Sport Practice and Social Inclusion: A Systematic Review

Pratique sportive et inclusion sociale : Une revue de littérature systématique

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Abstract

Sport is increasingly regarded as a potential vehicle for social inclusion in a global context marked by rising inequalities and the reemergence of social tensions. It was a systematic review that adheres to the PRISMA protocol and analyses the works of the last ten years (2015-2025) and in the discipline of sport and the social sciences. A total of eighteen studies focusing specifically on the relationship between sport participation and social inclusion were identified. The results indicate that sport can support the inclusion of marginalized groups such as disadvantaged youth, persons with disabilities and migrants by fostering social networks, participation and a sense of belonging. However, the effectiveness of sport as an inclusion mechanism is strongly shaped by structural, cultural and political conditions, and not all sport-based initiatives generate sustainable outcomes. Critical evaluations also demonstrate the enduring limitations whereby, standardization of research designs that incorporate methodological diversity and the measurement of long-term impact is a nagging issue. All in all, the review highlights the necessity to build purposefully inclusive programs, reinforce the development of stakeholders as well as the encouragement of longitudinal and context-related studies. Sport holds promise as a tool for social integration, but only when its practices are deliberately adapted and subject to rigorous evaluation.

Keywords: Sports participation, Sport, Social inclusion, Community engagement, social integration.

Résumé

Le sport est de mieux en mieux vu comme un moyen potentiel d'inclusion sociale dans un contexte mondial marqué par des inégalités croissantes et la réapparition de tensions sociales. Il s'agit d'une revue systématique qui respecte le protocole PRISMA et analyse les travaux des dix dernières années (2015-2025) dans le domaine du sport et des sciences sociales. Au total, dix-huit études portant spécifiquement sur la relation entre la pratique sportive et l'inclusion sociale ont été identifiées. Les résultats indiquent que le sport peut favoriser l'inclusion des groupes marginalisés tels que les jeunes défavorisés, les personnes handicapées et les migrants en encourageant les réseaux sociaux, la participation et le sentiment d'appartenance. Cependant, l'efficacité du sport en tant que mécanisme d'inclusion est fortement influencée par les conditions structurelles, culturelles et politiques, et toutes les initiatives sportives ne génèrent pas des résultats durables. Des évaluations critiques démontrent également les limites persistantes, la standardisation des modèles de recherche intégrant la diversité méthodologique et la mesure de l'impact à long terme restant un problème récurrent. Dans l'ensemble, l'étude souligne la nécessité de mettre en place des programmes délibérément inclusifs, de renforcer le développement des parties prenantes et d'encourager les études longitudinales et contextuelles. Le sport est un outil prometteur pour l'intégration sociale, mais uniquement lorsque ses pratiques sont délibérément adaptées et soumises à une évaluation rigoureuse.

Mots clés : Pratique sportive, Sport, Inclusion Social, Engagement communautaire, Intégration sociale.

Introduction

Modern societies are faced with increasing issues of social cohesion, assimilation of the marginalized groups and minimization of structural inequalities. Within this context, the social inclusion of vulnerable groups has become a central priority in both public policy agendas and social science research. Sport has become a specifically powerful field of experimentation and intervention over the last thirty years. It is commonly linked to the fight against exclusion, minority involvement and diversity encouragement, which is why it is a common subject in sociological, educational and policy-based research (Spaaij, 2012; Misener and Darcy, 2014). Despite this growing academic interest, the literature reveals persistent contradictions concerning the actual capacity of sport to generate effective and sustainable inclusion outcomes. Whereas most research points to the fact that sport can be used to strengthen social ties, widen networks and increase the capacity of individuals, other studies point to the fact that there are contextual, structural and institutional constraints that reduce or even reverse the anticipated gains. These obstacles can be built on the basis of social hierarchies, discriminatory patterns, lack of access, and organisational cultures that foster inequalities instead of eradicating them (Kiuppis, 2018; Penikar Oblak et al., 2023; Simplican et al., 2015). As a result, sport is not necessarily inclusive but a socially constructed site that has its impacts based on the broader societal structures, program design and the circumstances in which it is practiced (Coalter, 2015; Nicholson and Hoye, 2008). Given these ambiguities, there is a compelling need for a systematic and comprehensive assessment of the circumstances under which sport effectively contributes to social inclusion, as well as the mechanisms through which such outcomes are produced or hindered. This article therefore seeks to address the following guiding question: in what ways, and to what extent, does sport promote social inclusion? In order to respond to this question, a systematic literature review was performed according to the PRISMA protocol, and a total of 3,171 scholarly publications were analyzed, which were obtained in the leading international scientific databases.

The initial part elucidates the conceptual and analytical framework by defining the major terms and presenting the methodological processes of the literature selection and synthesis. The second section presents the principal findings, structured around target populations, inclusion mechanisms, programmatic modalities, and the factors that either enable or constrain inclusion through sport. The concluding part will provide a critical analysis of the evidence and develop operational guidelines to the researchers and practitioners. By adopting

this systematic approach, the article contributes to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the complex and sometimes paradoxical relationship between sport and social inclusion.

1. Littérature Review:

1.1. Social inclusion in sports:

Understanding what social inclusion means in the field of sport is crucial for assessing the broader impact of programs implemented and for designing interventions with a strong social impact. Social inclusion is defined as a dynamic process through which individuals or groups traditionally marginalized by their socio-economic status, physical abilities, origin or gender gain equitable access to resources, opportunities and networks in society (Penikar Oblak et al., 2023; Kiuppis, 2018). The idea focuses on the elimination of systemic and attitudinal obstacles and includes meaningful involvement as well as a sense of belonging and autonomy. Two dimensions are pointed out by many authors.

- Inclusion in sport: Refers to accessibility and equal participation within sport itself.
- Inclusion through sport: Treats sport as a means of broader social integration, education and civic engagement (Oblak et al., 2023; Kiuppis, 2018).

New theoretical models offer a framework of structuring. In particular, the review by Penikar Oblak et al. (2023) identifies four major dimensions of sports inclusion:

- Accessibility: Physical and symbolic access to sports programs.
- Active participation: Meaningful engagement beyond mere physical presence
- Agency/autonomy: Capacity to take or influence group rules and dynamics.
- Sense of belonging: Recognition and social identification in the group.

This conceptual map enables making a more sophisticated evaluation of sports programs beyond quantitative data of participation. In addition, sport as a tool for inclusion has been typified according to target groups: vulnerable young people, people with disabilities, migrants, gender and ethnic minorities (Darcy et al., 2017; Misener & Darcy, 2014). Research shows differentiated effects: participation tends to build confidence, social skills and networks, but remains conditional on institutional acceptance, appropriate supervision and stakeholder engagement (Acharki et al., 2023; Van Yperen et al., 2021). Lastly, the scientific community cautions against the essentialism of the inclusive possibility of sport: it can only be achieved when the strategy is planned to be inclusive, and infrastructure, rules, training and practices are modified to suit the diversity of participants (Misener & Darcy, 2014).

1.1.1 Inclusion through sport:

Participation in sport is increasingly recognized as a strategic means of promoting social inclusion. The recent research suggests that, in addition to its recreational and competitive aspects, sport provides a special environment where marginalized communities, such as disadvantaged young people, migrants, minorities and people with disabilities, can build social capital, broaden their network and improve their sense of belonging (Spaaij, 2012; Misener and Darcy, 2014).

Key mechanisms of inclusion through sport include:

- Facilitating intergroup interactions, which reduces prejudice and stereotypes (Elling et al., 2001).

- Strengthening participants' social capital by expanding their personal networks (Putnam, 2000; Misener & Doherty, 2012).

- Promoting active citizenship, self-confidence, and a sense of community (Sherry, 2010).

Empirical research highlights that sports programs support greater social connectivity and integration for various target groups:

- At-risk youth: Sport serves as a development tool, improving social skills and employability (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Burnett, 2020).

- People with disabilities: Inclusive sports programs improve autonomy and social engagement, but require adapted infrastructure and trained facilitators (Darcy et al., 2017; Corazza & Dyer, 2017).

- Migrants and refugees: Participation in sports clubs helps build local networks and supports adaptation to new socio-cultural environments, although structural barriers may persist (Mickelsson, 2024; Jeanes et al., 2015).

- Women and ethnic minorities: Inclusive practices contribute to empowerment and challenge stereotypes, but gender and cultural constraints persist (Ratna, 2011; GIZ, 2023).

However, the literature also emphasizes that not all sports programs automatically promote inclusion. The results of the programs are greatly affected by contextual factors, including the design of the program, cultural sensitivity, cost barriers, and policy frameworks (Penikar Oblak et al., 2023; Schwenzer, 2016). The strongest and most sustainable effects are obtained

through program that are created with the purpose of being inclusive and focusing on adapted infrastructure, cultural sensitivity, and staff training.

In summary, sport is a powerful social instrument for inclusion when structures, policies, and individual practices are intentionally aligned with inclusive values. The process of sustainable change takes a multi-level strategy that involves both grassroots efforts and a supportive policy structure and continuous research to evaluate long-term outcomes.

1.1.2 Sport as a tool for social inclusion

Sport is increasingly seen as a strategic tool for social inclusion (Coalter, 2007; Spaaij, 2012), which:

➢ Promotes intergroup interactions, reducing prejudice and stereotypes (Elling et al., 2001).

➢ Strengthens participants social capital by expanding their social networks (Putnam, 2000; Misener & Doherty, 2012).

➢ Promotes active citizenship, a sense of belonging and self-confidence (Sherry, 2010

Sports policies in several countries now explicitly incorporate social objectives, including reducing inequalities, integrating migrants, and ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities (Misener & Darcy, 2014). Social inclusion enables all members of the community to acquire vital skills, develop a sense of belonging, and gain independence (Pečnikar Oblak et al., 2023). Although it is a central objective for 2030, a conceptual and in-depth analysis must be carried out on what inclusion really means in order to ensure more data in terms of the sporting context. The latter welcomes the diversity of female athletes with disabilities and takes it as a starting point for the practice and theory of inclusive sport.

1.2. Limits and condition for success

Despite its potential, sport is not automatically inclusive. Spaaij et al. (2014) emphasize that contextual conditions are crucial:

- Programs must be inclusive in their design (language, cultural norms, costs, accessibility).

- Supervisors must be trained to understand the dynamics of exclusion and create supportive environments.

- Relational inclusion (forming lasting friendships and bonds) is more difficult to achieve than functional inclusion (physical participation in an activity).

Several studies also highlight that sport can reproduce or reinforce forms of exclusion (Elling & Knoppers, 2005) if it is based on overly rigid competitive structures or homogeneous norms.

1.3. Target groups and measured effects

Empirical research on inclusion through sport has focused on various groups:

- Vulnerable young people, as discussed by Hartmann & Kwauk (2011), who have highlighted sport as a tool for social development for vulnerable young people and emphasize its use in "sport for development" (SFD) programs.

- People with disabilities (Darcy et al., 2017) who face physical, institutional and cultural barriers and need equitable civic participation adapted to their limitations.

- Migrants or refugees (Spaaij, 2012; Jeanes et al., 2015), for whom sport offers opportunities to meet local people, build social networks and help overcome isolation. It is a tool that facilitates adaptation to a new socio-cultural context.

- Women and ethnic minorities (Ratna, 2011). Sport is a space for solidarity and a source of support and networking for women and minorities, helping to break down certain stereotypes.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Protocol and Method

In order to rigorously synthesize the data available on our research, we opted for a systematic review, which corresponds to the state of scientific knowledge on a given issue and thus helps to inform the decisions of practitioners and authors of recommendations (Nambiema et al., 2021)

A systematic review is an in-depth analysis of specific issues, carried out according to rigorous and reproducible protocols. It aims to identify, select, resume and critically evaluate all relevant studies that meet predefined eligibility criteria in order to provide a precise answer to the question posed. This approach includes both the collection and detailed examination of data from the selected studies. It is important not to confuse it with a traditional review, which is often based on partial bibliographic research and generally reflects the point of view of an expert or group. In addition, systematic reviews provide reliable and up-to-date scientific knowledge, thereby supporting better-informed decisions and avoiding waste of resources by clearly identifying areas that are well documented and those that still require further investigation. (Nambiema et al., 2021)

In order to construct a good research project, it is important to clearly formulate and specify the research question. This qualitative research will explore the role of sport in promoting social inclusion and integration for people in difficult circumstances. The research is based on a systematic literature review using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta Analyses) method. Using this method, we were able to formulate the following research question: To what extent does participation in sport contribute to social inclusion?

The results was analysed of several studies to identify key trends and implications of this research. This study focused on databases that were both highly interesting and rich in content. We used sources from Web of Science, Scopus and Science Direct articles to search for journals on physical and sporting activities and social inclusion. However, we used keywords such as 'sporting activities', 'social inclusion ", "social participation", "sport" and Boolean operators ("physical activity" OR "sport" OR "sports participation") AND ("social inclusion" OR "social engagement") AND ("impact" OR "contribution"). Restrictions were also applied in terms of language, date and types of journals.

The eligibility criteria were applied such as date, selecting research published between 2015 and 2025 in order to obtain recent articles and highlight gaps, trends and areas for further research. Then articles are selected by containing keywords from our field of research, limiting ourselves to articles written in English and French in order to properly assimilate and analysed them. Finally, the article from journals and newspapers was included mainly dedicated to the field of sport. Conversely, with regard to exclusion criteria, the duplicates were eliminated (see Prisma summary), articles that did not contain keywords from our search, articles published before 2015, articles from fields other than business, economics, social sciences, environment, and sports, as well as document types as book chapters and reviews.

2.2. Research and sources of information:

The documentary research was based on three databases: SCOPUS, WEB OF SCIENCE and SCIENCE DIRECT. These three sources generated 3,171 articles before the inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. Applying these criteria resulted in 451 articles without eliminating duplicates. Our initial research used the following search strategy using the Boolean operators *And* and *OR*, which gave us the following equation:

The 451 references were downloaded to Zotero, and Figure n°1 shows the Prisma flow diagram for each stage. After removing duplicates in Zotero, the remaining 380 articles were reviewed

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TITLE-ABS-KEY (("physical activity" or "sport" or "sports participation") and ("social inclusion" or "social engagement") and ("impact" or "contribution")) and pubyear > 2015 and pubyear < 2025 and (limit-to (subjarea , "busi") or limit-to (subjarea , "envi") or limit-to (subjarea , "soci") or limit-to (subjarea , "econ")) and (limit-to (exactkeyword , "social inclusion") or limit-to (exactkeyword , "sport") or limit-to (exactkeyword , "physical activity") or limit-to (exactkeyword , "adult") or limit-to (exactkeyword , "human") `

2.3. Selection of articles:

The 380 articles were initially analysed in terms of their titles and summaries. Articles which lacked keywords or those which were not directly related to our study were eliminated. At this point, we chose 94 articles to be analysed in detail. Analysis of the articles selected enabled us to focus on those that dealt with our field of research and addressed the theme of sports participation and social inclusion. These articles provided insight into the link between sport in general and its role in social inclusion. During the review process, several of these 94 articles did not focus specifically on sports practice and addressed social inclusion from other angles (infrastructure, transport, travel, etc.), while others did not include the full text.

Figure n°1: PRISMA flow diagram
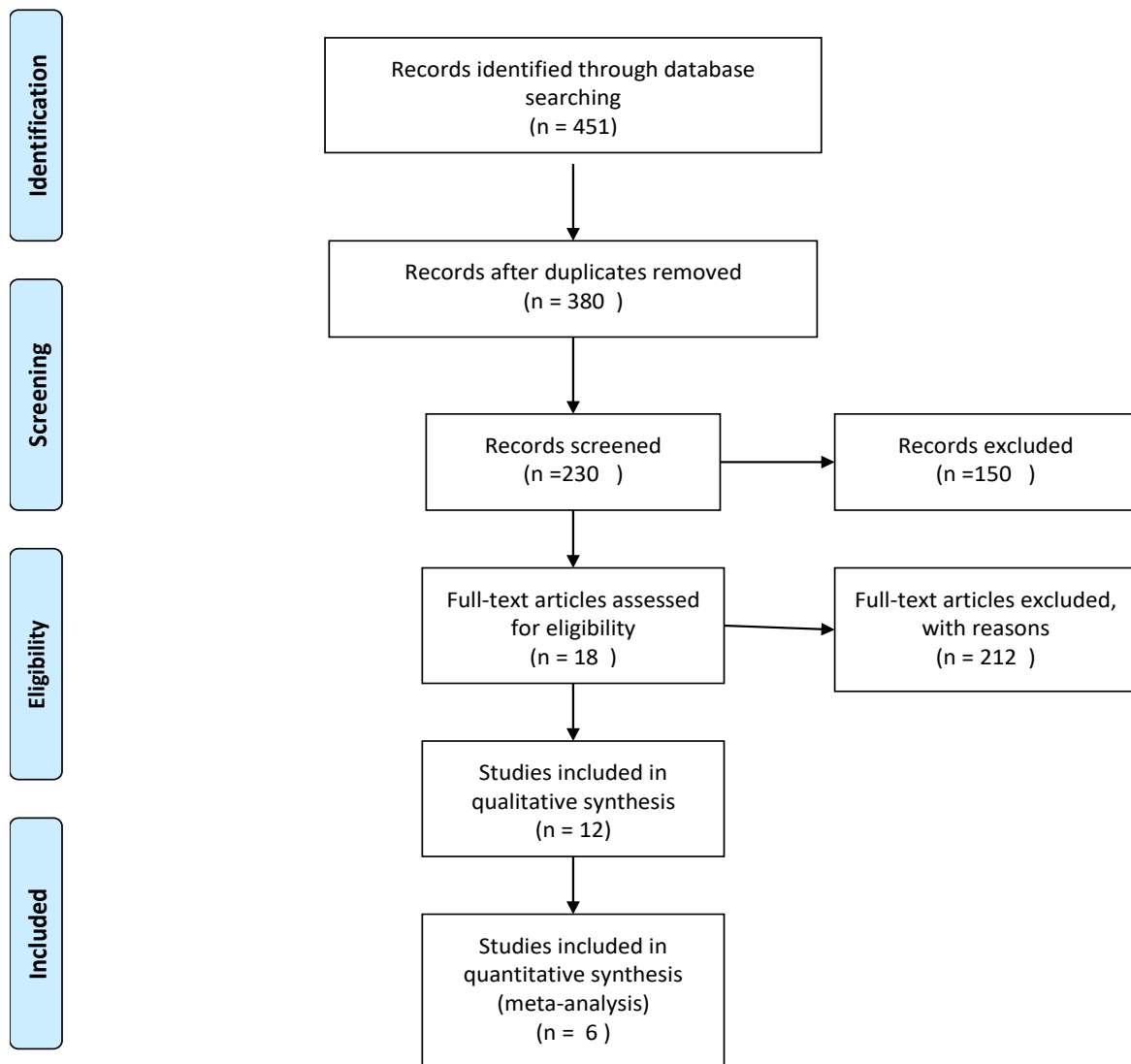
Source: www.prisma-statement.org

3. Result:

This study examined 18 documents. Table 2 summarizes the data extracted from the articles that showed a direct link between sport and social inclusion.

Table n°1: Data extracted from selected articles

Title	Author(s) / Year	Main Objective	Methodology and Findings	Conclusion
Physical activity participation and social inclusion	Harwood, G.; Sendall, M.C.; Heesch, K.C.; Brough, M. (2019)	Explore the relationship between physical activity and social inclusion	Field study, community survey (quantitative + qualitative); participation linked to increased sense of belonging	Physical activity serves as a vehicle for social inclusion
Sport as a vehicle for youth empowerment	Burnett, C. (2020)	Examine the impact of sport on the socio-economic inclusion of youth	Mixed-method study of programs in Africa; development of social and employability skills	Sport contributes to both social and professional inclusion
Social inclusion through school sport participation	Persson, E.; Eriksen, K. (2021)	Analyse the role of school sport in inclusion	Cross-sectional study, survey data from adolescents; improved social connectedness and reduced isolation	School sport promotes youth integration
Narrowing the Definition of Social Inclusion in Sport for People with Disabilities through a Scoping Review	Pečnikar Oblak et al. (2023)	Develop an operational definition of social inclusion in sport	Systematic literature review; identifies four key dimensions of inclusion: participation, access, belonging, and agency	Literature review synthesizing conceptual and empirical work

Title	Author(s) / Year	Main Objective	Methodology and Findings	Conclusion
Refugees and integration through football clubs	Mickelsson, T. (2022)	Study refugee integration through football	Qualitative study: interviews with refugees and sports clubs; facilitates social networks but reveals structural barriers	Football acts as a lever for social integration
Disability sport and quality of life outcomes	Hassett, D. (2021)	Assess inclusion of adults with disabilities through sport	Systematic review and meta-analysis; increased social participation	Sport promotes inclusion of people with disabilities
Community cohesion through grassroots sport	Liuppa, A. (2019)	Explore social cohesion through community sport	Community case study, qualitative data; increased social capital and cohesion	Local sport strengthens community bonds
Unified Sports and peer relations	Corazza, R.; Dyer, L. (2018)	Examine inclusion through Unified Sports	Program evaluations using mixed methods; improved peer relationships	Mixed-ability programs strengthen school inclusion
Coaches' perspectives on inclusion	Acharki, M.; Spaaij, R. (2021)	Understand the role of coaches in inclusion	Qualitative interviews with coaches (Netherlands); inclusive practices enhance integration	Coaches are key actors in inclusion

| Title	Author(s) / Year	Main Objective	Methodology and Findings	Conclusion
Sport for development and SDGs	Díaz-Suárez, A. et al. (2025)	Review the contributions of sport to the SDGs, including inclusion	Systematic review, PRISMA (2015–2025); positive effects on social cohesion	Sport represents a sustainable inclusion strategy
Migrant volunteers in sport policy	Schwenzer, J. (2016)	Analyze migrants' access to sport volunteering	Documentary analysis and policy evaluation; limited opportunities	Need for more inclusive policies
Gender and inclusion in African sport	GIZ (2023)	Promote inclusion of girls and marginalized groups through sport	Program evaluation in African contexts, mixed methods; increased female participation	Sport serves as a tool for social inclusion and gender equality
Policy and practice of inclusive sport in Ghana	Charway, K. (2025)	Study inclusive sport policies	Qualitative study, document analysis, and interviews; unequal inclusion across regions	Need to strengthen inclusive sport policies
Coaches and perceived inclusion in youth soccer	Van Yperen, N. (2021)	Examine the effect of coaching on inclusion	Quantitative survey of youth football players; strong correlation between coach support and inclusion	Coaching directly influences social integration

Title	Author(s) / Year	Main Objective	Methodology and Findings	Conclusion
Inclusion of people with disabilities in a multi-sport school	Ulate, J. (2020)	Explore inclusion of students with disabilities in a sports environment	Cross-sectional study, questionnaires; positive attitudes lead to better integration	Sports schools can become inclusive environments
Wheel of Inclusion in mixed-ability sports	Corazza, R.; Dyer, L. (2017)	Propose a practical model of sport inclusion	Qualitative study of a pilot program; strengthening social networks	The model fosters sustainable integration
Sport and inclusion as a rights-based approach	Kiuppis, F. (2018)	Conceptualize sport inclusion as a human right	Conceptual and theoretical review; inclusion requires structural adaptations	Rights-based approach to inclusion
Sport clubs and migrant youth integration	Walseth, K. (2020)	Explore integration of migrant youth through sports clubs	Qualitative study, interviews with migrant youth; participation enhances socialization	Sports clubs facilitate social integration

Source: Prepared by author

Across the 18 selected articles, there is a clear consensus that sport and physical activity facilitate social inclusion, particularly for marginalized groups such as migrants and refugees. As Mickelsson (2024) points out, participation in sports clubs provides entry points into local social networks, while also breaking down barriers. In addition, for people with disabilities and marginalized individuals, participation in sport improves autonomy, social participation and quality of life (Corazza & Dyer, 2017; Simplican et al., 2015). Using Vos viewer

software, we were able to extract the most frequently cited words in the articles presented in Figure n°2, which shows that the selected articles address this concept in their subject matter.

**Figure n°2: Keywords covered by the selected articles**
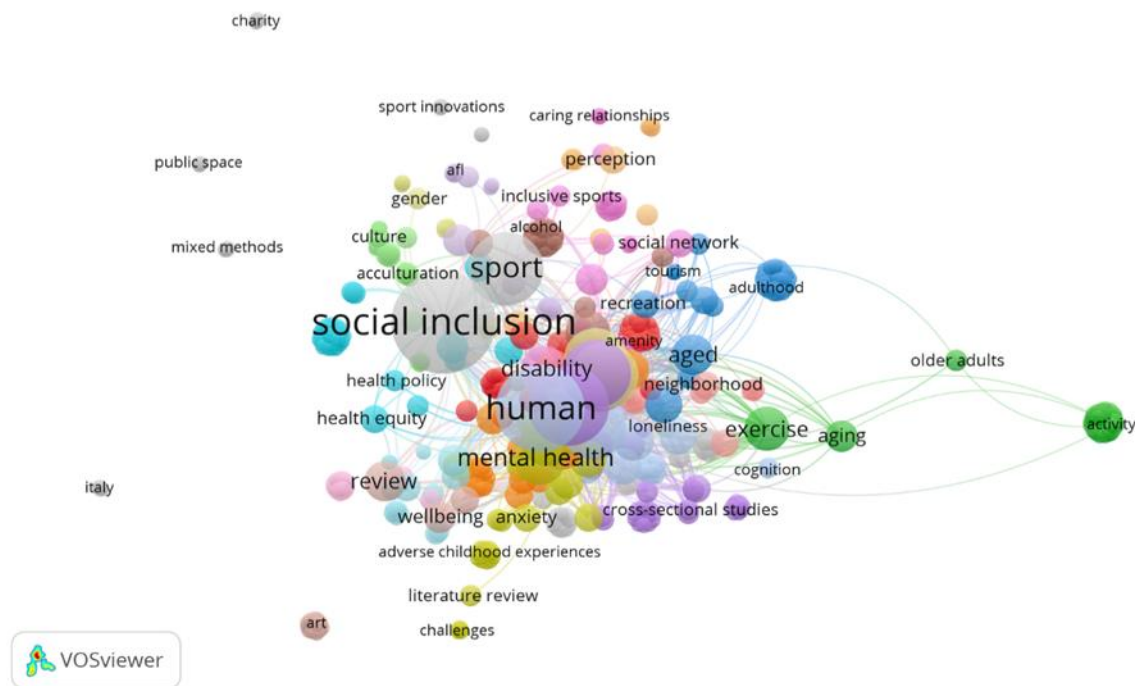
Source: prepared by author using Vos viewer

The concept 'social inclusion' covers the largest part of the articles, with a total of 33 citations in the selected articles, followed by the term "human" and then 'physical activity.' This means that the articles discussed linked sports participation with social inclusion.

In addition, researchers in the United States attach greater importance to this topic, which ranks first in terms of publications, as shown in Figure n°3, based on results from the Scopus database.

Figure n°3: Publications by country
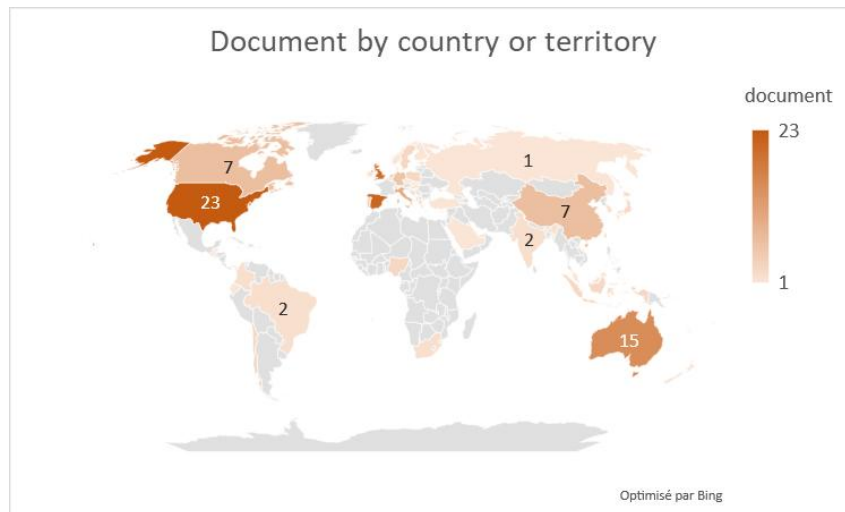
Source: prepared by author using Scopus data

The geographic distribution of the publications included in the review reveals a strong concentration of research output in a limited number of countries. The United States appears as the primary contributor with twenty-three documents, followed by Australia with fifteen publications. These two countries have long been recognized as major producers of research in sport sociology and sport-for-inclusion programs, reflecting both their academic capacity and the institutional development of sport-for-development policies (Coalter, 2015; Nicholson & Hoye, 2008). Additional contributions from the United Kingdom, China and Canada indicate that research on sport and social inclusion is also emerging within other high-income contexts with well-established sport systems and social policy frameworks.

In contrast, regions such as Africa, the Middle East and many parts of Latin America remain largely underrepresented, which aligns with broader patterns of global research inequality documented in the social sciences (Patel, 2020; Connell, 2014). The low production in these regions does not necessarily reflect a lack of relevance of sport-based inclusion initiatives but is more likely linked to limitations in research funding, disparities in academic infrastructure and barriers to publication in international journals (de Haan, 2021). This imbalance underscores the predominance of a Global North perspective in the existing literature and suggests that the experiences of countries with different sociopolitical contexts may be insufficiently explored.

Publications have increased significantly in recent years, with sport becoming much more prominent and evolving, as shown in Figure n°4, which provides an overview of publications in two databases, Scopus and Web of Science.

Figure n°4: Number of articles published in Scopus and Science Direct between 2015 and 2025
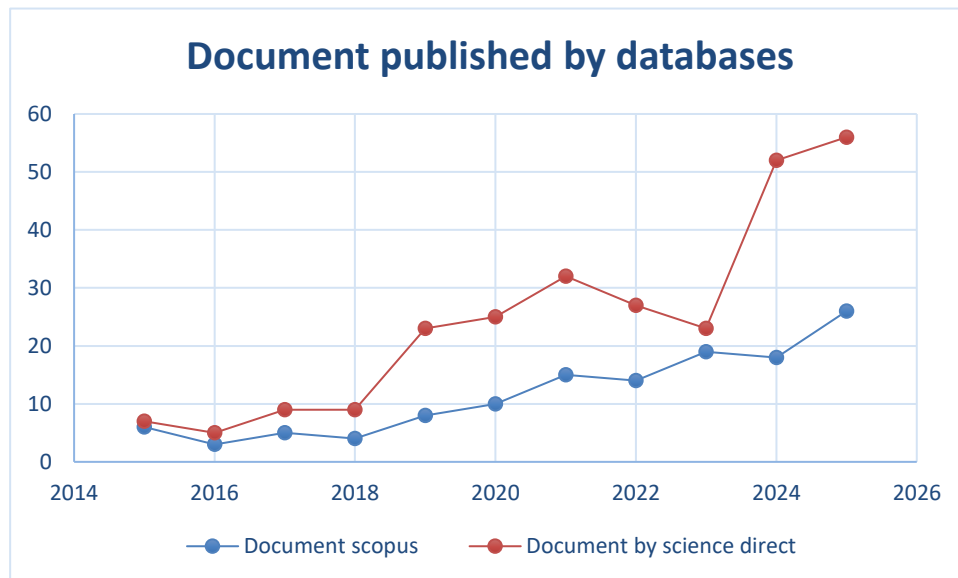
Source: Prepared by author.

The temporal evolution of publications indexed in Scopus and ScienceDirect reveals a clear upward trend in the academic production related to sport and social inclusion over the past decade. The data on both databases indicate a relatively low and non-varying rate of publications between 2014 and 2017, which can be attributed to the initial stage of the development of the research area. Starting in 2018, ScienceDirect displays a marked rise, reaching more than twenty publications in 2019, which aligns with the broader expansion of sport-for-development and inclusion research reported during this period (Coalter, 2015; Spaaij et al., 2018).

This growth is attributed to the fact that sport is now globally acknowledged as a policy instrument in solving social inequalities especially in programs sponsored by international organizations and governments. Since 2020, there are considerable changes in the number of publications in ScienceDirect, with maximum numbers in 2020 and 2024, when it was almost fifty-five publications. These surges are paired with such universal crises as the COVID-19 pandemic that provoked the active interest of academic communities in the topic of social cohesion, community resilience and the importance of physical activity as a means of preserving social connections at times of isolation (Evans et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2021). In its turn, Scopus demonstrates a slower, yet steady growth, as it is growing up to approximately twenty-five documents by 2025, starting with approximately five documents in 2017. This development is indicative of the wider indexing scope of Scopus and its preference

to index more and more multidisciplinary and international journals that are related to sport, social justice and public health.

The volume difference between the two databases is also in line with the difference in the indexing policies of the databases. ScienceDirect, where Elsevier journals are the main publication, contains a higher percentage of applied and interdisciplinary research products which usually discuss sport as a social, educational or health intervention. Scopus, conversely, is more inclusive of international and peer-reviewed literature, therefore, the slow yet consistent growth pattern (Martin-Martin et al., 2021). Because of the social aspects linked to sport, it is now recognized that participating in sporting activities promotes the social inclusion of people who are experiencing difficult situations.

4. Discussion:

This systematic research has enabled us to identify the topic addressed by these articles, which can be summarized in a table 3.

Table n°3: Topic addressed by the articles

Topic	Number of articles
Integration of marginalized people	7
Youth development and inclusion	5
Community engagement and social cohesion	3
Policies and institutional Framework	4

Source: Prepared by authors

However, these studies have highlighted the role of actors in social inclusion, with several researchers emphasizing that coaches, teachers and institutions are mediating agents of inclusion. (Acharki et al., 2023; Van Yperen et al., 2021) emphasize that inclusive teaching practices and supportive relationships between coaches and athletes directly shape participants' sense of inclusion. The other similarity is that there is a relationship between involvement in sport and psychosocial well-being. Research works carried out on adolescents and young adults indicate the enhancement of self-confidence, peer relationships and social skills (Borgogni and Digennaro, 2015). Policy studies (Charway et al., 2025; Schwenzer, n.d.) demonstrate that institutional arrangements make the difference between sport being an inclusive or a selective activity. Inclusion is not only about participation in sport, but also

about how sport is structured and delivered. There are four dimensions that are recurring in accordance with (Kiuppis, 2018; Pečnikar Oblak et al., 2023). The initial one is the possibility to attend without references to origin or skill, and it is the principle of accessibility. The second is significant participation without exclusion. The third is the skill of contributing, leading and decision making in sport. The last, which can be considered total inclusion, is the sense of belonging to a group or community. These dimensions go beyond simple access to sport and position inclusion as a multifaceted process.

4.1. Complementarity :

A crucial conceptual distinction made by several researchers is between inclusion through sport and inclusion in sport (Kiuppis, 2018; Pečnikar Oblak et al., 2023). The former emphasizes equal access and participation within sports structures themselves, while the latter refers to the use of sport as a pathway to broader social integration (education, community engagement, employment). Therefore, authors have put forward conceptual frameworks that transcend empirical findings. (Pečnikar Oblak et al., 2023) proposes a four-dimensional model of inclusion (access, participation, autonomy, belonging) that offers a structured way to evaluate programs. (Corazza & Dyer, 2017) propose an "inclusion wheel" for mixed sports, offering a practical model for improving participation. These works are crucial towards the development of theoretical clarity in the same. (Bailey, 2018).

4.2. Divergences and limitations:

Different populations experience inclusion in different ways. For people with disabilities, the emphasis is often on belonging and accessibility (Oblak et al., 2024; Yin et al., 2022), while for refugees, inclusion is viewed in terms of integration into a new community (Mickelsson, 2024). Gender-based research points to the evident inequalities in which women are the beneficiaries of sport programs but are still faced with opposition due to the cultural norms (Collison et al., 2017). They differ also in the approach to methodology. Quantitative methods (Hassett et al., 2024; Van Yperen et al., 2021) tend to confirm the positive effects of sport on inclusion, while qualitative methods (Charway et al., 2025; Corazza & Dyer, 2017; Mickelsson, 2024) highlight the limitations and nuances of these results. This heterogeneity of methods is, however, often inconsistent in its results, and ethnographic methods tend to show in the background some practice of exclusion.

The other point of departure is on the sustainability of the results. Short term research tends to show instant gains. Nevertheless, not many studies evaluate the long-term effects of the same,

as mentioned by (Hassett et al., 2024), who indicated that long-term sustainability is not well proven at all, which is why one of the significant research gaps. Despite this positive vision of most authors, the critical approaches are a reminder that sport replicates social inequalities in case of a poor design of programs. According to (Schwenzer, n.d.), the accessibility of migrant volunteers is limited. These two schools of thought warn against the possibility of seeing sport as a universal medicine and underline the necessity of structural changes. The definition of inclusion has been the subject of much debate among researchers. (Bailey, 2018) conceptualized the term primarily as participation and engagement, while (Borgogni & Digennaro, 2015) framed it in terms of social capital and collective identity. Inclusion is a fundamental right rather than an instrumental advantage, according to (Kiuppis, 2018), who advocated for a rights-based perspective. These different perceptions among researchers make it difficult to compare study results, which gives inclusion its multidisciplinary nature.

Conclusion

This is a review that affirms that sport is a social tool that goes way beyond the recreational or competitive aspects of sport. Throughout the reviewed research, authors and practitioners refer to the transformational power of sport to bring about integration, build a sense of belonging and add to social cohesion. Nevertheless, there are also some limitations that are present in the existing literature. The measures of outcomes are not standardized; there is a lack of cross-cultural and comparative studies and the underlying processes by which sport participation leads to meaningful social change are yet to be well understood.

Overall, the evidence indicates that sport and physical activity can effectively promote inclusion, resilience and social cohesion among marginalized and socially vulnerable populations. Such results are, however, not automatic. They are relying on programs that are planned, institutionalized and are part of larger inclusive policies. For sport to become a genuinely sustainable driver of social inclusion, it is essential to reinforce the connection between grassroots initiatives and public policy, while also conducting longitudinal and context-sensitive research capable of capturing long-term impacts. This review thus highlights the necessity of increasingly theoretically based, methodologically sound and policy-driven solutions that could be used to ensure that the inclusive potential of sport is fully realized.

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