

Accepted: February 11, 2026 | Published: February 27, 2026 | Language: English

Section of the conference: Physical Culture and Sport

Sekcja konferencji: Kultura fizyczna i sport

Beyond the Scoreboard: A Systematic Narrative Review of Sport's Influence on Cultural Norms and Values

Fadare Stephen 

¹Doctor of Education, Assistant Professor, Mindanao State University (Main), Marawi, Philippines

✉ Corresponding author:
stephen.fadare@msumain.edu.ph



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ABSTRACT: This systematic narrative review examines the intersection of sport with cultural norms and values through an analysis of peer-reviewed studies published from 2015 to 2025. Utilising Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony and Social Identity Theory, it synthesises empirical and conceptual research across various sports and contexts. A systematic search identified 68 relevant studies after screening 150 initial records. Thematic synthesis revealed four main clusters: (1) the role of sport in fostering social cohesion and community while also inciting exclusionary rivalries; (2) the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in sports media versus the challenges of women's participation in male-dominated sports; (3) issues of racial and ethnic representation in sport, highlighting both anti-racist activism and discrimination; and (4) the construction of national identity through sport in the context of athlete migration and globalization. Overall, sport is portrayed as a dual phenomenon that can both reinforce hierarchies and serve as a platform for resistance and social change. The review notes a fragmented methodological landscape, with calls for more intersectional, longitudinal, and non-Western perspectives, advocating for research designs that emphasise power, ideology, and identity while promoting inclusion and addressing structural inequalities.

KEYWORDS: Sports sociology, Cultural hegemony, Social identity, Social cohesion, Gender norms, Race and ethnicity, National identity, Intersectionality.

How to cite: Fadare, S. (2026). Beyond the Scoreboard: A Systematic Narrative Review of Sport's Influence on Cultural Norms and Values. *International Multidisciplinary Conference on Innovation, Technology and Sustainability*. Futurity Research Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18803226>

Introduction

Sport is widely recognised as a powerful social institution that both reflects and shapes cultural norms and values. Far beyond the playing field, sport functions as a site where identities are constructed, hierarchies are reproduced or contested, and broader struggles over meaning and power are played out (Hartmann, 2024; Santos et al., 2022). In contemporary societies, sports practices, events, and media representations have become central arenas through which ideas about gender, race, nation, class, and morality are negotiated and communicated.

Over the past three decades, and especially in work published between 2015 and 2025, scholars have increasingly examined sport as a cultural and political practice rather than a merely recreational or commercial activity (Batsunov, 2021; Broch, 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2023). This shift has illuminated how sport can simultaneously promote social cohesion and deepen social divisions; challenge dominant ideologies while reproducing them; and generate possibilities for inclusion alongside persistent exclusion and marginalisation (Borges et al., 2025; Hartmann et al., 2022). At the same time, the globalisation of sport has intensified its cultural reach, as transnational media, mega-events, and athlete migration link local sporting cultures to global economic and political processes (Zhenhua & Hamid, 2023).

Theoretically, this review is anchored in Antonio Gramsci's (2004) concept of cultural hegemony, which understands sport as a key arena through which consent to dominant social orders is manufactured and normalised (Acar & Erdoğan, 2025). Viewed through this lens, sport operates as a cultural practice that embeds ideological narratives in everyday rituals, celebrations, and spectacles, making social hierarchies appear natural and inevitable. Complementing this perspective, Social Identity Theory is employed to analyse how sport contributes to the formation of group identities, solidarities, and rivalries, from fan communities to national allegiances (Wu & Cheng, 2025; Jackson & Sam, 2025). Together, these frameworks enable a critical examination of how sport both stabilises and unsettles prevailing power relations.

Additional theoretical contributions from Cultural Studies, Ideological State Apparatus theory, and role identity theory further enrich this analysis. Cultural Studies approaches highlight sport as a contested terrain in which different social groups struggle over meaning and representation, emphasising the agency of athletes, fans, and communities (Harvey, 2021). Althusserian notions of Ideological State Apparatuses help explain how states and elites can mobilise sport to legitimise political authority and project specific national narratives (Acar & Erdoğan, 2025; Black, 2022). Role identity theory and related perspectives deepen understanding of fan identification, loyalty, and commitment, clarifying how individuals' attachments to teams and competitions connect to broader cultural and moral orders (Koo et al., 2025).

Within this broad field, several recurrent thematic concerns have emerged: sport as a source of social cohesion and community-building; sport as a site for the production and contestation of gender and sexual norms; the racialized politics of representation, discrimination, and activism in sport; and the role of sport in national identity formation, particularly in the context of mega-events and global media (Almeida & Ozdemir, 2024; Hartmann, 2024; Wasike, 2022). At the same time, critical scholarship has drawn attention to the "sportification" of global culture, in which the spread of modern sport is unevenly intertwined with political, economic, and military power, producing both cultural homogenization and the reassertion of local particularities (Zhenhua & Hamid, 2023).

This growing body of work illuminates sport's dual potential to advance United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): promoting peaceful societies and inclusive communities (SDG 16) through social cohesion (Moustakas & Robrade, 2022); achieving gender equality (SDG 5) by challenging stereotypes (Fraser & Kochanek, 2023); reducing inequalities (SDG 10) via intersectional inclusion (Pape et al., 2023); and fostering partnerships for global goals (SDG 17) amid athlete migration and mega-events (Storey, 2023). Yet sport can also perpetuate exclusion, aligning with Philippine education policies such as RA 11470 that mandate SDG integration into curricula.

Despite this growing body of work, there remains a need for a systematic and theoretically integrated synthesis of how sport influences and reflects cultural norms and values across different contexts. Existing studies are often fragmented by discipline, region, or thematic focus, and many do not explicitly engage with the underlying power dynamics and ideological processes that shape sporting cultures. There are also methodological gaps, including limited intersectional analyses and insufficient attention to how multiple axes of identity – such as gender, race, class, and nationality—interact in and through sport (Borges et al., 2025).

This review addresses these gaps by systematically examining peer-reviewed literature and selected scholarly book chapters on sport and culture published between 2015 and 2025, using Gramscian cultural hegemony and Social Identity Theory as primary analytical lenses while drawing on complementary theoretical perspectives where appropriate. Adopting a global scope, it explores how sport contributes to social cohesion and exclusion; how it reproduces or challenges gender and racial norms; and how it participates in constructing national identities in an era of intensified globalisation and athlete mobility.

Specifically, this review seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How have sports influenced cultural norms and values in different socio-cultural contexts between 2015 and 2025?
2. What are the reciprocal effects between sport and culture, particularly in relation to power, identity, and ideology?
3. How do global trends in sport—such as commercialisation, mediatization, and athlete migration—shape and transform local cultures and identities?

By providing a critical, thematically organised synthesis of recent scholarship, this review aims to clarify the dual role of sport as both a reproducer of dominant cultural orders and a potential site of cultural transformation. In doing so, it identifies key methodological and theoretical gaps and proposes directions for future intersectional and comparative research in sports sociology and related fields.

Research Results

Study Design

This study was conducted as a systematic review employing qualitative narrative synthesis, following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines. The review integrates systematic and transparent search and screening procedures with interpretive thematic analysis.

A meta-analysis was not undertaken due to conceptual heterogeneity and the predominance of qualitative and theoretically oriented research within the sport-culture literature. The aim was to critically synthesise how

sport influences, reproduces, and contests cultural norms, values, and identity formations.

Scope and Eligibility Criteria

The review focused on scholarship explicitly examining the relationship between sport and cultural norms, values, and identity processes.

For this study:

Sport was defined broadly to include organised competitive sport, elite sport, community and recreational sport, mega-events, and sport media.

Cultural norms and values were understood as shared beliefs, moral frameworks, symbolic meanings, and identity processes structuring social behaviour within local, national, or transnational contexts.

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they:

1. Were peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025?
2. They were written in English.
3. Explicitly analysed the relationship between sport and cultural norms, values, identity, power, or ideology.
4. Employed qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method, or theoretical approaches within relevant disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, political science, sport management).
5. Treated sport as a primary analytic focus rather than a peripheral context.

A limited number of widely cited scholarly book chapters were purposively included to strengthen the theoretical framework. These were not treated as core empirical cases within the synthesis.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they:

1. Were not peer-reviewed (e.g., opinion pieces, editorials, policy briefs).
2. Focused primarily on performance, physiology, biomechanics, or health outcomes without substantive sociocultural analysis.
3. Mentioned culture only incidentally.
4. Lacked methodological transparency.
5. Did not substantively link sport with cultural norms or values.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive search strategy was implemented across multiple electronic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, SPORTDiscus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar (used primarily for supplementary searches and citation tracking). Searches were limited to publications between 2015 and 2025 and to English-language records. Search strings combined terms related to sport with terms related to culture, norms, identity, and power,

using Boolean operators and truncation where appropriate. Example search queries included:

- sport* AND culture*
- sport* AND ("cultural norms" OR "cultural values")
- sport* AND (hegemony OR "cultural hegemony")
- sport* AND ("social identity" OR "national identity")
- sport* AND ("gender norms" OR "racial norms" OR representation)
- The search terms included sport* along with either globalisation or migration.

Search strategies were adapted to the syntax and indexing systems of each database. Backwards and forward citation tracking was conducted to ensure comprehensive coverage of conceptually central works.

Study Selection

The study selection process proceeded in three stages in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines. First, 150 records were identified through database searching and exported to a reference management system. Duplicate records were removed. Second, titles and abstracts were screened against the inclusion and exclusion criteria to remove clearly irrelevant studies. Third, the full texts of potentially relevant articles were retrieved and assessed for eligibility. After screening, 82 reports were retained for full-text assessment. Following a detailed evaluation, 14 full-text articles were excluded due to insufficient conceptual engagement, inadequate methodological transparency, or failure to meet the research objectives. Ultimately, 68 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis. The selection process ensured that sport and cultural norms/values were substantively linked in each included study. A PRISMA flow diagram summarises the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages.

Data Extraction

A standardised data extraction template was developed to ensure consistency across studies. The following information was recorded:

- Author(s), year, and publication source
- Geographic focus and socio-cultural context
- Type of sport or sporting context
- Study design and methodology
- Theoretical framework(s) employed
- Key concepts related to norms, identity, representation, power, and inclusion/exclusion
- Principal findings concerning how sport influences or reflects cultural norms and values

This structured approach facilitated systematic comparison and thematic integration.

Quality Appraisal

Given the methodological diversity of the included studies, a qualitative appraisal approach was adopted rather than a rigid scoring system. Each study was assessed for

- Clarity of aims and research questions
- Transparency of research design and data collection
- Analytical rigor
- Coherence between the theoretical framework and findings
- Reflexivity and acknowledgment of limitations

Quality appraisal informed interpretive weighting within the synthesis rather than serving as a strict exclusion threshold.

Synthesis and Analysis

A thematic synthesis approach was employed to integrate findings across studies. Initially, extracted data were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns related to social cohesion, exclusion, gender norms, racial representation, national identity, globalisation, and activism. In a second stage, these codes were organised into broader thematic clusters and interpreted through the primary theoretical lenses of Gramscian cultural hegemony and social identity theory, supplemented by perspectives on intersectionality and cultural studies. Through iterative comparison and abstraction, four overarching thematic clusters were identified:

1. Sport as a site of social cohesion and exclusion
2. The themes of sport, gender norms, and the contestation of hierarchies were identified.
3. Racial and ethnic representation, discrimination, and activism
4. Sport, national identity, and globalisation

The synthesis remains narrative and interpretive, prioritising conceptual depth over quantification. It conceptualises sport as both a mechanism of cultural reproduction and a potential arena for resistance and social transformation.

Table 1

Distribution of Themes showing clusters.

Theme	% of Sources	Count (N=68)
National Identity/Globalization	47%	32
Social Cohesion/Community	32%	22
Gender Norms/Sports	28%	19

Race/Ethnicity/Sports	19%	13
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Source: author(s) own development

Sport, Social Cohesion, and Exclusion

Many studies have highlighted sport’s capacity to foster social cohesion, particularly through community-based programmes, grassroots clubs, and school-sport initiatives. These contexts often promote inclusion, civic engagement, and cross-group contact, especially among youth and marginalised communities. Sport is shown to facilitate bonding and bridging social capital, strengthen local identities, and provide shared spaces for interaction.

At the same time, research documents how the same sporting contexts can reproduce exclusionary boundaries and antagonistic rivalries. Club cultures, fan groups, and competitive structures can reinforce class divisions, ethnic segregation, and territorial antagonisms. Some studies underscore how access to participation remains stratified by socio-economic status, gender, and race, challenging simplistic narratives of sport as universally inclusive.

Gender Norms and Contestation

A substantial body of work examines how sport reproduces and contests gender norms. On one hand, sport media and institutional practices often reinforce traditional masculinities and gender binaries, marginalising women’s sports, sexualizing female athletes, and policing femininity and masculinity. On the other hand, women’s increased participation in traditionally male-dominated sports and the visibility of non-conforming gender identities have been shown to challenge established norms, open spaces for alternative femininities and masculinities, and generate public debate about gender equality.

However, the literature also shows that such challenges are often partial and uneven. Women and gender-diverse athletes may gain visibility while still being constrained by heteronormative and commercial logics, and intersectional analyses reveal how race, class, and sexuality shape who can contest gender hierarchies through sport.

Race, Ethnicity, and Activism

Studies on race and ethnicity highlight sport as a site of both racialised exclusion and anti-racist activism. Research documents persistent patterns of under-representation in leadership roles, racial stereotyping in media portrayals, and experiences of discrimination within clubs and federations. Simultaneously, athletes and fan groups have used sport platforms to contest racism, highlight police and state violence, and articulate broader claims for racial justice.

These dynamics are often analysed through intersectional frameworks, showing how racialization intersects with nationality, religion, and migration status. Yet the review also finds that many studies remain limited to single-axis analyses, with fewer works that engage deeply with multiple, intersecting forms of marginalisation.

National Identity, Globalisation, and Athlete Migration

A fourth cluster concerns sport’s role in the construction of national identity within an increasingly globalised sporting economy. Mega-events, national teams, and mediated spectacles provide powerful

occasions for the performance of national belonging, pride, and unity. Research shows how states and media use sport to promote particular narratives of nationhood, often emphasising homogeneity and harmony while downplaying internal conflicts.

At the same time, athlete migration, dual citizenship, and transnational fandom complicate these narratives, revealing tensions around who “counts” as a legitimate representative of the nation. Studies document ambivalent public reactions to migrant or diasporic athletes, as well as the use of sport to promote more pluralistic, multicultural visions of national identity.

The findings from studies published between 2015 and 2025 confirm sport’s dual role as both a mechanism of cultural reproduction and a potential site of cultural transformation. From a Gramscian perspective, many of the reviewed studies demonstrate how sport helps naturalise existing hierarchies—gendered, racialised, and national—by embedding them in emotionally resonant practices and spectacles. Sporting rituals, media narratives, and institutional rules contribute to consent for prevailing social orders, making inequality appear normal, meritocratic, or inevitable.

At the same time, Social Identity Theory helps explain why sport is such a powerful arena for identity negotiation and contestation. Strong in-group identifications around teams, clubs, or nations create opportunities for solidaristic projects and politicised identities, including feminist, anti-racist, and pro-migrant movements that strategically use sport to gain visibility and mobilise support. The literature shows that moments of rupture—athlete protests, controversies around selection, or high-profile incidents of discrimination—can destabilise hegemonic narratives and open space for alternative meanings.

However, the review also highlights significant gaps and limitations in the existing scholarship. Methodologically, the field remains skewed toward qualitative case studies in Western, often Anglophone contexts, with relatively few longitudinal, comparative, or non-Western analyses. Theoretically, many studies reference concepts such as power, ideology, or identity in a relatively loose manner, without fully engaging with or integrating frameworks such as cultural hegemony, intersectionality, or decolonial thought. Intersectional analyses are particularly underdeveloped: while gender, race, and nation are each examined, fewer studies investigate how these axes intersect in shaping experiences and representations in sport.

Conclusions

Overall, the review suggests that future research must move beyond descriptive accounts of sport as “good” or “bad” for society toward more theoretically coherent and methodologically robust analyses of how sport participates in the ongoing making and unmaking of cultural norms and values. This includes stronger integration of critical theories of power and identity, more systematic attention to non-Western and marginalised contexts, and designs capable of tracing change over time in the cultural politics of sport.

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