

Exploring the Social Benefit of Informal and Lifestyle Sports

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Decades of government attention and policy-based intervention have advocated the use of traditional institutionalised sports for combating a range of social 'problems', from youth disengagement to health promotion. Fears about rising levels of inactivity and obesity, particularly amongst children, are increasingly driving sports-based interventions. Yet as surveys across Europe, including Sport England's Active People Surveys (2009- 2013), have illustrated, many young people are increasingly choosing not to participate in organised, competitive sport. In contrast, participation in informal and so-called 'lifestyle sports' - such as skateboarding and surfing - is increasing rapidly in many national contexts (Booth & Thorpe, 2007; Howell, 2008; Tomlinson, Ravenscroft, Wheaton, & Gilchrist, 2005), fuelled by a buoyant transnational consumer industry and culture (Comer, 2010; B. Wheaton, 2004).

Lifestyle sports are attracting an ever-increasing body of followers, outpacing the expansion of many traditional sports in many Western nations (Jarvie, 2006; Tomlinson et al., 2005; Belinda Wheaton, 2013). This is reconfiguring the lifestyles and leisure practices of men and women, youth and older participants. Such leisure practices - which include activities funded by the state, business and voluntary sectors - are making an increasingly significant contribution to the economy and culture of many Western societies.

Yet, as Tomlinson et al's (2005) report to Sport England identified, and subsequent research and commentaries have reaffirmed (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011; K. King & Church, 2013; Katherine King & Church, 2014; Turner, 2013) the potential of Lifestyle sports to inform social policy remains largely untapped. In part, this is because of the difficulty in capturing participation rates, patterns and motivations in what are often unregulated, outdoor, nomadic and non-association based activities, existing outside of traditional sport provision. Emerging research on activities including parkour, skateboarding and mountain-biking has demonstrated the potential to engage those young people disenfranchised by traditional competitive team sports, and to engage them in managed risk-taking, thus, addressing community-engagement, creativity and healthy lifestyles in new meaningful ways (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011; King & Howell, 2005; King & Church, 2013; Turner, 2013).

In the USA attitudes to the provision of Lifestyle sports are shifting from participants being perceived as antisocial and deviant, to being embraced as creative entrepreneurial neoliberal citizens (Howell, 2008). Further afield, award-winning NGOs like Skatistan, a skateboarding-focused education project concerned with girls in Afghanistan, have recognized the potential for Lifestyle sports to be a tool for integration, education and empowerment (Thorpe & Rinehart, 2013). When leisure spending by central and local government is falling, the need to understand the social benefits of these more informal sports is even greater. To do so requires the collation and synthesis of the ever-expanding academic research on lifestyle sports' cultures that highlights policy-based concerns and issues. As Coalter (2004) argues, informal sport and leisure plays a central role in the construction of identity, citizenship, community, health and the economy.

The University of Brighton's response

The University of Brighton has a longstanding history of research in leisure and sport, and lifestyle sports in particular. A team led by Belinda Wheaton, including Jayne Caudwell, Mark Doidge, Paul Gilchrist, Dan Burdsey and John Nauright, successfully won funding from the United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council to host a seminar series that examines the impact, and potential social and political benefits, that are generated by informal and non-institutionalised sport in general (activities from 'mindful fitness practices' like yoga, to dance and street-sports) and Lifestyle sports in particular. These seminars are being held in collaboration with colleagues in Brunel University, London and Bournemouth University. While our focus is on the United Kingdom, these issues are not unique to the British context; similar trends have been noted in the USA, Australasia, and across Europe. A range of international speakers have been invited so that we can locate the UK in an international context, and to learn from research, policy development and interventions in other national and local contexts.

There are six seminars that address the various interests of academics at the University of Brighton, particularly the role of Lifestyle sports on the PE curriculum and exclusion and discrimination in sport and leisure. It concludes with a workshop which pulls together the key findings of the previous five seminars. The seminar series also reflects a key approach of the University of Brighton in that it brings together academics, policy makers and practitioners, creating dialogue between often-disparate academic disciplines and user communities. The seminars will assess the most current and useful research in these fields, and involve end-users perspectives. They will develop new networks and approaches to issues, and providing a platform for a new generation of researchers to challenge current research agendas.

The ESRC seminar series

Since Tomlinson et al's (2005) Sport England report, a range of locally-based initiatives using different Lifestyle sports have emerged. These cut across different policy agendas including: social inclusion, anti-social behaviour, increasing physical activity/well being, and urban/rural regeneration. However there is an absence of coherent strategy by practitioners, policy makers or academics, not an understanding of why these initiatives work beyond their local contexts. The first 2-day seminar will explore the existing evidence base and map key issues in the policy debates about the social value of Lifestyle sports. In particular it will assess the different policy contexts in which Lifestyle sports are emerging (including in sport, the arts, physical activity, education, urban planning and health) and how can work across agencies be fostered. In preparation for the subsequent seminars, we will also be addressing how Lifestyle sports can be adopted for promoting more inclusive physical activity amongst target groups such as girls and minority ethnic groups.

Increasing institutionalisation, governance and external regulation are issues that impact on many Lifestyle sports' cultures, particularly those perceived to involve risk. The discourse of risk and (ir)responsibility haunts youth-focused Lifestyle sports practices such as parkour and kite-surfing, and has led to attempts to regulate, contain and institutionalise these activities (from internal stakeholders and external bodies). However the itinerant and non-club based nature of much LS sport activity does not fit easily the rigid boundaries imposed by organisational structures involved in the policy-making processes. In this context Sport England's emphasis on funding through NGBs, which have been tasked with funding, promoting and increasing participation in their sports, presents particular difficulties for developing and promoting Lifestyle

sports' provision. Activities like skateboarding have actively resisted incorporation in traditional sporting structures, including inclusion in the Olympic Games (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011); others like kite-surfing are actively seeking inclusion. The second seminar, held at Brunel University, London, will examine these processes and issues in different sports and national contexts, providing policy makers and emergent governing bodies with better understandings about how to develop and promote Lifestyle sports' provision. It will allay safety concerns without alienating participants by disregarding their strong alternative ethos and values.

The PE curriculum introduced into secondary schools in England in 2009 marked a shift in emphasis from *activities* (such as team games) towards core *skills* (such as balance and flight). This encouraged some schools to adopt a greater range of activities including non-traditional Lifestyle sports such as skateboarding, Ultimate Frisbee, street surfing, and parkour. More recently there has been an ideological shift back to traditional competitive games. Research about the impact of these initiatives, or about which pupils benefit and why, remains anecdotal. Proponents argue activities like parkour provide managed risk-taking for children in urban environments; but critics claim there are legitimate health and safety fears. The third seminar will examine the ways schools have (or can) expand their provision of non-traditional Lifestyle sports (both in and out of curriculum time), and the perceived benefits and whether these can be transferable to other contexts, such as work or community. It will assess how schools and policy makers can establish parameters of acceptable and safe practice.

In keeping with the University of Brighton's longstanding academic interest in exclusion and discrimination, the fourth and fifth seminars will address the role of women and ethnic minorities in Lifestyle sports. Participation in Lifestyle sports has tended to be associated with youthful white men. However over the past decade increasing numbers of women and girls have been taking to these sports, reflected in, and driven by the buoyant and expanding consumer market for the surfer/skater/snowboard 'girl' (Comer, 2010; Thorpe, 2011). Concurrently, an ageing demographic is apparent in Lifestyle sports' activities, propelled by life-long participants who have aged with their sports, and older men and women who are taking up lifestyle sport increasingly in later life (Wheaton, 2013). Across many Lifestyle sports white bodies are seen to be the 'natural' occupants. They are seen as having the 'right to belong' (Puwar, 2004, p. 8), which works to exclude racialised groups. Chivers-Yochim (2010) describes the cultures of skateboarder as an 'imagined community' of whiteness. Furthermore the non-urban spaces in which many LS take place such as beaches, and hills are overwhelmingly white spaces (Erickson, Johnson, & Kivel, 2009; Wolch & Zhang, 2004). Hosted by Bournemouth University, these seminars will consider the experiences of these "less visible" participants and consumer groups, including minority ethnic groups, girls and women, and older participants. We will examine the political potential of this so-called 'female athletic revolution' (Comer, 2010), and how to promote greater equity and strategies for change amongst young and older women. The forms of exclusion and barriers to inclusion (in relation to sexuality/gender/ race/age/dis-ability) that operate in these informal sporting spaces and the role of the media and action sport industries in promoting greater equity will also be considered.

Conclusion

The seminars reflect the Brighton approach to research. Our objective is to facilitate dialogue between academics, policy makers, community groups and practitioners. Each seminar includes at least five participants from outside of academia and encourages end-user participation. Up to ten free places have

been funded for community groups, grassroots organisations and PhD students so that they can attend the series. Open and lively interaction is stimulated via a round-table debate lead by a discussant and will be published as podcast on the series website. The intimate format facilitates the participation of PhD students and ECR's, as well as practitioners and policy makers.

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