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[Abstract]

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Does Sport And Fitness Facility Ownership Matter? The Impact On Sport Participation And Citizens' Health, Well-Being And Social Capital In England

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Aim

This study aims to investigate: Does the sport and fitness facilities' ownership matter? and its influence on end users' sport participation and on their subsequent health, well-being and social capital.

Theoretical background

While the public sector remains the biggest investor in sport (Sporting Future, 2015), the private and third sectors assist in driving sport participation forward (Humphreys, Maresova & Ruseski, 2012). This mixed sport provision between the public and private sectors is likely to result in different strategic priorities pursued (Hodgkinson, 2013), influencing the management behaviours that might be adopted. As such, contextual variation in the delivery of sport provision should be expected which might influence service provision and end users' sport participation behaviour. Yet, the relationship between the supply-side of sport — including ownership and management — and citizens' sport participation has yet to be explored.

Methodology and design

In order to answer the research question, an instrumental case study approach was adopted, in which focus was drawn on a UK county sport partnership allowing for a deep understanding of the role of facility ownership and management. A three-phase data collection was carried out at macro, meso and micro level. At the macro level, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key individuals responsible for the development of sport in the County, providing insights into the delivery mechanisms in place for sport provision at the regional level. At the meso level, 30 structured interviews with the different types of facility managers across the County was conducted, which has helped to understand their strategic priorities in sport provision towards their end users. Participants at meso level were selected through stratified random sampling while maintaining the representativeness of the different types of sport and fitness facilities in the County, and as a result 17 private, 10 third sector and three public sport and fitness facility managers were interviewed. At the micro level, three focus groups were conducted involving end users of public, private and third sector facilities to explore the impact of facilities' strategies on their participation and associated health, wellbeing, and social capital.

Results

Regional managers for sport development in the County suggested that there is a need for additional investment in the public and third sector, as the financial climate is having a negative effect on the sport and fitness industry due to the government's recent austerity measures. This has created additional challenges to the public and the third sectors who often struggle to find a balance between controlling cost and in achieving their social objectives. They also suggested that there is a clear divide between the public and private facilities' objectives, in which public and the third sectors — while trying to be commercially viable, its focus is on social objectives such as; health, well-being and social capital, while the private sector's sole focus is on their commercial objectives i.e., to make profit and to gain higher market share. According to the regional managers all the three sectors in the sport and fitness industry have different strategies towards sports provision, the public sector is still trying to understand the customers' needs, the third sector relies on customer feedback, whereas the private sector's main focus is on marketing.

Meso level data shows that there are differing strategic priorities between public, private and third sector facilities: public and third sector focuses more on cost reduction, while private sector seeks to compete on differentiation and perceived higher value. Public, private as well as third sector managers say that they place a higher strategic importance on price, facility opening timings, equipment, range of activities, memberships as well as training and development of their staff/employees.

End users' choice of a sport and fitness facility mirrors the respective sector's strategic priorities. For instance, private facility users highlighted the additional perks that the chosen facility provides them with, such as aesthetics, parking, cleanliness and friendliness of staff; whereas public and third sector facility users informed that it was the loyalty and sense of belonging to the facility influenced their choice. Interestingly, the reported health, well-being and social capital status of the end users from all the three sectors is identical, despite the public and the third sectors focusing more on their social objectives, raising an important question about the role of the private sector (whose sole focus is on their commercial objectives) in

delivering social outcomes such as health, wellbeing, and social capital that have long been deemed to be only the preserve of public sector delivery.

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