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Leveraging Social Science for Youth Sport Engagement: Enhancing Awareness and Consumption of the Youth Olympic Games

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ABSTRACT

The Youth Olympic Games (YOG) provides a unique platform for young athletes to compete and develop, yet there is a pressing need to understand its broader impacts on youth sports culture and development globally. Objective: This study addresses the need for a deeper understanding of public awareness and consumption intentions of the YOG considering its potential for promoting social cohesion within the Sport for Development (SFD) framework. Instruments and Methods: Utilizing a cross-sectional survey conducted during the Buenos Aires YOG, 140 usable surveys were analyzed to examine awareness and consumption intentions. Results: Results reveal significant sex and athlete-type disparities in awareness and event participation, with males and recreational athletes displaying higher levels of awareness and engagement compared to females and competitive athletes. Findings and Discussion: These findings underscore the necessity for targeted interventions to increase inclusivity and engagement among underrepresented groups. A collaborative approach, involving sports social workers and local partners, is recommended to enhance awareness and participation. By promoting the YOG as a catalyst for social cohesion and community development, its impact can be amplified. Additionally, activating the support of ex-athletes could further elevate the YOG profile. These insights provide a strategic guide for expanding the reach of the YOG and advancing SFD outcomes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Youth Olympic Games (YOG) represent a premier international multi-sport event established by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and first held in 2010 in Singapore. Designed for athletes aged 15 to 18, the YOG brings together young competitors from around the globe to participate in a diverse array of sports within a highly structured and educational Olympic framework (Judge et al., 2009). In addition to traditional Olympic disciplines, the YOG intentionally introduced innovative formats, such as 3x3 basketball, sport climbing, and mixed-gender events, to modernize the Olympic program and engage younger audiences. Importantly, the YOG goes beyond athletic competition by integrating robust cultural and educational components that promote Olympic values, intercultural understanding, and holistic youth development. Despite these forward-thinking elements, the YOG has faced challenges in gaining widespread public recognition (Petersen & Judge, 2023). Judge et al. (2009) notably described the Youth Olympic Games as “the best-kept secret in sport,” underscoring the limited awareness and visibility surrounding the event in its early stages.

To clarify the transformative role of youth sports participation in promoting social cohesion through the Sport for Development (SFD) lens, it is essential to understand the factors that influence event awareness and consumption. Awareness refers to the recognition and knowledge of the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) among various audiences, while consumption encompasses engagement with YOG events, whether through attendance, viewership, or other forms of participation. The significance of leisure activities, especially sports for the youth, is enshrined as a fundamental human right and intersects profoundly with developmental benefits, including enhanced self-motivation (Deelen et al., 2018), the formation of robust social support networks (Reverdito et al., 2017), improved physical health, and academic performance (Messner & Musto, 2014; Moore et al., 2021).

Central to the SFD framework is the concept of social cohesion, which epitomizes the strength and solidarity inherent within community relational networks (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). Understanding the dynamics that influence event awareness and consumption is crucial to elucidating how youth sports participation can foster these community bonds. The SFD framework is a multidimensional approach that utilizes sports as a catalyst for social change, development, and peacebuilding. Under this framework, sports are not merely recreational activities but powerful tools for promoting social integration, economic development, and enhancing communal harmony (Meir & Fletcher, 2019).

Central to the SFD ethos are principles such as inclusivity, mutual respect, and the cultivation of global citizenship through cross-cultural interactions and cooperation. Understanding the SFD framework provides a vital foundation for appreciating how social cohesion is both a goal and a by-product of youth sports initiatives. Social cohesion within the context of SFD refers to building strong, unified communities through shared experiences, collaborative efforts, and mutual understanding fostered by sports. For instance, the YOG not only serves as a sporting arena but also as an incubator for fostering cultural exchanges, mutual respect, and global citizenship among young athletes from various backgrounds (Judge et al., 2009; 2014). Through these interactions, the YOG embodies the core SFD principles, promoting respect, fair play, and international collaboration.

To truly leverage sports as a tools for social cohesion, it is essential to understand event awareness and consumption in the context of the YOG. The SFD framework provides a foundation for understanding how organized sports can drive social change, development, and peacebuilding. The SFD framework views sports not merely as recreational activities but as powerful tools for promoting social integration, economic development, and communal

harmony. Central to this framework are principles such as inclusivity, mutual respect, and the cultivation of global citizenship through cross-cultural interactions and cooperation.

Event awareness refers to the recognition and understanding of the YOG, its significance, and its goals by the target population. Consumption involves active engagement with the event, whether through participation, spectating, or following its proceedings through various media channels. These factors are pivotal because only through heightened awareness and active engagement can the desired outcomes of the SFD framework, such as enhanced social harmony and community solidarity, be realized. If populations are unaware of these events or do not engage with them, the opportunities to cultivate and strengthen social cohesion may be significantly undermined (Parent et al., 2013). Thus, it becomes essential to identify and address barriers to awareness and consumption to maximize the social benefits that the YOG and similar initiatives can offer.

This study, as the first part of a two-part investigation, aims to explore current levels of YOG awareness and consumption. By understanding how aware people are of the YOG and how they engage with it, we can identify gaps and opportunities for increasing both awareness and participation. The findings from this initial study will inform the second part, which focuses on developing strategies to improve these rates. The overarching goal is to leverage increased awareness and consumption to more effectively use the YOG for promoting social cohesion within host communities. Enhanced engagement with the YOG can serve as a microcosm for global harmony and understanding, thereby actualizing the SFD framework's objectives on a broader scale.

In this study, the SFD framework is employed to explore the multifaceted contributions of sports to community development. The SFD framework focuses on the integration of sports programs within broader social development goals, emphasizing attributes such as community engagement, personal empowerment, and the fostering of social cohesion (Lyras & Peachey, 2011; Schulenkorf, 2012). By understanding the SFD framework, we can then draw meaningful parallels with related concepts including social cohesion, and examine the intersections with various professional lenses of those looking to shape the future of sport (e.g., psychologists, social workers, sociologists).

Drawing upon SFD literature, the focus shifts from traditional sports marketing frameworks to a comprehensive social science understanding of SFD principles, which not only promotes individual and community well-being but also aligns with broader developmental goals (Newman et al., 2024). The YOG, as a multifaceted sporting event, aims not only to showcase youthful athletic talent but also to galvanize sport as a force for societal development and peace. This mission dovetails seamlessly with the goals of SFD, where sports endeavours are leveraged for broader social benefits beyond the field of play.

According to Blom et al. (2015; 2022), sports can serve as a platform for fostering social cohesion, community pride, and intercultural understanding. For instance, Blom et al. (2022) explored the extreme challenges confronting Liberian youth during a civil war and Ebola crisis through a program called Life and Change Experienced Through Sport. This program used sports and character activities to cultivate aspects of positive youth development including social responsibility, personal relationships, peace, and purpose to support Liberian youth. The sport for peace and development paradigms (Blom et al., 2015) further explores how sports coaching within the framework of systems theory can drive long-term positive changes for both coaches and participants. Between 2012 and 2015, Blom et al. (2015) used soccer to promote grassroots diplomacy in Jordan and Tajikistan by training local coaches to design sports for development and peace programs in their local communities.

To leverage the YOG as an effective SFD platform, understanding event awareness and consumption among host communities is crucial through social science lenses. [Blom et al. \(2015\)](#) have highlighted the transformative nature of sports events through systemic interactions that impact individual, community, and societal levels. Specifically, there is evidence supporting the interconnectedness of athletes, coaches, family members, and community members in building relationships among people from diverse backgrounds, empowering young people and their mentors to be agents for change, and strengthening community-based social institutions. Each of these elements connects closely with the mission of YOG and SFD as it relates to learning, sharing, and leveraging sports to promote healthy lifestyles and take active roles in communities. Yet, without adequate awareness and consumption among various stakeholders, including community members within host cities, the potential benefits of SFD initiatives linked to the YOG might not be fully realized.

Research on YOG awareness and consumption has predominantly focused on individuals directly involved in youth sports, such as sports coaches and administrators ([Judge et al., 2009](#)), amateur figure skating coaches ([Judge et al., 2012](#)), Greek athletes and coaches ([Judge et al., 2011](#)), and physical education professionals ([Judge & Petersen, 2011](#)). However, little prior research specifically explores the awareness and consumption levels of community members in host cities ([Chalip et al., 2017](#); [Misener et al., 2015](#)). Understanding these aspects is imperative for fostering social cohesion, as heightened awareness and consumption can generate social relations, and interactions, and build community pride ([Moustakas, 2022](#)). Community members, as integral partners, are likely to benefit from the social cohesion fostered by the YOG. This is supported by research demonstrating that heightened awareness and consumption of the Olympic Games correlate with increased social cohesion within host communities ([Maguire et al., 2015](#); [Pringle, 2012](#)). Similarly, the YOG could produce parallel outcomes. [Warner and Dixon \(2011\)](#) explored the concept of the sense of community in the context of sport, specifically focusing on understanding the differences between formal and informal structures. Their work examines how both formal sports activities (e.g., varsity athletics) and informal sports activities (e.g., recreational settings) foster a sense of community and underscores the dual impact of sports structures on community cohesion. This facet can be directly linked to both SFD and YOG initiatives.

Adopting a social science perspective illuminates how the YOG can foster social cohesion through the prism of an ecological systems model ([Bronfenbrenner, 1977](#); [Shriver, 2011](#)). A system perspective rooted in a social science framework supports the exploration of micro, mezzo, exo, and macro systems, which are all present in both the YOG and SFD frameworks. Disciplines like social work and sociology examine the interconnectedness between athletes, coaches, family supports, sport-specific supports (e.g., athletic trainers and sports psychologists), sports policies/regulations, and broader and historical contexts ([Gill et al., 2017](#); [Moore, 2016](#); [Moore & Gummelt, 2019](#)). These interconnected elements are captured in the relationships between awareness and consumption intent of the YOG. For example, community members in host cities are intrinsically linked to their environments, shaped by personal experiences, cultural values, and normative frameworks that foster trust and empowerment. Additionally, by promoting life skills, social-emotional learning ([Anderson-Butcher, 2019](#); [Newman et al., 2024](#)), mental health and well-being ([Beasley et al., 2022](#); [McHenry et al., 2022](#)) and the creation of safe sporting environments ([Reynolds et al., 2022](#)), the YOG can act as a catalyst for SFD through a social science system lens. Youth sports can become a platform not only for physical and mental health literacy but also for fostering community engagement, well-being, and inclusivity ([Moore et al., 2022](#); [Tarr et al., 2023](#)).

Thus, recasting the conversation around the YOG is not merely a discussion of marketing or sports administration; it is an exploration of how such a global event can be harnessed for the benefit of youth and communities worldwide. The symbiotic relationship between the YOG and SFD outcomes necessitates a multi-faceted approach that includes sports marketing, social science, community development, and a systems-based understanding of ecological transactions. This provides comprehensive insights into how global sporting events can serve as levers for societal enrichment and cohesion.

The primary research question for this study is: What is the current level of awareness and consumption of residents of the Buenos Aires YOG? This study's framework is rooted in SFD principles, seeking to understand how the YOG aligns with the core tenets of SFD, such as the reinforcement of social fabric, the advancement of community health, and the promotion of educational and developmental opportunities for youth. These tenets are also prevalent within the systems framework championed by social scientists – a framework that views YOG participants as part of a larger network, emphasizing the interconnectedness of personal, social, and organizational influences on individual and community wellness (Moore & Gummelt, 2019). By focusing on YOG awareness and consumption, we aim to lay the groundwork for subsequent research exploring how these factors can enhance social cohesion within host communities (i.e., Buenos Aires). By addressing these foundational elements, this study justifies the need to understand YOG awareness and consumption independently, setting the stage for future research to explore their broader impacts on social cohesion and community development.

2. METHODS

Research design and instrument

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design using a validated instrument developed by Judge et al. (2009, 2013, 2014, 2016) to measure event awareness and consumption related to the YOG. The survey contained 15 items, including six demographic questions and nine Likert-scale items assessing awareness, interest, and likelihood of engagement with the YOG. Example items included questions on participants' familiarity with the YOG, their perception of public awareness of the event, and the likelihood of attending a YOG event in Buenos Aires. Responses were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The instrument demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.75. The validity of the instrument within the cultural context of Buenos Aires was ensured through expert review and a pilot test to confirm the appropriateness of Likert scale interpretations. Given that self-reported awareness and engagement measures are susceptible to social desirability bias, survey items were framed neutrally, and confidentiality was emphasized to encourage honest responses.

Participants

A total of 140 surveys were collected, yielding a response rate of 78% after accounting for individuals who declined participation or provided incomplete responses. The final sample included 54.6% identifying as female and 45.4% as male, with an option for non-binary or other gender identities. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 89 years ($M = 33.2$, $SD = 13.4$). Participants represented a range of athletic backgrounds, with 32.4% identifying as recreational athletes, 36.0% as current or former competitive athletes, and 31.6% as non-athletes. Additionally, 44.3% reported prior youth sports participation, and 18.4% were parents of current youth sports participants. To improve generalizability, recruitment efforts

sought to include diverse socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds, particularly underrepresented groups within Buenos Aires' broader sociopolitical landscape

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through in-person surveys administered to adult residents of Buenos Aires, the host city of the 2018 Youth Olympic Games (YOG). This method was chosen to capture real-time public perceptions and engagement with the YOG while ensuring accessibility to a diverse population. In-person surveys in public spaces have been widely employed in sport and community-based research (Cameron et al., 2022; Schroeder et al., 2019) as they facilitate immediate participant engagement and minimize reliance on digital or self-administered responses. However, such methods can introduce selection bias by primarily capturing individuals in high-traffic locations. To mitigate this limitation and enhance representativeness, data collection was conducted across multiple strategically selected locations, each chosen for its demographic diversity, accessibility, and role in public life.

The selected locations included the Central Business District, a hub for economic and social activity; the Retiro Station Complex Transportation Hub, which serves as the city's primary transit center connecting commuters across Buenos Aires; Parque Tres de Febrero, the largest public park in the city, attracting a wide array of recreational visitors; and the Abasto Shopping Center, a major commercial and cultural venue. These sites were chosen to ensure exposure to a broad cross-section of residents, encompassing individuals from varying socioeconomic backgrounds, occupational sectors, and levels of engagement with sport and physical activity.

To further mitigate potential biases, surveys were conducted at varying times of the day and across different days of the week to capture a more representative sample. Data collection teams were trained to engage passersby neutrally, ensuring voluntary participation while avoiding over-sampling specific demographic groups. Participants were provided with informed consent details, and anonymity was guaranteed to encourage honest and unbiased responses. This approach allowed for the collection of real-time, location-based insights while minimizing the common limitations associated with street intercept surveys, thereby improving the validity and reliability of the data. Surveys were administered in hard copy to maximize accessibility and inclusivity, particularly for individuals with limited digital access. Given Buenos Aires' bilingual context, both Spanish and English versions were available. The translation process involved a rigorous back-translation method to ensure conceptual equivalence and cultural appropriateness. Initially, a bilingual expert translated the survey into Spanish, followed by a blind back-translation into English by a separate bilingual expert. A committee of language and subject-matter experts reviewed and resolved discrepancies to enhance validity. To further refine clarity and contextual relevance, a pilot test was conducted with a small representative sample ($n = 15$) before full implementation. Data collection occurred during the YOG from October 6 to 18, 2018, to assess real-time awareness and engagement with the event. Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate Institutional Review Board, and participation was voluntary and anonymous. Informed consent was obtained before survey administration.

Data Analysis

A priori power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) determined that a minimum sample size of 100 participants was required to detect medium effect sizes (Cohen's $f = 0.25$) at a power level of 0.80. The final sample of 140 participants exceeded this threshold,

ensuring sufficient statistical power. Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28.0) and included both descriptive and inferential statistics. Comparative analyses examined differences in YOG awareness and consumption across demographic groups, including sex, sports participation, and youth sports parent status. An ANOVA was used to assess group differences in YOG awareness and consumption, followed by Tukey post-hoc tests for multiple comparisons where significant main effects were detected. To ensure the validity of the ANOVA results, assumption testing was conducted, including Shapiro-Wilk tests for normality, Levene's test for homogeneity of variance, and an inspection of Q-Q plots. Effect sizes, measured using eta-squared (η^2) for ANOVA comparisons, were reported alongside confidence intervals (95%) to assess the practical significance of findings. Given that reliance on statistical significance alone is insufficient for meaningful interpretation, confidence intervals were incorporated to enhance the robustness of the results. Additionally, response distribution analysis was conducted to examine potential central tendency bias in Likert-scale responses.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

These results provide important insights into how different demographic factors influence awareness and consumption of the YOG. Particularly, sex, prior youth sports participation, and athletic background significantly affect these outcomes.

Sex Differences

A significant difference in YOG awareness and consumption intention was observed based on sex. Males demonstrated higher levels of awareness and a greater inclination to consume YOG events than females, with mean scores of 4.10 for males and 3.15 for females. This difference was statistically significant [$F(1, 128) = 5.53, p = .020$]. Tukey post-hoc testing further confirmed these findings, indicating that males are significantly more aware and likely to consume YOG events compared to females.

Youth Sport Participation

Participants' prior involvement in youth sports was another factor influencing YOG awareness and consumption intention. Those without prior youth sports participation showed significantly higher awareness and intent to consume YOG events than those with such a background. This aspect of the analysis highlights the potential impact of prior sport engagement on current interest in youth-oriented sports events.

Athletic Background

Survey responses indicated a significant difference in YOG event awareness and consumption based on athletic background. Recreational athletes were more likely to be aware of and attend YOG events compared to competitive athletes. Mean awareness and consumption scores were 4.39 for recreational athletes and 2.76 for competitive athletes. This difference was statistically significant [$F(2, 133) = 6.02, p = .003$]. Tukey post-hoc tests further elucidated these differences, confirming that recreational athletes are significantly more engaged with YOG events compared to their competitive counterparts.

Discussion

The effectiveness of the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) as a platform for Sport for Development (SFD) outcomes depends significantly on public awareness and engagement. This study sought to assess the level of YOG awareness and consumption among residents of Buenos Aires, aligning with SFD principles that emphasize the role of sport in fostering social cohesion, promoting health, and advancing youth development (Blom et al., 2015, 2022). The findings highlight demographic disparities in awareness and engagement, particularly among gender and athletic background groups, raising important theoretical and practical considerations for future research and policy initiatives.

One of the key findings was that male participants reported higher awareness and intent to engage with the YOG than females, a trend that aligns with prior research on gendered consumption of sports media and participation patterns (Delia et al., 2022; Hartmann, 2003). However, this study does not fully unpack the underlying structural and cultural mechanisms that contribute to this disparity. From a social identity theory perspective, men may be more engaged with sporting events due to traditional associations between masculinity and athletic competition, whereas female engagement in sports often occurs through alternative social pathways, such as community-building and interpersonal relationships (Whisenant, 2021). Additionally, media representation and marketing strategies have historically catered more to male audiences, potentially shaping gendered awareness and consumption patterns (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012).

Addressing this imbalance requires a multi-faceted approach, including more inclusive media representation of female athletes, targeted outreach campaigns, and community-driven engagement initiatives that align with how women interact with and consume sport. Another unexpected finding was that individuals without prior competitive sports experience exhibited higher awareness and engagement with the YOG compared to competitive athletes. While this appears counterintuitive, it may reflect differences in media exposure, particularly among those who follow mainstream sports through general news coverage rather than through specialized athletic networks (Judge et al., 2011). Additionally, non-athletes may be more likely to engage with high-profile, community-centered sporting events as a means of social participation, whereas competitive athletes may focus their attention on professional or elite-level competitions that align more directly with their sporting aspirations.

From a capital theory perspective (Bourdieu, 1986), this discrepancy could indicate differences in cultural capital related to sport, non-athletes may engage with the YOG as a social or cultural event, whereas competitive athletes may not perceive the event as central to their sporting identity. Future research should explore whether these patterns are influenced by factors such as educational background, media exposure, or personal investment in sport culture. Beyond individual engagement, the study underscores the role of broader systemic factors, such as marketing, sponsorship, and media coverage, in shaping YOG awareness and participation. Unlike established mega-events such as the FIFA World Cup or the Olympic Games, the YOG lacks widespread media visibility, limiting public awareness and engagement (Dvorak et al., 2000). The relative lack of mainstream media attention, coupled with the event's emphasis on youth participation rather than elite competition, may

contribute to lower levels of recognition among the general population. In this regard, SFD scholars and practitioners should consider the potential for cross-sector partnerships to amplify YOG engagement. Collaborations between media organizations, local governments, and grassroots sporting initiatives could enhance visibility, while digital and social media platforms could be leveraged to reach younger audiences more effectively (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). Additionally, the study's reliance on demographic variables as primary explanatory factors for YOG awareness and engagement overlooks important contextual determinants, such as economic status, education level, and local sports infrastructure.

Prior research indicates that accessibility, both financial and geographic, plays a crucial role in shaping participation in sports events, particularly for underrepresented communities (Coalter, 2013). If economic barriers such as ticket prices or transportation costs inhibit attendance, awareness and engagement gaps may be driven more by socioeconomic disparities than by inherent differences in sporting interest. A more comprehensive analysis incorporating these contextual variables would provide a clearer picture of how structural inequalities shape access to and participation in the YOG.

Practical and Policy Implications

To maximize the impact of the YOG as a vehicle for SFD, future engagement strategies should be designed with a deeper understanding of the social and cultural factors influencing participation. First, targeted interventions should be implemented to address gender disparities, such as community-driven programs that encourage female participation in sports events and the development of inclusive marketing campaigns. Second, greater emphasis should be placed on enhancing the visibility of the YOG through strategic partnerships with media and technology platforms, ensuring broader accessibility to event information and engagement opportunities. Third, comprehensive policies designed to enhance accessibility, such as subsidized tickets, free community engagement events, and expanded public transportation options, are critical to bridging economic disparities and fostering broader, more inclusive participation in the YOG. In alignment with facility reform efforts proposed by Petersen and Judge (2023), host cities should consider adopting scalable, community-integrated venue models that reduce long-term infrastructure costs and prioritize post-Games utility. Such reforms not only alleviate the financial burden on host cities but also create more welcoming environments for economically diverse audiences. Finally, integrating competitive athletes into the YOG's promotional and outreach framework can amplify awareness and engagement. These athletes, acting as ambassadors, can leverage their existing platforms to cultivate grassroots support and extend the reach of Olympic values to a wider demographic.

Limitations

Several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, including social desirability and recall errors, which may affect the accuracy of responses. The use of street intercept surveys, while effective for capturing real-time public perceptions, presents inherent sampling limitations, particularly regarding individuals from lower-traffic areas who may have been underrepresented. Additionally, the study did not incorporate qualitative data, which could have provided

deeper insights into the motivations and perceptions driving YOG awareness and engagement. Future research should consider mixed-methods approaches to triangulate findings and enhance the depth of analysis.

Future Research

The evolving status of the YOG as an international sporting event necessitates further inquiry into its long-term social and cultural impacts. Future research should explore the effectiveness of targeted engagement strategies in increasing public awareness and participation, particularly among historically underrepresented groups. Additionally, there is a need to examine how local community partnerships influence YOG engagement, assessing whether cross-sector collaborations with schools, community organizations, and local sports clubs can enhance outreach efforts. Longitudinal studies tracking changes in awareness and participation over multiple YOG cycles would provide valuable insights into the event's trajectory and effectiveness as an SFD initiative.

Beyond awareness and engagement metrics, future research should critically evaluate the extent to which the YOG achieves broader developmental objectives, such as fostering social cohesion, improving health outcomes, and creating sustainable sporting legacies in host cities. Employing theoretical frameworks such as Bourdieu's capital theory, social identity theory, and ecological systems theory could provide a more nuanced understanding of how social structures shape participation and access to sporting events. By adopting a more comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach, scholars and policymakers can better position the YOG as a meaningful and impactful global sporting initiative.

4. CONCLUSION

The Olympic Movement has long been recognized for its ability to transcend national, cultural, and social barriers, fostering global unity through the shared pursuit of athletic excellence. By promoting intercultural exchange and inspiring the next generation of athletes, Olympic-affiliated events such as the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) are positioned as powerful tools for sport-based social development. However, the findings from this study underscore a critical challenge: the relatively low levels of awareness and engagement with the Buenos Aires 2018 YOG among the local population. This lack of engagement raises significant concerns about the extent to which the YOG fulfills its broader mission of increasing youth participation in sport and strengthening community ties in host cities. The implications of this study extend beyond event-specific engagement metrics, offering valuable insights into the structural and cultural barriers that may limit public interaction with international sporting events. Gender disparities in awareness and consumption suggest that traditional modes of sport promotion and marketing may not effectively reach all demographic groups, particularly women, whose engagement with sport is often shaped by different social and cultural dynamics. Similarly, the counterintuitive finding that non-athletes demonstrated higher levels of awareness than competitive athletes suggests that mainstream media exposure, rather than sport-specific networks, plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions of the YOG. These findings emphasize the need for more inclusive engagement strategies that account for diverse pathways to sport participation and consumption.

From a policy and practice perspective, these insights are particularly relevant to the field of sport social work, which aims to leverage sport as a mechanism for addressing social inequalities and fostering community well-being (Alliance of Social Workers in Sports, 2023). If the YOG is to serve as a meaningful vehicle for Sport for Development (SFD), targeted interventions must be designed to enhance its visibility and accessibility, particularly among underrepresented groups. Strategic partnerships between local governments, media organizations, and grassroots sport initiatives could help bridge existing engagement gaps by expanding outreach efforts and integrating the YOG into broader community development programs. Additionally, a more intentional focus on inclusive marketing strategies, such as leveraging digital platforms and social media to engage younger and more diverse audiences, may help ensure that the event resonates more deeply with the local population.

Ultimately, for the YOG to fulfill its role as a catalyst for youth engagement in sport, it must move beyond traditional promotional efforts and adopt a more community-centered approach that prioritizes accessibility, representation, and sustained legacy-building. Future research should continue to explore the long-term impacts of YOG engagement, examining how host cities can create lasting social and sporting infrastructures that extend beyond the event itself. By integrating evidence-based social science strategies with SFD principles, stakeholders can enhance the transformative potential of the YOG, ensuring that it not only showcases elite youth sport but also fosters inclusive participation, social cohesion, and community empowerment.

5. AUTHOR'S NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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