star power. Over three-quarters of respondents most enjoyed seeing content about an athlete's personal and private life, which might include posts showcasing their homes, holidays, special events, dinner parties, and time spent with friends. This type of content can depict the athlete as an "everyday person," just like those viewing the content. This ensures the athlete appears as "ordinary." However, the content can also illustrate their "extraordinary" attributes, for although they may be posting content depicting everyday activities, it is also likely that, at least occasionally, the content will showcase their extraordinary lifestyles: their homes are likely to be bigger and more expensive, their holidays more lavish, their special occasions more spectacular. Thus, the content shared by athletes helps ensure they appear relatable while also establishing and illuminating the "ordinary-extraordinary" paradox. Furthermore, the fact over 70% of fans enjoy reading news about the athlete in a sporting context highlights the importance of posting content that boosts the perception of their athletic expertise. Again, this highlights the athlete's "extraordinary" characteristics.

*Athlete Beliefs, Ideals, and Opinions*

Interestingly, over half of all respondents (51.4%) stated that they enjoyed seeing athletes express their views and opinions about sporting and social issues. This view was amplified amongst those aged between 15-24 where 58.8% of respondents stated they enjoyed athletes expressing their views and opinions about sporting and social issues. Furthermore, when asked if they liked professional athletes expressing their views on social or political issues on social media, 57.01% of respondents stated that they did, while 38.32% stated they did not care if players voiced their opinions on social media or not. Only 4.67% stated they believed athletes should only discuss sporting and not social issues on social media.

When asked to what degree survey respondents agreed with the statement "professional athletes should only comment on issues relating to the sport they play," a large majority (71.97%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Over a quarter (28.04%) strongly disagreed, while only 9.35% agreed or strongly agreed. The remaining 18.69% neither agreed nor disagreed. This confirms the argument made above that the notion of athletes speaking about issues beyond the sporting field is largely now accepted and endorsed by the general public.

This supports the idea that athletes are no longer marginalized or criticized for voicing their opinions about sporting or social issues. While an athlete will never be viewed the same way in every community, country or region of the world, it does seem cries for athletes to "stick to what they know best [sport]" (Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015, p. 336) appear old-fashioned and redundant. In fact, given over half the respondents stated they enjoyed seeing athletes expressing their views and opinions, and less than 5% believed they should not express their views, athletes should feel free to promote their values and ideals via social media, safe in the knowledge that if their values are shared by their followers, it will enhance their image rather than damage it.

Further supporting this idea is the fact that fans generally believe athletes should lead or contribute to social debates, with 42.06% of respondents agreeing that professional athletes should be "social activists," while only 11.21% believe they should not. Interestingly, almost 80% of respondents claimed they respect athletes more if they actively engage with charities or social causes (79.44%), while almost 30% expect professional athletes to engage with or promote social causes or charities (28.97%).

An overwhelming majority of survey participants stated that they respect professional athletes more for taking a stand against forms of discrimination, such as racism, homophobia, and gender inequality (73.83%), while 26.17% stated an athlete's stance on issues of discrimination does not influence their view of the athlete. None of the respondents stated that they respect athletes less for taking a stand on such issues. Furthermore, over 70% claimed a professional athlete's view on a social or political issue could influence their own view, depending on what the issue was. Just over a quarter (25.23%), on the other hand, stated that an athlete's opinion would not impact their own view at all.

When it came to athletes sharing the same values as fans or society, over half of all respondents (51.4%) stated they either agree or strongly agree that their favorite athletes share the same values, beliefs, and ideals as them. Only 2.8% disagreed, while the remaining 45.79% were neutral. Likewise, 69.16% believe their favorite athletes reflect the values, beliefs, and ideals of today's society. Importantly, less than 1% disagree that their favorite athlete reflects the prevailing values, beliefs, and ideals of today's society.

These research insights highlight that the majority of fans endorse athletes engaging in different forms of activism, including actively engaging with charities and taking a stand against forms of discrimination. Almost four in five respondents respect athletes more for engaging with social charities and causes, and almost one in three expect them to. Similarly, almost four in five people respect athletes more for taking a stand against discrimination. If we view these insights through the lens of Dyer's star theory, it appears that activism can act as a key component in ensuring that athletes appear to support and advance modern values and ideals. This form of activism can help the athlete appear relatable. It also augments their image as "ordinary" in that it shows that they have experienced the same kind of discrimination as many others, or that they value prevailing ideas of equality and fairness, or that they feel passionately about the same issues as a significant portion of society.

However, it also helps them illustrate their "extraordinary" qualities as they are able to use their power and status to actively make a difference and either contribute to, or lead, important social debates. This also helps position them as "ideal" citizens who possess the values and qualities that society should aspire toward. Importantly, by engaging in activities oriented toward reflecting today's values, athletes are able to exhibit the widely admired values of wisdom and knowledge, courage, temperance, transcendence, humanity, and justice, which undoubtedly strengthens their star factor powers of trustworthiness, likeability, social attractiveness, and characteristic style.

## Conclusions

While there has been analysis of athlete brands, celebrities, and stars, as well as of star attributes and values, this study has sought to offer a theoretical framework for understanding the process of cultivating stars. While star characteristics have been highlighted in the past, Dyer's star theory allows us to understand how an athlete can foster, cultivate, and promote the star power factors to become a star. Fundamental to the star cultivation process is relating to society by reflecting the community's prevailing values, while augmenting the "ordinary-extraordinary" paradox. In this study we have argued that, to enhance their star power factors of professional trustworthiness, likeable personality, athletic expertise, social attractiveness, and characteristic style, athletes must represent society's most commonly respected values of wisdom, courage, temperance, transcendence, humanity, and justice. However, as Dyer notes, the nuances of what defines these values changes from generation to generation and even from community to community. Thus, athletes need to be aware of what those values represent in society at the time.

Importantly, the process for portraying and cultivating society's values is anchored in the idea that to successfully strike a chord with society athletes must present themselves in a manner that reflects key modern values and, in doing so, makes them appear both "ordinary" and "extraordinary." Thus, athletes must satisfy the demands or desires of their audience while cultivating their stardom via media texts. This paper has highlighted that cultivating their stardom via their own social media channels and engaging in forms of activism or advancing social causes is a key component of this in today's society.

This paper can be seen as an important theoretical primer for further studies that explore the process of cultivating stardom, which might include a more detailed analysis of the types of content that most resonate with modern values. Furthermore, by using Dyer's star theory to understand the creation of the athlete star via social media, we can also begin to predict how social media strategies and content dissemination might evolve in the future to reflect the prevailing values, beliefs, and ideals of the time. This creates an important theoretical tool for athletes and athlete managers responsible for enhancing athletes' brands. Importantly, the survey insights support and enrich the theory, highlighting that the majority of fans endorse athletes engaging in different forms of activism, including actively engaging with charities and taking a stand against forms of discrimination. Thus, Dyer's star theory can now be used as a theoretical framework for further empirically led research, with a larger sample size, seeking categorical and definitive trends between fan attitudes and expectations and the cultivation of athlete stardom.

Therefore, based on the research insights, it seems "star athletes" will continue to actively engage with social media and create content there that offers an insight into their personal and private lives as "ordinary" citizens, while also promoting their sense of social justice and social conscience through expressions of their views and their active participation in social causes and with charities. In doing this, athletes will be seen to share the same or similar values as their fans and the broader community. This will also make them seem "extraordinary", reflecting the image of the "ideal" athlete and citizen. For athletes, their star status and positive image and brand are not only dependent on their sporting exploits, but also on their life as a citizen, which includes their views and active participation within the community.

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# The Culture of Narcissism: A Philosophical Analysis of "Fitspiration" and the Objectified Self

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B) acquisition of data
C) analysis and interpretation of data
D) manuscript preparation
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## Abstract

This article is a philosophical examination of the social media culture of fitness and the behavior which most distinctly characterizes it. Of the numerous and varied digital subcultures emerging with the rise of photo-based social media during the 2010s, the culture surrounding fitness, or "fitspiration," stands out as one of the more notable. Research has identified the phenomenon as consisting to a large extent of users engaging in behaviors of self-sexualization and self-objectification, following, not unexpectedly, the inherent focus within fitness on the body, its maintenance and ultimately its appearance. Research also demonstrates that, for many, viewing and engaging in this behavior is linked to a deterioration of body-image, general self-perception and mental well-being. In this article, I analyze the phenomenon within a philosophical framework in which I combine the philosophical theory of Jean Baudrillard on media and the consumption of signs and the psychoanalytic perspective of Jacques Lacan on subjectivity, narcissism and desire. Using this framework, I discuss the body assuming the properties of a commodified object deriving its cultural value and meaning from the signs which adorn it, resulting in the "fitspiration" user imperative becoming the identification with an artificial object alien to the self, necessitating a narcissistically oriented, yet pernicious self-objectification. I argue that "fitspiration," as well as the photo-based social media which both enables and defines it, indulges narcissism, detrimentally exaggerating the narcissistic inclinations lying at the center of subjectivity.

**Keywords:** Fitness, fitspiration, social media, narcissism, Baudrillard

## Introduction

"The medium is the message," wrote the media critic and philosopher Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (2001, p. 30). He posited that for all media – past, present and future – the medium itself would be of greater significance to a society and the way its people think and behave than any message transmitted through it could ever be. The medium has characteristics and properties of its own that mold and modify the contents and experiences it gives rise to. As mirrors of reality, we see ourselves and the world, albeit distorted, in media, and it is the medium that defines how and what it is that we see. If used enough, a medium can even change us as we slowly adapt to the distorted version of reality the mirrors show (McLuhan, 2001). As we currently find

ourselves in a society increasingly saturated by the prevalence of photo-based social media, we ought to wonder: what does this medium tell us?

This article is a philosophical analysis of the social media culture of fitness from the perspective of Baudrillard's philosophy on signs and media, and Lacan's theory on subjectivity through desire. I argue that photo-based social media promotes the narcissistic tendencies of individuals in general and fosters a culture of masked narcissism within the digital fitness phenomenon specifically. I attempt to show that the distinctive behavior characterizing "fitspiration" constitutes a profound objectification of the self through viewing the body as an object having assumed the properties of a commodity, enveloped in the culturally ascribed signs through which its value is determined, and rooted in a narcissism detrimentally fueled and enhanced through the medium of social media.

**Background**

One of the defining trends of the last decade has been the rise of social media. The various social media platforms presently have a combined active global population of approximately 4.2 billion (Tankovska, 2021a), 1.2 billion of which are active users of the popular photo-sharing app Instagram, making it the world's largest platform of its kind (Tankovska, 2021b). Among the abundance of digital cultures that have emerged from this virtual landscape, the culture of fitness is one of the most prominent. "Fitspiration" (an amalgamation of the words fitness and inspiration; also "fitspo," used more frequently on Instagram but less in the research), as it has become known among scholars, refers to the digital culture of fitness that has predominantly developed on Instagram since around 2012 or 2013. A search for the corresponding hashtags *#fitspiration* and *#fitspo* in March 2021 returned 19.1 and 72.7 million posts, respectively. This type of content obviously attracts large crowds of users both posting and/or viewing content, millennials and the so-called Gen Z (people born around the turn of the millennium) in particular. It also attracts more women than men, for whom both the culture of "fitspiration" and photo-based social media in general are most widespread (Pew Research, 2019; Carrotte et al., 2015; Carrotte et al., 2017).

The "fitspiration" trend revolves in large part around the appearance of the body; posts in this category primarily depict fit bodies, or those aspiring to have one, commonly adopting static poses rather than exercising, or inspirational quotes overlain on a picture of a body or a neutral background (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Santarossa et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). One can imagine how engaging in behaviors where unrestrained attention and focus is directed towards one's body, by oneself and by others, would foster an environment where objectification and sexualization are encouraged, both of which appear as highly prominent features of "fitspiration" (Carrotte et al., 2017; Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Murashka et al., 2020; Santarossa et al., 2019). In fact, as noted by Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015), photo-sharing social media platforms such as Instagram might be construed as inherently self-objectifying given their very nature and how users interact with them – by posting photos, often of themselves, for the explicit purpose of being viewed by others. Posting thus presupposes and is dependent on an intended observer, without whom the act loses its purpose. After all, why even perform any sort of interaction publicly on social media, be it posting photos or statements, if not for the explicit purpose of the post being viewed by others, thereby conferring a consciously or unconsciously desired effect on the originator? Delimiting the contents of these posts to photos of the body, or even specific body parts, further enhances the objectification features inherent in the medium. The bodies in these pictures are often lightly dressed and posed in suggestive manners, seemingly socially legitimated and sanctioned in their self-presentation by their textual or otherwise conspicuous connection to fitness. A leisurely scroll through the contents of "fitspiration" reveals the normalization of this online self-expression within the community. It clearly garners a lot of appeal among young adults, who make up the majority of users (Carrotte et al., 2015; Carrotte et al., 2017), despite it rather explicitly constituting a behavior of objectification and sexualization – or perhaps because of it.

## "Fitspiration" and its philosophical elucidation

"Fitspiration" has been labeled "a wolf in sheep's clothing" (Uhlmann et al., 2018). The same sentiment also seems to be echoed quite unanimously among the rest of the research community. Results from existing research on "fitspiration" have been overwhelmingly one-sided in their findings of its harmful potential. Two themes are particularly pervasive and appear in most of the articles published on the topic. Firstly, scholars report harmful effects on mental well-being, body image and general self-perception, usually by way of social comparison (e.g. Anixiadis et al., 2019; Arroyo & Brunner, 2016; DiBisceglie & Arigo, 2019). Secondly, they highlight sexualization and objectification as traits featured heavily in the images posted. These two themes naturally overlap and are invariably

connected, with the former normally viewed as a consequence of the latter when directly engaging in the types of behaviors "fitspiration" entails.

As most of the research on "fitspiration" tends to focus on young women (as the majority of "fitspiration" users are female [Carrotte et al., 2017] and most "fitspiration" posts are of women [Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018]), the objectification theory by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) is often invoked as a means of interpretation. The theory provides a framework for analyzing how girls and women, to varying degrees, are socialized into behaviors of bodily self-objectification by a society saturated with messages of beauty and media images depicting idealized bodies of women. It is a process that is argued to be particularly aided by the internalization of media depictions of individuals as dismembered entities (i.e. faceless, focusing on specific body parts) stripped of their personality and enhanced in their function as physical or, often, sexual objects to be viewed and evaluated – a media phenomenon with many similarities to those of Instagram fitness photos. These kinds of depictions can be viewed as a norm when it comes to self-portrayal within the context of "fitspiration" (Carrotte et al., 2017; Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018), where objectification is usually a prominent feature, and naturally enhanced by the overt focus on the body inherent in the culture. Again, Instagram can itself also be understood as an inherent medium of objectification by its explicit function as a platform whereby individuals, inevitably disassembled into mere base characteristics, are exhibited for others to view and evaluate.

Thus, in adopting this behavior of self-objectification and, by extension, involuntarily attempting to become an object, one's subjective value is also determined through the exteriorly knowable features presentable through the medium of the image. The emphasis is placed squarely on appearance and positions the person in direct relation to and comparison with other people presenting in the same way. This primes them for disappointment and dissatisfaction with themselves if they fail to achieve a certain look, while simultaneously causing them to feel the pressure to conform to that look, leading to the deterioration of their self-perception and mental well-being. At face value, self-objectification, we can deduce, becomes part of a compensatory endeavor in response to feelings of inadequacy or in the attempt to obtain something one does not possess. This, of course, is neither a new phenomenon nor isolated to the confines of social media, but rather has long been a feature of society. It appears, though, that through social media it has evolved into a behavior with an increasingly strong allure for people, particularly young women (Talbot et al., 2017). According to two comprehensive reviews by Haidt and Twenge (2019a; 2019b), the evidence strongly supports the fact that social media generally has the potential to exert a negative influence on its users. Furthermore, it appears to be precisely the features which, although generally omnipresent, are especially prominent within "fitspiration" that harbor the greatest potential for harm.

**Baudrillard and the consumption of signs**

A key focus of the theorizing of Jean Baudrillard concerns the abstraction of the value of objects from use-value to sign-value, and even the diffusion of the logic of economy and consumption into non-objects and everyday practices. Through the influence of the ever-increasing presence of mass media, he argued that commodities have ceased to be defined by their functional use. Instead, he asserted, they are defined by what they signify; furthermore, what they signify is defined not by what they do, but rather by their relational position in the system of significations (Baudrillard, 1998). The effect is that consumers, by unconsciously reading the code for the system of consumption, come to consume signs and messages, psychological experiences, as much as (or instead of) commodities themselves, turning signs and symbols into hyperreal commodities. This consumption of signs does not, in Baudrillard's view, correspond very well to the usual notion of needs sometimes attributed as the logic of consumption (Baudrillard, 1998), the view that we consume in order to fulfill tangible and physical needs. Needs, by definition, can be satisfied, and the increasing insatiability of consumers reveals the fallibility of needs as the logic of consumption. Rather, what Baudrillard views as the consumer imperative is the search for differentiation. If needs apply, they do so only in reference to personal differentiation through the system of signification and its artificial associations and meanings, thereby seemingly making themselves unending. In keeping with Baudrillard's advocacy for an expansion of the concept of needs and for an increase in the explanatory potential it provides, I suggest that the psychoanalytic concept of desire be introduced instead.

**Lacan, desire and narcissism**

In advocating for a return to Freudian psychoanalysis, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan reintroduces desire as the basis of analytic experience (De Battista, 2017). As subjects driven by desire, desire lies at the center of our subjectivity. Beyond basic needs and wishes, the more fundamentally rooted desire is what creates subjectivity, manifesting as striving for validation and self-realization through things such as social status and the forming of

relationships, things that cannot be accomplished by virtue of a subject's agency alone. These are the desires that channel us into the world and require the world in order to be satisfied. For Lacan (2006), desire, as opposed to needs, is inherently obstructed from consciousness and is a means by which we project ourselves into the future we want to see realized. Subjectivity is therefore based in our narcissistic relationship to ourselves and is fundamentally constituted in absence – in what we unconsciously designate ourselves as lacking.

Narcissism should not be interpreted here merely as a derogatory description. In *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, Sigmund Freud describes it as "the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation" (2014, p. 1). Drawing on Freud, Lacan (2006) further views narcissism as one's relation and attraction to one's image and connects the emergence of subjectivity to the development of the narcissistic tendency of the individual, beginning with the mirror stage (to be discussed later). It is precisely the relationship individuals have to themselves when they are, in common terms, characterized as narcissistic that must always exist, albeit less intensely, for any desire, concerning the preservation, cultivation and aspiration centered around the self, to materialize. Desire thus always includes a narcissistic dimension. It then changes forms and adapts while corresponding to the outside world, over which we have no agency or control. As this world is in constant flux and is never stagnant, it renders our pursuit of the realization of these desires ultimately futile. This means that, and is Lacan's explanation as to why, we will never be truly satisfied. As Baudrillard writes, "There are no limits to man's 'need' as a social being (i.e. as a being productive of meaning and relative to others in value)" (1998, p. 64).

**Self-realization and social comparison**

This speaks to our nature as human beings. After all, is it not so that social differentiation is itself woven into the very fabric of the self-realization to which we all naturally strive? For Lacan, I think, this is the case. What then, if not the value-hierarchical structuring and organization of society – its culture and commodities by which we measure ourselves, our possessions and accomplishments – constitutes the framework for operating in our search for said self-realization? In *The Righteous Mind* (2013), social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, drawing on evolutionary psychology, describes how the human mind, developed and shaped over tens of thousands of years of early humans' tribalistic living, evolved through competition with individuals within the group and collectively as groups with other groups. In the comparatively few years since the development of modern society, our brains have not changed much, which ultimately means that ingrained deep within us as part of our biological heritage is the logic of interpersonal competition and hierarchical structuring. This parallels the social comparison theory by Festinger (1954), oft-cited in the research on "fitspiration" as a way of understanding its effect on users (e.g. Fardouly et al., 2018; Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Peng et al., 2019). It states that we automatically and unconsciously evaluate ourselves on a number of parameters by comparing ourselves to the people around us, thereby gauging our social standing in an inevitably hierarchical fashion through "upwards" and "downwards" social comparison. In turn, as noted by Reaves (2011), social comparison has its evolutionary roots in the systems of social rank found in animal behavior. According to Klein (1997), this subjective social comparison even seems to influence one's perceptions and judgements more than objective benchmarks do, if and when they are available for comparison, further adding to its significance in how the human mind creates its perception of itself. Hence, it seems it is really only in relation to our perception of others that we are able to create ourselves and define our own worth and subsequent subjective sense of place in the social hierarchy – a philosophical position shared by Lacanian psychoanalysis.

In striving for self-realization, we are simultaneously striving for personalization, a whole that can be reduced to its constituent parts and their sign-value, each of which is assigned a place relative to others in a system of status. In Baudrillard's (1998) view, objects and their production of meaning as signs and differentials are profoundly hierarchical. In personalizing oneself, one interacts with the order of significations, which occurs on both a conscious and an unconscious level, and then consumes according to it. It specifically becomes a process of differentiation through the consumption of the *significations* of objects, the meaning ascribed to them in the system of signs, and it is as signs that they gain the ability to distinguish a person through affiliation with their corresponding value markers. This is fundamental to the construction of identity and the process of self-realization "by which everyone takes their place in society" (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 61). In this sense, the consumer object is able to assume not only a physical form, but also an immaterial and abstract form. Baudrillard, for example, viewed time, in our modern sense of the word, as having assumed the properties of a commodity to be used, spared or wasted in leisure. A similar process of commodification of the non-conventional can be argued to be occurring on Instagram. When employed for personal expression, this medium is intrinsically linked to identity and the process of differentiation through which that identity is formulated and maintained. As such, it becomes a unique vessel for the transfusion of the same logic of

economy and consumption into the *objects*, the commodities, that are currently being marketed so fervently within "fitspiration." They become applicable to the *body* and its representation.

**Signifying the "real"**

Mass media, through which consumption is not only enacted, but also infused with meaning, is the great architect of our code of significations, the provider of archetypes with which we cannot help but model our lives and behaviors around. While this process was long dominated by traditional media, today it has arguably in large part been substituted for various instances of social media. When fed the never-ending stream of signs and images through screens that lay claim on an increasingly large portion of our waking lives in today's social media saturated climate, and paired with our propensity for conformity to outside influence, the images begin to be internalized and melded with our perception of reality (Baudrillard, 1994). Although we, for example, no longer subscribe to the ill-founded illusion of the Earth being the center of the cosmos, we are now instead generally uncritical subscribers to an illusory perspective on reality that is distorted by signs and images, created within mass media and, increasingly in recent years, within social media. While certainly not everything (or even most things) said or seen on social media are taken to be true, it still, assuming the position taken by Baudrillard, transmits significations which enter our consciousness and become integrated with our frame of reference. Slowly supplanting what they signify, they then become our perception of reality, perceived as more real than reality itself. As the historian and philosopher Richard Weaver wrote of the most influential medium of his time, "The newspaper is a man-made cosmos of the world of events around us at the time. For the average reader it is a construct with a set of significances which he no more thinks of examining than did his pious forbears of the thirteenth century […] think of questioning the cosmology" (Weaver, 1984, p. 93).

Regarding the age of the internet, studies have, for example, shown that information received through new media is generally highly influential on the behavior of young people (Ettel et al., 2012). Beauty standards too have long been known to exert great influence on individuals and to propagate and become normalized through the media. In their meta-analytical review of data from 156 studies, Myers and Crowther (2009) found that women tend to compare themselves to media images of women as frequently as they compare themselves to their peers with a more similar appearance. This tendency also appeared stronger in women than in men, echoing the position taken by most of the research published on "fitspiration," which has chosen to focus primarily on the effect it has on women (e.g. Seekis et al., 2020; Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019; Slater et al., 2017). Conducting this self-comparison on social media involves the melding of the two – the media depictions and the real – into one, conflating the one with the other. As Verrastro et al. (2020) note, the incongruity between the world of the images online and the reality outside of the screens creates appearance anxieties and emotional dissatisfaction as individuals, females in particular, become so immersed in the virtual representation that the distinction between it and reality start to become blurred. The model is confused with an original that never truly existed. Yet it is precisely the model, and the signs which envelop it, that is internalized and against which the social comparison is then conducted.

**The finest consumer object**

If we retain the view of photo-based social media in general, and its culture of fitness specifically, as inherently self-objectifying, through the reduction of its subjects into signifiable visual characteristics, it is only logical that the body would become its most valued object. "Fitspiration" can be viewed as an extension of the narcissistic self-investment inherently fostered by photo-based social media, a culturally and socially sustainable pretext for capitalizing on the symbolic sign-value attributed to the body as an object – one that conveniently circumvents the prevailing norms and social codes surrounding nudity and the conspicuous flaunting of the body as a sexually desirable object.

Baudrillard viewed the sexual liberation of the twentieth century as having "liberated" the body as something to be groomed and enhanced, thereby turning it into an object (Baudrillard, 1998). Having taken its place in the system of objects, and by being the most personal and subjectively representative thing we possess, it became the "finest consumer object" (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 129). By fusing ourselves with the object of the body, we have become consumers of ourselves, increasingly narcissistically invested in ourselves as objects to be manipulated as just another signifier of social status. While we once competed for this precious social currency with our peers primarily in instances of real physical interaction, and to a lesser extent with anonymous models and nameless entities in the media, we now have the whole world to compete with; and it is available to us around the clock. The possibilities for social comparison become endless, and the more we engage with the medium in this way, so too grow our "needs" in the Baudrillardian sense as social beings – or perhaps more aptly, our outwardly directed desires in the

Lacanian sense. In 1970, Baudrillard prophetically wrote that "When the whole social world becomes urbanized, when communication becomes total, 'needs' grow exponentially – not from the growth of appetite, but from competition" (1998, p. 65). The fact that over 4 billion people are now connected via social media (Tankovska, 2021a) surely makes any relevancy embedded in this statement in its original form all the more potent today.

**The fusion of the immanent and the transcendent**

Baudrillard (1998) viewed the locus of consumption as the separation of a total praxis into the sphere of the immanent, one of closed and private everydayness, and the sphere of the transcendent, one of the social, the cultural and mass communication. This division, I would argue, has today been completely shattered within the culture fostered through fitness on social media. The users within this space no longer have, or are expected to have, private lives or private bodies, thereby displacing them from the sphere of the immanent. Instead, everything about a person is exhibited for the viewing of others, exposing it all to the inescapable demands of social desirability and thereby rendering the individual an entirely Lacanian mirage of a person – a Baudrillardian simulation and "sham object," "offering an abundance of signs that they are real, but in fact they are not" (George Ritzer in Baudrillard, 1998, p. 12). It is this collapse of the divide between the public and the private sphere which allows for the narcissistic tendencies fundamental to the forming of identities to become unrestrained and grow uninhibited. This can be likened to the societal tendencies described by philosophers Bard and Söderqvist (2018) and termed *pornoflation* – a social-pornographic, narcissistic behavior of increasing exhibitionism of even the most intimate in order to garner attention. Unchecked, as is arguably the case with "fitspiration," this behavior risks degeneration into a state of *hypernarcissism*, a pathological and highly defining characteristic of the contemporary network society of which social media has become a constituent element (Bard & Söderqvist, 2018). However, this indulgence in narcissism does not result in a celebration of singularity, as Baudrillard puts it (1998), of differentiation through personalization, despite outward appearance. It is rather a refraction of features, of signs collected and reassembled, first found in the "fitspiration" collective and then reintroduced through personal, narcissistic expenditure.

From social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001), we can gather that in mass communication, behaviors, thought patterns and values are retrieved from the substantial modeling found in mass media, meaning that individuals observe the actions of people and their symbolic translations and learn from their consequences in social contexts. They then adapt their own behavior in accordance with what has been proved to be socially rewarding. As social arenas today are as much virtual as physical spaces, users literally model their striving for differentiation on signs and meanings flowing from social media, giving rise to the process repeating itself as they in turn come to embody the model.

"Fitspiration" is a clear example of this, as the myriad of identical pictures reveal, with users all differentiating themselves by the same means. The signs beckoning seductively for users' narcissistic assimilation are already there when their desire projects them outwards, as media models, produced en masse and composed of identifiable signs. "Everyone finds their personality in living up to these models" (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 96). If everyone seeks themselves in the same codified models, it presupposes that everyone's true, differentiated self; their personality (which they do not yet possess – hence their desire – but somehow still "know" to be theirs truly), already exists as signs. This means it exists only artificially, and thus, in attempting to become oneself, one is further fragmenting one's identity despite the intention to do the opposite. As people imitate each other's representation while striving for personalization, they are locked in a perpetual loop of subconscious dissatisfaction, compensated for by the ceaseless development of desires needing to be satiated. In theory, this is a recipe for a profound sense of absence and negative mental feedback loops; judging by the trends highlighted in the research on "fitspiration" in particular, as well as on social media in general (Haidt & Twenge, 2019a; 2019b), these are the results in practice as well.

This is a process which certainly appears to have intensified as the metaphysical distance between us and what we are presented with in the media has been drastically reduced. A sociocultural model commonly used for understanding negative appearance-related self-evaluation is the Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al., 1999). This model holds that the perceived ideal appearance to which one strives is the combined result of the influence of three primary sources: family, peers and the media. However, the media of today has shed its former anonymity. In doing so, it has shed its formerly held place in our consciousness and become a form of two-way communication. Now the media *is* us; it is made up of family, friends and people just like us. In combination with the fusion of the spheres of the immanent and the transcendent within "fitspiration," the three-fold distinction arguably no longer holds, but is rather combined into one. It is consequently personalizing, while also bridging the distance to the entire system of significations propagated by the media, through which its influence is made all the greater.

**The mirror stage and fictionalized self**

Although Instagram is a tool for communication between individuals, it is also, and perhaps more so, characterized by its function as a form of mass media, especially as social networks have grown to reach mass audiences rivaling those of traditional media. It is the consumption of signs and images, and by virtue of its user interactivity, it also serves as a platform for the expression of our own self-objectification, our misrecognition – *méconnaissance* (Lacan, 2006) – of ourselves as objects and our desire for that object to be consumed by others as signs, to become the thing we have already convinced ourselves of being. One of the central concepts in Lacanian theory is what he refers to as the mirror stage (2006), the stage of development where the young child misrecognizes their reflection in the mirror as an object in the world of objects through a kind of dialectic of objectifying identification. The child sees the representation of themselves in the mirror, which, in comparison with themselves, is already viewed as a complete unity, an imaginary gestalt of themselves as an organized whole. This is the point at which the child becomes a subject, fundamentally intertwined with the hereby emerging narcissism, by beginning to project desire towards this misrecognized image of themselves. Lacan (2006) also refers to this as the *imago*, referring precisely to the idealized mental image of the self, constituting both something other as the "Ideal-I" and its misrecognition as that which one already identifies with. This is the origin of the fractured subject wanting to become whole, creating a discordance as the child adopts this externalized image of themselves as the object of their self-identification, constituting the self in an imaginary alienation (Lacan, 1989). However, an object is defined by its material attributes, by its *lack* of desire, while a subject, by contrast, is an abstraction established precisely *upon* desire, and this fact serves as the inescapable distinction of our internal experience as separate from the world of objects.

Instagram is a medium through which users are given distinct tools to attempt to make themselves into their "Ideal-I," the entity serving as the imagined resulting object of their fulfilled desires, by mimicking and reflecting select aspects of the system of significations through which their desires are mediated and directed. "Fitspiration" represents the cultural value assigned to the body as an object of sexuality and status, resituated and codified within the system of significations as something beyond narcissistic self-indulgence, which in turn is codified as something undesirable. One's "Ideal-I" is then informed by and becomes intertwined with the signs constituting this cultural value, making it readable to consumers of the system of significations. The success of the endeavor to merge oneself with this imagined "I" can now easily be gauged and quantified through the number of likes accrued. Presenting "oneself" as an image on social media is the continuation of the same misrecognition of oneself as an object that began during the mirror stage; in attempting to be oneself so as to represent this entity, one must be seen as a complete whole, as an object alongside other objects.

Herein lies the irreconcilable paradox, as one sees and imagines oneself as "the finest consumer object" (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 129), internalizing this objectified view of oneself and projecting it onto social media for it to be validated as such by the imagined other. Lacan uses the concept of the gaze, "[…] not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other" (Lacan, 2004, p. 84), its function being to externally construct the subject as if gazed upon by an external observer, in the same way that the child first viewed themselves from the outside, as an object in the mirror. And yet, we can never be objects precisely because of that which makes us subjects in the first place – our outwardly projected desire towards that fictionalized unity of the self observed in the mirror. This is the desire for the impossible, the constitution of ourselves as subjects based on a profound *lacking*, an absence within us that can neither be filled nor removed.

According to Lacan (2004), we pour into the imagined gaze of the crowd our desire to be realized in the roles we assume, to be seen as the "I" with which we identify and which has already appeared before us as the mirrored gestalt reflected in the image, yet forever remains beyond our reach as the illusive projection of our ever-fluctuating desire. Therefore, part of the process of trying to become this "I" is the desire for our self-projection to be seen by others and, most importantly, as can be concluded from Haidt (2013), to be seen as desirable by others, the way we desire our misrecognized image in the mirror. What is deemed desirable is of course determined by the value-hierarchy according to which the system of signification with which one interacts is structured. However, we can never truly experience the desire of others, that which constitutes the origin of their subjectivity. For us, even the very idea of "others" becomes internalized as part of us, originating in the mirror stage as the external observer and then externalized by us as the gaze of the imaginary crowd. It therefore follows that the external observer for whom one projects will always be imaginary, despite the eventuality of the presence of a real crowd actually watching or viewing the images one posts. Obviously, this will never satiate one's desire for recognition, leading to ever more self-objectifying behavior, of which the "fitspiration" trend could be considered a contemporary embodiment. Continuing along this theoretical argument, it should hold that the more one indulges one's narcissistic tendencies and

self-objectifies in this way, the more at risk of further fragmenting and alienating oneself one becomes, leading to a perpetual loop of anxiety and feelings of internal disunity and dissatisfaction with oneself.

Furthermore, when self-projecting on social media, one assimilates the signs and images consumed and internalized from interacting with the medium and reintroduces them into the system as signifying the personalized and complete self, the "Ideal-I," the realization of which is the object of one's desire (Lacan, 2006). This desire to be complete must ultimately be the desire to become an object in another's eyes, with whom the sole power to validate the fiction of ourselves lies. However, it can only ever be little more than another failed attempt to turn ourselves into complete beings. As what we are desiring is the desire of others – desire being constituted in absence – the result is that we are trying to rectify one negation with what is fundamentally another negation. Clearly, this will never resolve the underlying problem of the fractured subject. Rather, I would argue, the problem is amplified by the intensified process of objectification manifested through fitness on social media, where subjects are both further objectified and further alienated from their idealized and highly codified self-projections as objects than has ever been possible before. There is a clinical term in psychoanalysis called pathological narcissism, defined as being driven by repressed feelings of self-hatred and inflated self-grandeur masking an intense yearning for approval (Lasch, 2018). Following Lacan's views on the objectification of the self, the term might serve here both as a description of the culture of pornoflation being cultivated by "fitspiration" and as an indication as to what the consequences of indulging these impulses might be, while also providing an explanation for the already well-established rise in negative self-perceptions among its users and the negative impact on mental well-being that it seems to exert.

## Concluding remarks

Situating the phenomenon of "fitspiration" within a philosophical framework combining Baudrillard and Lacan allows for a deeper level of understanding and explanation of the philosophical underpinnings and implications of the behavior characteristic of "fitspiration."

On Instagram as a visual medium, and within "fitspiration" in particular, one is compelled with a rare level of conspicuousness to indulge one's narcissistic impulses through the projection of one's imaginary form as the "Ideal-I," codified as an object adorned with all the cultural signs which constitute it. In the age of digitalization, "fitspiration" can be described as a natural extension of the cultural attribution of sign-value afforded to individual appearance and beauty. Beauty has become an absolute imperative – the capitalization on the body through narcissistic reinvestment – and is expressed on a broad cultural scale through erotic appeal. It imbues the whole field of sign consumption with a sexualization deeply engrained with narcissistic tendencies. Sexualization enhances the allure of social media, and social media enhances the allure of sexualization, carrying with it the signs with which it is assigned its cultural meaning, reaching a state of ubiquity in "fitspiration." Sexualization then turns into objectification. In succumbing to the easily accessible gratification on social media of displaying oneself as being in possession of the finest consumer object to the gaze and perceived attention of the crowd, one is exacerbating the processes of self-objectification and allowing one's further alienation through identification with an object far removed from oneself and forever trapped in the imaginary. The phenomenon of "fitspiration," which appears on the surface to be a benign sheep, enabling free and emancipated self-expression without restraints or inhibitions, seems in fact to conceal a malicious wolf, ready to prey on the cracks in the façade of the self – beneath which is exposed the frail and vulnerable human subject.

Narcissism always originates from a drive to attend to the interests of the subject and inevitably grows along with the subject's unfulfilled desires. The growth of narcissism must thus always be a response to some underlying sense of insufficiency, described here as the disparity between the imaginary, unitary self-identification mediated through the medialized code of significations and projected onto the image and the disunity of the internal subjective experience of the self, defined by infinitely fluctuating desires. I have argued that rather than providing the recognition desired and manifested as narcissistically oriented self-objectification, overindulging one's innate narcissistic inclinations through the mechanisms enabled within the context of "fitspiration" provides no rectification of that *lack* from which desire emanates, and thus no remedy for the anxiety which it generates. The incompleteness of subjects can never be mended in this way.

While hardly unique to "fitspiration," self-sexualization and self-objectification in contemporary society, as has been described here, seemingly finds a natural and self-legitimizing culmination in the culture of self-realization that "fitspiration" promotes. As the divide between the spheres of the immanent and the transcendent crumbles, as narcissistic "self-preservation" becomes ubiquitously engaged, seeking to reconcile the incompleteness which lies

at the heart of subjectivity by submitting to the urge to embrace this narcissism rather than resist it appears, by all accounts, to be an ill-advised way of adapting to the interconnected and image-centered society we now find ourselves in. McLuhan once declared the medium of communication itself to be the true message. What, then, is the message harbored in the very essence of photo-based social media? Does it speak of narcissistic self-inflation and the pampering of ourselves for the viewing of others? If so, then rarely has it been spoken as loudly as within the social media fitness culture, to the unwitting detriment of its members.

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# The Crisis of Physical Education in the Discourse of Mimicry: Ukrainian and Global Contexts

**Authors' contribution:**

A) conception and design of the study
B) acquisition of data
C) analysis and interpretation of data
D) manuscript preparation
E) obtaining funding

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## Abstract

This study presents a qualitative analytical approach through a critical analysis of data to critically describe, interpret, and explain the crisis in physical education (PE) in Ukraine and the world. The subject of consideration is the Ukrainian PE curriculum, which must be followed by all teachers when making lesson plans. Among the many different obstacles for Ukrainian PE, the study focused on one of the most important and hidden barriers, which is a kind of multiplier of the crisis – the culture of mimicry. Institutional mimicry is a serious problem that has been poorly analyzed, but it is actually very significant and often causes crises or slows down the progress of PE. Ignoring or failing to understand the factor of mimicry reduces the possibility of escaping a crisis or even makes escape impossible. The results show that the mimicry of PE is at least two-tiered: on the one hand, it is bureaucratic (external), and on the other, it is "internal" (based on tradition). Mimicry in the Ukrainian reality of PE is not advertised, but there is almost no alternative path for development. The constant mimicry of PE in Ukraine has created a paradoxical situation in which scientific expediency yields to politics and eventually leads to a new crisis. The study shows that there is a missing culture of influence on political decisions in Ukraine. Ukrainian PE teachers have a culture of mimicry, not a culture of leadership. The Ukrainian PE curriculum for secondary schools contains contradictions in its theoretical and practical parts.

**Keywords:** Curriculum, bureaucratic, tradition, policy, Ukraine

## Introduction

As in many civilized countries in the world, physical education (PE) is in crisis in Ukraine. A very indicative marker of the crisis is the number of people involved in physical activity both in educational institutions (direct marker) and after graduation (indirect marker). The number of pupils and students involved in PE is extremely low in Ukraine. In schools where PE is a compulsory subject (the curriculum provides for 2-3 academic hours per week), only 45.9% of students participate (Sportmon.org, 2018). As for the population that does not have any special time for exercise, the statistics are even worse. The results of an all-Ukrainian survey show that

> *only 3% of the population aged 16 to 74 had a sufficient level of health-improving physical activity (at least 4–5 times per week lasting at least 30 minutes), the average level — 6%, low level (1–2 hours per week) — 33% of the*

*population. Hypokinesis is characteristic of the majority of the adult population. Among children, the popularity of sedentary leisure is growing.* (Rada.gov.ua*,* 2016).

Compared to the countries of the European Union, the Ukrainian case looks bad:

*Around 28% of the European Union (EU) population aged 16 or over did not do any exercise outside working time in 2017, in contrast with the rest of the EU population, who undertook some form of sports, fitness or recreational activities in their leisure time. In a typical week, just over one quarter (27%) of the EU population exercised for up to 3 hours, 17% for between 3 and 5 hours and 28% for 5 hours or more. In the most EU Member States, the majority of the population carried out some form of exercise in their leisure time, with the highest proportion in Romania (96%). Athwart there were two Member States where less than 50 % of the population were physically active outside work: Portugal (45%) and Croatia (36%)* (Eurostat, 2017).

The Ukrainian statistics raise the question of whether people are incompetent or their own worst enemies. There are many reasons for sedentary behavior as well as many barriers to physical activity, including those of a meteorological nature (Sainchuk, Sainchuk, & Fidchunov, 2021). In fact, due to the lack of indisputable evidence that PE in educational institutions forms the habit of an active life in the future, there is cause for doubt in the civilized world about the feasibility of this subject. Since the late 1980s, some scientists have from time to time made futurological predictions about PE, even predicting its complete disappearance (Siedentop, 1987; Taggart, 1988). In the first decade of the 21st century, this issue is still relevant. In "Physical Education Futures," Kirk (2010) calls for radical reform as a guarantee of a stable future for PE in schools that would make its extinction impossible. Zeigler (2014) believes that the next 10–15 years will be crucial for PE and sports education. Crum (2016) states that in the final report of a governmental advisory committee concerning the desirable structure and content of Dutch school education in 2032, PE is no longer mentioned as a subject in the core curriculum.

Despite the fact that research leads to the conclusion that the PE crisis lies within the discipline itself, this reason, despite all its rationality and weight, is not the main one. Old methods can be improved upon and new approaches can be invented and implemented, but failure is inevitable. It is impossible to consider everything; the world does not stand still. The roots of the PE crisis are rather in the permanent diffusion of goals. As a result, PE must in fact adapt to new educational demands. Pangrazi (2010) argues that professional PE organizations change their focus every 5–10 years. Bocarro et al. (2008), Jago et al. (2009), and McKenzie et al. (2008) analyzed the history of the organization of PE and found that over the past few decades there have been significant changes and transformations associated with the transition from the traditional sports-skilled orientation of PE to a broader direction related to health, fitness, and lifelong physical activity.

At the same time, the subject of PE is unchanged; it revolves around the human body and corporeality.

One scientific publication (Sainchuk, 2016) briefly describes the methodologies through which it is possible to explain and interpret the causes of the PE crisis phenomenon in Ukraine's educational sphere. It provides an approximate non-hierarchical list of the phenomena and factors that have long directly or indirectly affected PE and which should be taken into account now and in the future to prevent the crisis:

*public policy; programmatic (legislative) lability/flexibility; public request for physical activity; social image of the profession; globalization demands; scientific paradigm of PE; articulation of the axiosphere of physical education itself; socio-stereotype of modern children (students); learning environment (hierarchy of subjects, the problem of their equality); Recruitment policy (entrants) for teaching PE, etc.* (Sainchuk, 2016, p. 88).

A content analysis of the scientific literature and conferences shows that the PE crisis is not often the subject of systematic research. Moreover, the European Database of Sport Science (Ecss2006.com, 2021) has accumulated all scientific contributions presented at the annual ECSS Congress since 1996. A search for the word "crisis" in the 30,100 abstracts produces only five results, and even these are remote in relation to our problem. Therefore, we believe that this issue requires special focused consideration for discussion and reflection.

## Methods

### Documents for analysis

We analyzed the Ukrainian PE curriculum for secondary schools as a statutory policy document that guides teachers in planning and teaching PE lessons and assessing students.

**Data analysis**

To achieve the aims of the research, we selected the method of critical analysis, which offers a heterogeneous approach to theory and a practice that examines the historical and socio-political dimensions of texts primarily concerned with the relationship between power and language. Critical analysis attempts to expose hidden power and taken-for-granted assumptions and also embraces multiple perspectives, gives space to unheard voices, and stimulates social criticism (Holland & Novak, 2017).

Critical analysis aims to produce interpretations and explanations of areas of social life that both identify the causes of social wrongs and produce knowledge which could (in the right conditions) contribute to righting or mitigating them. Moreover, these interpretations and explanations include not only those of the people who live and act in particular circumstances, but also those who seek to govern or regulate the ways in which they do so, including politicians and managers. A critique of some area of social life must therefore be in part a critique of interpretations and explanations of social life. Moreover, since interpretations and explanations are discourse, it must be in part a critique of discourse (Fairclough, 2013). Critical analysis is suitable for the scholarly investigation of texts and contexts that shape social processes and practices and can be employed for understanding and indicating the reason for the existence of a PE crisis, helping identify its hidden causes.

For a critical analysis of the Ukrainian state's PE curriculum, we used the three-step analytical framework developed by Rossi et al. (2009) that is in turn a modification of the work of Fairclough (2001) for critical discourse analysis. Nevertheless, unlike Rossi et al. (2009), in the second stage we conducted a thorough analysis of the network of practices that are located within and not through the discourse (the semiosis itself): a linguistic and semiotic analysis. According to Fairclough (2001), Stage 2 can take the form of an analysis of (a) the network of practices it is located within, (b) the relationship of semiosis to other elements within the particular practice(s) concerned, and (c) the discourse (the semiosis itself).

**Table 1.** Analytical framework

| Stage | Description |
|---|---|
| 1. Focus upon a social problem that has a semiotic aspect. | PE does not help students form an interest in physical activity and develops skills that are not actually needed in life. |
| 2. Identify obstacles to the social problem being tackled. | Obstacles to solving the PE crisis were identified through analysis of the educational network of Ukraine and the peculiarities of its management. |
| 3. Reflect critically on the analysis. | The social positioning of PE is localized in the Ukrainian educational network and other countries with dissimilar cultural environments. |

*Source:* Fairclough (2001), Rossi et al. (2009).

The stages were conducted as follows:

Stage 1 focuses upon the description of the social problem. In this study, the social problem is that PE does not help students form an interest in physical activity and develops skills that are not actually needed in life, unless students pursue a career in sports. PE can even create a negative experience of exercise, which is likely to be remembered later in life (Cardinal, Yan, & Cardinal, 2013). Because of this, a low percentage of the population in Ukraine is involved in physical activity. Eliminating differences between theory and practice in PE curriculum is seen as a way to make PE more relevant and socially just.

Stage 2 of Fairclough's framework is to identify obstacles to the social problem being tackled. Obstacles to solving the PE crisis were identified through analysis of the educational network of Ukraine and the peculiarities of its management. In Ukraine, there is no autonomy of educational institutions. Everything is subordinate to the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. The ministry approves the syllabus and curriculum. For PE teachers to plan the educational process, they must rewrite that curriculum.

The official Ukrainian PE curriculum for secondary schools (Mon.gov.ua, 2017) was selected for this critical analysis. This official document was constructed in a working group in 2012 that included two PE teachers, two scientists, and three bureaucrats. In 2017, the new working group (three PE teachers, three scientists, and two bureaucrats) renovated the curriculum. This text represents the politics, values, and ideals that a small working group considered to be important for teachers implementing the curriculum and for all students in secondary schools in Ukraine. A text analysis of the official Ukrainian PE curriculum was conducted to ascertain the government's priorities in the area of education. The text analysis involved coherence and contradiction across policy goals, a structural

overview of the curriculum, a description of the key foundations and competencies of the subject, content and indicative assessment expectations, and the identification of official abilities and physical fitness discourses.

As part of Stage 3 of Fairclough's framework, we determined the social positioning of PE, localized in the Ukrainian educational network and other countries with dissimilar cultural environments. As part of this phase, we used the critical discourse analysis framework in the Systematic Literature Review presented by Mullet (2018). We were interested in using the relevant literature and approaches of scientists from different countries to find recommendations to overcome the PE crisis. The primary method used to search for studies was utilizing online library research databases (i.e., EBSCO [SPORTDiscus], Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Taylor & Francis Online). Our approach required a comprehensive literature search with subsequent critical analysis of methodological quality and findings of the corpus of relevant publications. Relevant articles were searched for and selected using the key terms associated with the PE crisis and ways out of it: "crisis," "reform," "revisiting," "future," "changes," "transformation," "tradition," "policy," "dilemma," and "strategy," all paired with either "PE" or "PE curriculum."

## Results

When attempting to understand the variety of factors propelling the PE crisis, the main thing is to avoid getting lost in surface details. The phenomenon of mimicry is a serious problem that is often ignored and under analyzed, but it is actually very important and often causes crises or delays in the progress of the institution.

The institution of PE and sports is especially sensitive to this topic. The study of the phenomenon of institutional mimicry allows us to get out of the "interior" of the problems of a particular science and take into account factors that are often overlooked. Ignoring or failing to understand the factor of mimicry reduces the likelihood of escaping crises or even makes such an escape impossible.

In the discourse of mimicry, PE appears in two aspects: the first can be called *"**external mimicry**"* (also known as ***bureaucratic***), and the second is "***internal mimicry***" (***tradition***). Ukrainian scientists have developed a specific "mimicry immunity." On the outside, it is an adjustment to the directive vectors, because nothing can be done; in the middle, it is an established tradition of functioning. Something is not very conducive to progress, and sometimes it is not immediately apparent what hinders the development of PE more, external or internal mimicry. Both forms of mimicry are interconnected; they are not isolated. Similar situations can be observed in other countries in the Western world.

***"External mimicry".*** Institutional mimicry is so natural in the Ukrainian system of government that it is difficult to imagine how a bureaucratically dependent industry could function without it. Many good, and in fact revolutionary, ideas simply perish in the bureaucratic circle. It is almost impossible to break the vicious cycle. Strategic planning and relevant "road maps" remain an impossibility when faced with the conditions and rules of public administration, especially with regards to an issue as sensitive as funding.

For PE in Ukraine, mimicry is generally an artistic practice for the self-preservation and self-defense of the industry. The historiosophy of the institutionalization of PE reveals the complete mimicry of this phenomenon, in which the internal logic of development is eliminated under the pressure of external, usually political, goals (Sainchuk, 2021). Moreover, institutional mimicry in the Soviet Union was the only option for physical culture and the survival of the professionals who worked in this field. However, today, when the system is more open, the sports industry still struggles to overcome the Soviet background and continues to wait for guidelines for its development rather than producing and defending them. If the science of physical culture and sports fulfilled its mission as dictated by its social function, then special efforts to prove the desired vector of the development of PE would not be needed: the facts and only the facts would speak for themselves. Only serious and lengthy scientific research with appropriate conclusions can provide the irrefutable argument that multiplies attacks on and campaigns to discredit the values of PE.

PE as part of the general educational system in Ukraine is an experimental platform unprotected from the political situation, all because of the lack of proper autonomy of educational institutions and scientific dominance. Because of the political involvement in education, fundamental principles and paradigms can be transformed with each subsequent change of government. In any case, a transformation is often declared and some steps are taken in the stated direction. However, the educational structure, like other state structures, is so clumsy that before a plan can be fulfilled, the "new" vector becomes "old" and loses its essence, after which another government begins another "modernization." Despite the various twists and turns, everyone does their job based on established traditions in a particular field and their own perception of the situation. Only when it is not possible to "twist" do they

integrate some parts of the "new" into the "old." It is not difficult to guess what results from this. Rational planning, timely control, and everything else that can be attributed to a properly organized process must take into account as many factors as possible that hinder or promote success and could prevent or minimize the negative consequences of the actions of reformers. However, it so happens that in Ukraine scientific grounds do not always dictate and condition reform. PE, of course, is no exception to this.

***"Internal mimicry" (tradition).*** Many traditions and ideas have outlived their usefulness in education in general and PE in Ukraine in particular. Nonetheless, they continue to exist as long as their followers are alive or in power. It has long been proclaimed that knowledge, skills, and abilities are the mission of education; now, they are competencies. However, it is not because of fatigue that knowledge, skills, and abilities have become connotations of the word "competence." The problem is something else altogether: a poor understanding of PE goal-setting. Goal-setting can be quite abstract, and it is necessary to be as specific as possible. In Ukrainian PE, this is generally difficult to do and, again, everything depends on the personal perception of those who embody the educational process. Some PE teachers "stand up" for the development of physical qualities and sacrifice everything else; others form skills in the sport they love and have professional experience in; others simply "throw" the ball that the pupils want – they could be recorded as fans of sports, games, or leisure; the fourth type imposes the ball or other sporting device that is available.

The PE curriculum introduced into secondary schools (Mon.gov.ua, 2017) formally legalized freedom of choice for the teacher and to some extent for the students, as the content of the variable component of the educational institution may be formed independently of the modules offered by the curriculum.

According to the plan, the teacher must ask students about the modules they want, but in practice the material and technical base of the institution or the teacher's loyalty to a particular module, and in fact, their competence in it, can be decisive. What if students want to do aerobics, sambo, horting, or cheerleading and the teacher only learned about these activities from the curriculum? The curriculum content for the most part is a mix of everything from motor actions to a variety of physical activities. There is nothing wrong with this uncertainty; the only question is what is achieved in the end, as the mission of educational discipline is to form competencies that will be useful throughout life. This is why funds are allocated for education from the state budget. Undoubtedly, students gain some motor experience in PE lessons, but after graduating from an educational institution they do not engage in physical activity – not the one they were taught in the institution, nor any other. We also cannot speak about the independent ability to organize safe motor activity. This is why in some countries, PE is not included in educational programs; some want to throw it out for good, and only scientific data on the potential benefits of exercise prevents them from taking steps once and for all to do away with this educational discipline.

**An example of institutional mimicry of PE**

In Ukraine, the entire process of PE lesson planning is carried out in accordance with the program of physical culture approved by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. The physical culture curriculum for secondary schools (Grades 5-9) states the following:

> *Physical education in primary school is aimed at achieving the overall goal of basic general education. The purpose of basic general secondary education is: development and socialization of students' personality, formation of national self-consciousness, general culture, world-views, ecological style of thinking and behaviour, creative abilities, research and life support skills, ability for self-development and self-learning in global change and challenges.* (Mon.gov.ua, 2017).

In the last few years, another reform called the New Ukrainian School has been implemented. The main goal of this reform is to create curriculum that will be pleasant to study and will give students not only knowledge they can use in class, but also the ability to apply that knowledge in everyday life. Ten key competencies have been identified for the New Ukrainian School (Mon.gov.ua, 2016); these are comparable to the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council (Eur-lex.europa.eu, 2006) on key competences for lifelong learning.

The analysis of normative documents showed that PE is not mentioned in the key competencies for lifelong learning for the EU or Ukraine. A person must be competent in everything, be able to properly "operate" technological devices, but not their own body.

Since Ukrainian education has become focused on the formation of specific competencies, and for PE such competence is not allocated separately, PE must "seek" and "show" itself in each of them. Environmental literacy and healthy living seem to be the closest competence to PE, but the explanation of this competence does offer grounds to make this claim.

At times, it appears almost anecdotal how PE corresponds to each of the educational competencies or the language of the program – it is invested in the formation of key competencies. Here is an example of the "contribution" (!) of PE to mathematical competence:

***«Skills:*** *use mathematical methods during physical education, to create individual fitness programs, self-assessment of one's own physical condition, to keep track of competitions in various sports, to calculate and analyse heart rate at rest and during exercise, to calculate efforts to achieve the goal by analysing speed, distance, trajectory, etc.*

***Attitude:*** *awareness of the importance of mathematical thinking for fitness and sports activities»*

***Training resources:*** *tasks to overcome the distance, creating a menu of nutrition.* (Mon.gov.ua, 2017)

Here is how PE is "invested" in initiative and entrepreneurship:

***«Skill:*** *to fight, win honestly and accept defeat with dignity, control your emotions, organize your time and mobilize resources, assess your own capabilities in the process of motor activity, realize different roles in game situations, be responsible for your own decisions, enjoy your own strengths and recognize shortcomings in tactical actions in various sports, plan and implement sports projects (tournaments, competitions, etc.)*

***Attitude:*** *initiative, activity in physical culture, responsibility, courage, awareness of the importance of cooperation during game situations.*

***Resources:*** *sports competitions in various sports* (Mon.gov.ua, 2017).

It does not make sense to continue here as doing so will not change the essence of what is being said. PE is in each of the competencies, except its own. This is despite the fact that PE is a separate discipline.

PE as an educational discipline requires the allocation of its own competence; children require specific motor competencies which will surely matter to them in the future. This "Procrustean bed of competencies" which PE should mimic seems absurd and only confirms the marginal status of PE in the constellation of educational disciplines. If one desires to be in the program, they must adjust. No one doubts that PE should correspond to the educational vector of the state, but it is not clear why it is necessary to mimic non-inherent competencies. Mathematical competence is best formed through mathematics, algebra, and geometry rather than PE, biology, or language. The same goes for other disciplines. This only shows the marginal status of PE. In this context, PE is not so much an educational discipline as an interdisciplinary switch.

## Discussion

In Ukrainian sports science, despite the complaints (indirect or direct hints) and fragmentary delineation of the crisis, no constructive studies have been conducted. Research in Ukrainian specialized journals on PE and sports is full of evidence of the benefits of specially organized physical activity for both the physical and mental condition. Unfortunately, this is not included in the list of key competencies. At the same time, understanding problems for the future of PE and creating a vision for overcoming the crisis is in the long-term scientific interest of the world (Kirk, 2010; Konukman et al., 2012; Tinning, 2012; Sullivan, 2021; Ward et al., 1999; Yli-piipari, 2014; Zeigler, 2010).

For Thorpe (2003) and Casey and Larsson (2018), the PE crisis is mainly a crisis of dominant discourse that shapes and is shaped by ideology and habitus (Fernández-Balboa & Muros, 2006). For Kirk (1994), Crum (1993), Belcher (2008), and Kretchmar (2008), the PE crisis is related to identity. For Vargas and Moreira (2014), the PE crisis stems from a lack of epistemological identity in the teaching profession.

Crum (2016) states that the precarious position of the PE profession can at least partly be explained by the ideological legacy of the profession.

A significant factor contributing to PE's apparent resistance to change is the role that governments play in the construction of PE curricula (Gray et al., 2021). PE curricula are not politically neutral; they embody discourses that reflect and influence the beliefs, values, and practices of society (Hardley, Gray, & McQuillan, 2020). Multiple policies and discourses play out in educational contexts. The conditions of uncertainty and possibility, which some researchers call a "policy storm," within the institution of PE generate a great degree of uncertainty; this positions the various actors responsible for course delivery, including the academic staff and the course leader, as both subjects and agents of policy (Lambert & O'Connor, 2018).

However, multiple other factors also influence different approaches to the adoption of different criteria in making decisions related to PE. There exists a dynamic interplay between the external dimensions of context (i.e., neoliberal policy-making and pressures and support from the local educational authority and the school inspectorate) and the internal dimensions of context (i.e., school-based traditions, school demographics, and support and

resourcing for PE) in policy enactment (Wilkinson et al., 2020). Artefacts play an integral role in supporting and shaping curriculum policy enactment (Lambert et al., 2021).

Progress in the PE profession is slowed by a cycle of nonteaching and the dominance of traditional methodologies. Socialization factors operate to preserve and perpetuate the status quo of the profession, which is rooted primarily in team sport content (Richards, Housner, & Templin, 2018). Teacher socialization is a mechanism for program reproduction, and reproduced programs promise to maintain inherited patterns of socialization (Richards et al., 2020). Furthermore, PE teachers are resistant to change (Griggs & Fleet, 2021); they continually participate in reproductive practices and tend to make limited changes to PE curricula (Herold, 2020).

Scientists are constructing whole concepts that PE must adhere to in order to maintain its integrity. Some scientists see the most advantageous position of PE in the concept of the "hedgehog," not the "fox." This concept belongs to the field of marketing and was first developed by Collins (2001). Collins posed three questions to help organizations identify the hedgehog concept: (a) What are we deeply passionate about? (b) What can we be the best in the world at, and/or what can we not be the best in the world at? (c) What drives our resource engine? Johnson (2014) calls for PE professionals to hold a discussion to identify and disseminate answers to these three questions in order to ultimately identify the hedgehog concept of PE. His own position is that the greatest number of opportunities for students is provided by learning through games, which is a legitimate hedgehog concept for PE.

Hawkins (2008) criticizes PE professionals' lack of pragmatism to set values in this area. He emphasizes the futility of constantly trying to adjust PE to new requirements (recently, the kinesiology is mostly focused on health and well-being). He offers to reorient PE around the idea of the game. It is this concept that can produce more sincere feelings about professional values.

Pesce et al. (2018) declare that any redesigned PE proposal must start with children and their ecologies and be projected towards a grand vision. The indivisibility of the rights to health and play is a key opportunity for PE:

> *Active play is both a right to be fulfilled and a powerful means to promote the holistic development of the physical, cognitive and social prerequisites of health and civic engagement* (Pesce et al., 2018, p. 221).

For Kirk (2019), the shift in curriculum policy to health and well-being may well offer an opportunity for rethinking the mission of PE in schools. The growing prevalence and negative effects of precarity may provide a powerful rationale for doing so.

In order to maintain PE as part of the school curriculum, the profession needs a new paradigm. It is necessary to form a new way of theoretical thinking and new ways of action in practice. Crum (2016) outlines the main characteristics of the new paradigm by discussing the following issues:

> *(a) justification as a school subject, (b) objectives of "teaching movement and sport", (c) view of human movement, (d) didactical principles and (e) an "ecological" curriculum and institutional openness* (Crum, 2016, p. 238).

Crum (2016) believes that in the future, schools will provide sufficient space in their classrooms only for subjects that

> *(1) are emancipating because they prepare youngsters for a relevant, humane and independent participation in social and cultural life; (2) can be arranged according to the typical institutional status of the school; and (3) cannot be fulfilled better by other socialization agencies* (Crum, 2016, p. 238).

PE professionals continue to live on the marginalized fringes of education globally. PE in schools lacks a strong policy infrastructure as well as a multi-faceted, evidence-based policy strategy to enhance the position of the profession. Until kinesiology scholars start carrying the ball in the game of policy development to support PE in schools, the subject will continue to limp along as it has for decades (Van der Mars, 2018).

Harris et al. (2020) identify PE teachers and teacher educators as key policy actors in terms of what they prioritize, do, and achieve. These researchers are confident that

> *PE's vast potential to enhance children's lives across all nations and contexts relies on teachers' readiness and ability to confront and cope with issues within the field* (Harris et al., 2020, p. 42-43).

McCuaig et al. (2020) encourage PE practitioners and faculty to

> *create their own wicked problem parties, reaching out across disciplinary, professional and national boundaries to invite as many stakeholders as possible to the task of devising innovative initiatives that can secure the care, health and wellbeing of young people in precarious times* (McCuaig et al., 2020, p. 66-67).

Looking forward, Cooper et al. (2016) recommend three specific strategies for physical educators to assert themselves and impart their knowledge in an effort to build support for policy implementations that enhance the delivery of PE and physical activity in their schools and communities. First, it is important to develop a direct feedback loop between policy, its implementation, and its upstream and downstream effects. Second, PE teachers, school administrators, and other health professionals need to educate decision-makers and policymakers about the importance of PE and physical activity so that specific policies can be developed and implemented. Third, college and university faculty involved in PE and health-related fields need to recruit talented, conscientious, intellectually curious people into these disciplines to advance the health and PE profession. Stolz et al. (2019) argue that PE could benefit from a shift from a disproportionate focus on practice or practices to theory as a means of closing the gap between theory and practice. They equate work on reforms or change in PE with the myth of Sisyphus from Greek mythology.

The weakness of the humanitarian studies, especially those of a philosophical nature, and the tradition of mimicry reduces the chances of PE surviving in the educational field in the global capitalist world. Kosiewicz (2019) emphasizes that the alleged superiority of biological sciences within physical cultural sciences and the connected marginalization of the humanities – which, after all, constitute a necessary and thus unquestionable foundation for cultural studies – is therefore a clear challenge in the institutional field of physical culture.

The PE crisis is caused by both internal and external factors that correlate with each other. We should not wait for the situation to change for the better; we have to fight for ourselves. Education reform is now in effect a marketplace of business opportunities and commercial solutions (Ball, 2018). Today, scientists are recording a new challenge for PE: curriculum work is being outsourced to new actors in the global education industry. Health and PE has become a big business, and the outsourcing market is growing (Enright, Kirk, & Macdonald, 2020; Griggs & Randall, 2019).

Almost any educational project in the world has one goal: promotion in a broad public context involving not only professionals but also politicians. How many good PE projects and ideas are buried due to institutional dependence and PE teachers' lack of independence?

## Conclusion

There is nothing catastrophic in the phenomenon of crisis because the world does not stand still; everything changes over time and undergoes new assessments. Adjustments or even reforms are quite a natural thing for all sorts of institutions established by human society, even if they have long functioned almost flawlessly. Failure or crisis is an uncompromising reason to implement real steps to correct a negative situation.

Scientists constantly identify, describe, explain, and justify the need for changes in PE. In every country in the world where PE operates, there is something to adjust, improve, or reform. Depending on the country, scientists offer different options for improving and changing PE: from a softer redesign to conceptual and systemic reforms and transformation.

Kirk et al. (2018) suggest that even in a positive situation, a case can be made for the redesign of PE:

> *Even in apparently favorable situations, redesign may be necessary, possible and desirable* (Kirk et al., 2018, p.152).

In PE in Ukraine, there is a rather specific tradition of change; it is mimicry or adaptation to new educational goals or turns. Chronic mimicry of PE has turned this discipline into a pathetic process of finding unusual approaches to the modernization of PE and, surprisingly, the scientific basis is not always as decisive as it should ideally be. Institutional mimicry is a leading factor in the development of the PE crisis in Ukraine.

In Ukraine, performance discourses related to developing motor abilities for different types of sports continue to dominate as the main purpose of PE curriculum. No matter how relevant and timely the slogans and actions for change in PE curriculum have been, they have mainly embodied the theoretical section. The sporting core has remained unchanged for decades.

One of the obstacles to dealing with the PE crisis is the need for interactions and communications involving all stakeholders at different levels of the process of producing policy and institutional change to be realized. The problem of the so-called "crises" of educational disciplines in the post-Soviet countries exists because there is a permanent transition from educational authoritarianism to educational liberalism. However, this process is not necessarily natural or even accepted by all, especially those who are accustomed to the Soviet style of imposition and dictatorship in government. The missing culture of influence on political decisions exists not only among PE

teachers, but among all others as well. Teachers have a culture of mimicry, not a culture of leadership. There are no professional societies like SHAPE America, and there is no movement in this direction. Therefore, mimicry will remain a reality for PE in Ukraine for a long time.

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