Article

Determination and Quantification of Foreign Interest in Sports Using Selected Variables for the Support of Appraising Investments in Sports by Businesses and States

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Abstract: The evaluation of the effectiveness of invested funds requires relevant data. This currently applies to investments in all areas of economic activity, including sports. The article's aim is to determine the factors applicable to the quantification of interest in sports in selected countries. From the perspective of state funding of sports, foreign interest in sports is a part of the mechanism of allocating resources (situated in the Slovak Republic). For businesses, sponsoring sports organizations is a part of their activities connected to the concept of corporate social responsibility and environmental, social, and governance-related indicators. In both cases, it is important to have the necessary background data so that the entities responsible can correctly evaluate the effectiveness and return on such investments. The Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, and Hungary were selected to determine foreign interest in sports. These variables were selected for data analysis to quantify foreign interest in sports: competitions and tournaments, registered athletes, and keyword searches in Google trends. The variables predetermined the methods of data collection and statistical analysis. The main results lead to more accurate data for decision-making on investments in sports. The most popular sports in the given countries based on the interest quantification were identified.

Keywords: investments; sports; sports management; sponsoring; funding; foreign interest

1. Introduction

Sports play a key role in international relations, linked to world politics, national pride, and prestige. Sports represent the most widespread phenomenon in history that affects concepts such as democracy and freedom. They also play a huge role in influencing the culture of a nation.

Sports are the specific rule- and skill-based, competitive physical activities or practices in which cooperation is present to fulfill a set goal. Sports participants themselves endure or tolerate the application of constitutive rules, while sports practitioners also try to achieve the main goal of sports, which is to win or not lose, regardless of the sports competition questioned (Borge 2020). The Slovak Republic defines sports according to Act 440/2015 Coll. as amended, as all forms of physical activities that, via occasional or organized participation, lead to demonstrating or increasing physical fitness and mental well-being, form social ties, or enable achieving results in competitions at all levels (§3, letter t, Act no. 440/2015 Coll.).

Sports can be divided into recreational, amateur, elite, and professional categories. Recreational or leisure sports are practiced by the largest group of people, and their main goal is to strengthen the health of society. On the other hand, elite and professional sports are supposed to be more demanding and sophisticated. These involve hard training and require a high quality of performance, often becoming a full-time job (Piermattéo et al. 2018).

The categories can be divided into levels: regional, national, and international. Within this article, all these levels are analyzed in the selected countries.

Funding is a necessary part of sports. Therefore, all sports organizations face pressure to acquire sponsors. Some are more dependent on this source of funding than others. Specifically, specialized professional sports need funding from sponsors to cover day-to-day operations. Although sponsor support is crucial at all levels of sports, professional sports may be the most dependent on this form of funding (Greenhalgh and Greenwell 2013; Oral 2018). The amount of the sponsorship contribution varies depending on the country, and the main factor in determining the amount is the popularity of the sport.

The current research from around the world focuses on numerous aspects related to the sports industry and sports management. Gerke et al. (2020) studied the process of value creation within the sports industry, advising the managers of sports organizations to focus on creating networks of actors. According to Ratten et al. (2021), this sector is service-dominated, and a proper understanding of its structure is needed since it can be perceived as its own ecosystem. The current situation in the sports industry is characterized by the necessity to adapt to the changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, proactive collaboration among the individual entities in this ecosystem for the creation of value is needed. Liu et al. (2022) examined sports consumption characteristics and future consumption willingness after the pandemic. People realize the importance of active participation in sports. However, the governments play a pivotal role in support of this participation. One of the tools they can use is funding the sports organizations providing infrastructure for people to do the sports they like. Heydari et al. (2022) shifted their attention toward the sports tourism industry and the entrepreneurial opportunities emerging in it. Several factors influence these opportunities, including government policies, and the combination of public and private sector support. Public sector and government policies in this area were identified as the base within the proposed model.

Chen (2022) links the sports industry sector and the sports economy with the health industry, analyzing the sports industry's position in building the regional health economy. According to the author, it is necessary to utilize advanced analytical methods and big data approaches to integrate sports and the health industry so that the desired effects can be achieved. This supports the importance of high-quality analytical foundations within the sports industry and the interest of people in it, including people in a certain country and around the world. These foundations are then used by governments during the decision-making on funding individual sport types via investments from the state's budget. Papadimitriou et al. (2021) concentrate on the businesses being connected to the sports industry because they produce sports licensed products. Four sources of factors were identified as significant in this study, including experience, socialization, aesthetics, and locality. Willingness to pay a price premium for licensed products of one's favorite team was revealed in this research. Sánchez-Zambrano et al. (2020) analyzed the customers' loyalty towards sports brands. Even this second-tier relationship can be connected back to the interest of people in specific sport types. If a sport is more popular in a certain country, more sports equipment and apparel can be sold there. Thus, knowing how to objectively quantify interest in certain sports in countries is a valuable piece of information within multiple contexts.

Moyo et al. (2022) studied sports marketing and the CRM (customer relationship management) concept applied by sports organizations themselves. The potential of this approach is still not fully utilized by sports organizations. A possible cause of this state is the lack of understanding and knowledge of sports marketing and its concepts. Sports organizations' managers need to be able to effectively plan and implement their CRM activities. Another sports marketing aspect, digital marketing, was then approached by Budovich (2021). According to this research, managerial and socio-cultural challenges of digital marketing emerge at the national level, including whole countries. This is just another supporting argument for studying the interest of people in sports based on relevant variables in the selected countries. López-Carril et al. (2020) stayed within the area of

sports marketing aspects, studying the importance and consequences of the presence of sports organizations and individual athletes on social media. This can be connected to the development of long-term relationships with the fans, as approached by Paek et al. (2021). Increasing the quality of this relationship must happen intentionally by the sports organizations. Fan motivation needs to be examined and understood to be incorporated into the sports club's actions. Emotional motivation was identified as crucial within this process. Painter et al. (2022) approached social responsibility within the sports industry. Such behavior can be examined among sports organizations even though it is more usual to study the CSR activities of other business entities in the form of their sponsoring of sports organizations. The CSR concept is being applied by the sports organizations themselves as well. This then represents just another layer in the topic of the sports industry as a whole, giving even more merit and value to the research projects focused on this sector. Kim et al. (2020) took it back to the more frequent angle of CSR activities in the form of sports sponsorship and the effect on consumer attitudes toward the sponsoring business. Their conclusion was that if the business engages in these socially responsible activities, the customers are more inclined to repurchase the service even after their own experience of the service failure. This can be considered a substantial motive for businesses to invest in sports organizations within their CSR agenda.

Sponsorship in the sports sector is a mutual relationship. It has multiple effects and benefits for both sides. In relation to the obvious financial gain of the sponsored sports organizations, there are other effects as well. The non-financial effect of sponsorship is described by Dolores et al. (2021). The total number of sponsors builds the sports organization's image in the public eye. A sports organization should cooperate with sponsors to create a professional impression. The effects on the sponsors themselves are described, e.g., by Cheong et al. (2019). These authors identified people's positive attitudes toward advertisements in sports, especially young customers, who viewed this sponsorship in a rather positive way. This attitude was much more positive than the one towards general advertising.

Additionally, sponsorship in sports is considered more socially responsible and altruistic. Consumers of products and services do not directly perceive the advertising intention when this is the case of sports sponsorship, rather focusing on it as an element in the business's CSR strategy (Cayolla et al. 2021; Varmus et al. 2023). Finally, even though the sponsorship of sports organizations may seem a natural move only for large businesses, it is beneficial for small and medium ones as well (Datson et al. 2021). This is another supporting argument for the importance of research within the sports industry, focusing on selected elements and their relationships.

Summarizing the angles presented above, it was established that the sports industry is a multifaceted phenomenon. This calls for a thorough analysis of its individual elements and perspectives. To contribute to this research and generation of relevant knowledge, this article focuses on one such perspective—foreign interest in sports in relation to Slovakia. Slovakia was set as a central point in the analysis, representing the Eastern Europe approach to sports funding from the state's budget (based on the Act on Sport, Slov-Lex 2022). Within this approach, the interest in individual sport types in foreign countries is included as one variable in the formula for the funds' allocation. (Varmus et al. 2022). Other countries included in the comparison were selected deliberately. They represent the inclusion of the bordering countries—the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary. All of them are countries with a strong impact of the government on sports funding (Hobza and Jiří 2008; Drozda et al. 2020; Kozma et al. 2012). The comparison was further expanded by the inclusion of Germany as a country with great economic power, representing the western approach, where the more popular sports, such as football, are less supported by the state's budget because they operate on a sports market principle. (Feiler et al. 2019; Breuer and Svenja 2023) Due to the decisions described, the results of the analysis bring relevant conclusions for the policy makers in Slovakia, which they can apply in the evaluation of the funds' allocation within the sports industry. They can thus assess their investments

in individual sport types and particular sports organizations, considering whether the interest of people in other countries is great enough. This way, their investment decisions can be considered internationally justified, and they can be connected within a consciously selected strategy. A similar application of the results is then possible for the policy makers in other included countries as well as all other countries interested in the international comparison of interest in sports. The relevance of the article's results for businesses acting as sports sponsors and for sponsored sports organizations stems from the above-described effects of this mutual sponsoring relationship.

The topic approached in this article, as a part of a larger research project on the sustainable management of a sports organization, is foreign interest in sports. Foreign interest represents the interest of four selected countries in the selected 30 most popular sports identified in the previous phases of the research. The topic was addressed mainly from the perspective of quantification.

The research primarily examined potential parameters that can quantify foreign interest, where these were defined, and the most relevant measures were processed in the data analysis. When choosing parameters, not only the quality of quantification was considered. This was combined with the data processing possibilities and the availability of data. The article's aim is to determine the factors applicable for the quantification of interest in sports in selected countries as well as to identify and describe the situations within the investment decision-making of relevant stakeholders (policy makers, sponsoring businesses, sports organizations) for which the results of this analysis are needed.

2. Literature Review

This chapter puts the conducted research into a wider socio-economic context. It begins by presenting different perspectives that are related to the very interest in sports. This is followed by identified possible ways and approaches leading to the determination of the popularity of individual sports. The last sub-chapter of the literature overview focuses more narrowly on investments in sports by the state and individual businesses involved in sports sponsorship.

2.1. Possible Perspectives for Determining Interest in Sports

Foreign interest in sports significantly influences the resulting status of sports in the country. The main reason for the influence is the fact that most sports are practiced worldwide or in several countries where different legislative and statutory standards apply. Di Marco used comparative analysis to express the impact of the reforms on sports. The purpose of the analysis is to quantify the influence of the political–legal factor on the expression of interest in a specific sport (Di Marco 2020). Hoekman et al. dealt with the development of the local sports policy from the perspective of local sports managers in the Netherlands. The study deals with the inconsistency between wider and local sports management policies, which causes a lack of synergistic action in the development of the chosen sport. The conclusion is that the biggest impact on local sports policy was a change in the financial structure and a change in the organizational structure, both national and international. The issue can be viewed from the perspective where a unit is a group of states—the European Union and a partial part are a specific state. Or the unit is a specific state, and its part is one area (Hoekman et al. 2019). The influence of the sports policy of individual countries depends on the overall political influence of the country. This means that if a country has significant political influence, its influence in the field of sports also grows in direct proportion. A study by Drakakis et al. pointed to the correlation between the increase in macroeconomic indicators and the increased number of events in various sports. It also confirmed the consensus that small sports teams have a larger economic multiplier than larger sports teams (Drakakis et al. 2020).

Recent changes in the way modern sports are managed have significantly altered the role of sports in society. Sports have transformed from a leisure activity to a multi-billion-dollar business. In the study by Zuev and Popova, sports are discussed as a tool

for promoting interests via a combination of socio-cultural and economic factors. The European Union plays an important role in the creation of a management model for sports organizations, as it expresses an aggregated interest in sports. This translates into the deepening of the integration processes of promoting the European model outside the regions. Based on the influence gained, it represents the strongest driving force in the global sports governance system. The European Union model is enforced by soft power, which is supported by the authorities of various European sports federations and leading organizations in the European sports market (Zuev and Popova 2018).

A study by Lintumaki et al. showed that sporting events mainly attract fans who can be classified as more affluent or consumption-oriented. This finding led to the conclusion that considering the household wealth factor is one of the important attributes in predicting fan attendance at an event (2020). However, the wealth factor is very difficult to express, so it was not used in this research. On the other hand, it is also important to examine the influence of interest in sports on the physical results of the youth. One of the main goals of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research, and Sports of the Slovak Republic is to increase the physical fitness of the youth (MINEDU 2022). Other studies say that the factor of interest in sports does not affect the increase in physical fitness of the youth, where children in primary schools (up to 15 years of age) were mainly examined (Torres 2018; Longo et al. 2019). However, these studies were conducted on a small sample. A study by Chen et al. talked about the need for more physical activity and the involvement of the youth in sports. This goal is important not only from the perspective of the state but also of other interested parties. The output included the factors that help with the prediction of the future course. They were divided into personality traits (extroversion, openness, and conscientiousness) and lifestyle traits (exercising and watching sports events, live or online) (Chen et al. 2017). A study by Khouzani et al. identified factors that influence the development of student participation and divided them into nine categories: community dynamism, synergy, funding, education, program-oriented activities, social capital, support of a culture of participation, role-playing, extracurricular activities in sports (2020).

The experience of a high-quality match at an international level (World Cup, Champions League) has an indirect effect on the willingness of fans to attend local sports events. A study by Feng et al. says that because of the experience of a quality match featuring world-class players, the viewer will begin to demand the same quality in local matches. This means that if fans watch live football matches of the Champions League, they subsequently lose the motivation and desire to watch the local second league (Feng et al. 2018).

2.2. Popularity of Sports

It is assumed that the achievement of significant sporting success is correlated with a longer coalition government. However, a study by Rapeli et al., which was conducted on 28 years of data between 1994 and 2021 in Finland, showed that this factor has no or minimal influence (2022). Based on this, it is assumed that there are better tools for the government to maintain power than sponsoring sports. Khouzani et al. (2020) and Lasinski and Pawlukiewicz (2019) have an interesting perspective on sponsoring, saying that increasing the popularity of sports provides sponsors with a unique opportunity to reach many potential customers or to remind current customers of the products. The results of the study support the positive influence of the perception of the sponsor's image and the attitude of customers toward the sponsor. This image is based on the activities of the organization in the field of social responsibility in sports.

The popularity of a specific sport greatly affects the number of funds raised from a source such as sponsorship. Based on the review of the literature and previously gathered knowledge, potential parameters for the quantification of popularity or foreign interest in sports were identified, including the indicators described below.

Number of competitions and tournaments:

Various sports events and tournaments are organized in each country. However, this parameter often depends on the size of the country and the number of inhabitants. Many

countries are even known for the fact that a certain sport dominates there, and for that reason, more competitions are held in that sport. Therefore, it is possible to determine the most popular sports (Perić et al. 2019).

Number of registered athletes:

For this parameter, it is assumed that each country has a sports information system and contains at least partially the same parameters as defined under Act no. 440/2015 Coll. in Slovakia. Based on the content of the sports act, it is assumed that countries will have a register of athletes at professional and amateur levels (Slov-Lex 2022).

Google Trends:

One of the factors that can be used to determine interest in sports is searching for keywords. If people often search for a specific sport, there is a lot of interest in it, and it is, therefore, popular. For this, the Google Trends tool can be used, where individual sports can be compared with each other by looking at the location (territorial principle) (Genoe et al. 2021).

Betting companies:

In addition to watching on TV, many sports fans also participate in betting on the results of matches to make a profit. In this case, it is assumed that people will place bets on the sport they are most interested in. From this data, the popularity of sports can be determined as well. In addition to the popularity of the given sport, the data can show interest in a specific sporting event only. Thus, this represents a deviation in the determination of the sport type's popularity (Killick and Griffiths 2021).

Number of sports viewers:

TV stations use people meters to measure the success of individual broadcasted programs. The problem is that private TV stations do not publish complete data because of a competitive advantage. In addition, the resulting data are not that accurate as they contain only a small sample compared to the country's population. For that reason, this parameter is considered rather informative (PEOPLEMETERS 2022).

Social networks:

In today's digital age, a lot of time is spent on social networks, where people follow sites appealing to them. Sports organizations are no exception, often appearing on various social networks, and regularly posting news. Based on the number of users, it is assumed that the data obtained will be relevant and quite easily accessible.

Number of fans at the events:

This factor can be based on the size of the stadiums and the number of fans that regularly attend individual events. By attendance, it is possible to determine which sport the fans are more interested in. However, with a larger number of events, the complexity of data collection can be expected (Lintumäki et al. 2020; MINEDU 2022).

Number of professional leagues:

Via this factor, it is possible to determine the interest in each sport from the perspective of active athletes. Each sport has its own domestic league in that country, with many sports having multiple leagues.

The athlete's salary:

In every sport, the question of money is approached. Given that the task of determining foreign interest is also to determine the popularity of sports for the needs of distributing financial subsidies, the athlete's salary helps determine the interest in sports from the perspective of fans as well as the media. With great interest, a larger amount of money is accumulated, which results in higher salaries for athletes.

Prize pools in competitions:

This factor describes the same situation as the amount of the athlete's salary. Major events usually represent high financial rewards for highly placed teams or athletes. The

prize pool is divided into a certain proportion. However, this factor makes data collection difficult as such data is not always disclosed to the public.

2.3. Investments in Sports by Businesses and States

For various businesses engaged in the manufacturing of products or the provision of services, sponsoring specific sports organizations or directly only certain sports events represent investments in the application of the CSR and ESG concepts.

As part of the CSR concept, it is necessary for businesses to participate in activities that benefit the local community they are surrounded by. For this, businesses can use different management approaches and tools. One of them is the EFQM model linked to the evaluation of the level of CSR activities (Jankal and Jankal and Jankalova 2016). Murata and Hamori (2021) then analyzed the importance of ESG and its disclosure with its possible impact on the businesses' share prices. When a business promotes its CSR activities via sports sponsorship, it affects how it is perceived among customers (Mamo et al. 2022).

Several decision-making situations arise for businesses in connection with sponsoring sports and sports events. From the perspective of the overall spectrum of activities, investing in which strengthens businesses' CSR results, the basic decision is whether they will invest financial resources in sports or in another beneficial area. After the sponsoring business has already decided on the field of sports, it is time to decide on the type of sport and, later, also on a specific sports organization or event. Relevant data and knowledge regarding the population's interest in individual sports are therefore important. Although, at first, it may seem more efficient to invest in sports that are of higher interest, Greenhalgh et al. (2021) mention the benefits of sponsoring niche sports too. This offer sponsors the opportunity to address a demographically more precisely identified group of potential customers.

Just as the decision to invest financial resources to support sports is important for sponsoring businesses, it is often a key decision for entire countries. The situation in Slovakia was described by Varmus et al. (2022), who discussed and analyzed in detail the mechanism based on which state budget funds are distributed among individual sports. One of the factors considered is foreign interest in sports. This is precisely why it is necessary for research to deal with possible ways and methods using which this interest can be expressed as accurately as possible.

Whether it is investment decision-making performed by sponsoring businesses or entire countries, in both cases, it is necessary to have relevant data and knowledge, and to analyze them with the help of modern ICT, applying appropriate methods for assessing investments (Koman et al. 2022; Tumová 2019; Bubelíny et al. 2021; Malichová et al. 2016; Vetráková et al. 2018; Stachová et al. 2020; Boršoš and Gabriel 2022).

3. Materials and Methods

In this part, the aim of the research is described together with the procedure leading to its fulfillment. As part of the procedure performed, further details are provided for the individual sources of the collected data used in the statistical analysis.

3.1. The Aim of the Research

The main aim of the research was to identify the factors that can be used to determine and quantify interest in sports and express the popularity of individual sports in selected countries using the collected data. This created the basis for evaluating the efficiency and returns on investment of businesses in the framework of sponsoring sports and states in the framework of allocating funds to support sports in the country. This is connected to the identification and description of the situations within the investment decision-making of relevant stakeholders (policy makers, sponsoring businesses, sports organizations) for which the results of this analysis are needed.

3.2. Research Procedure

Before the data analysis itself, individual steps and methods were defined to set the research process. The analytical procedure was based on the following parts: Theoretical knowledge summary; Determination of countries for analysis; A list of 30 sports for analysis, based on previous research; Factors affecting the popularity of sports determined via brainstorming and literature review; Data collection, analysis, and the summarization of relevant results.

Slovakia represents a central point in the analysis, being an example of the Eastern European approach to sports funding from the state's budget (the detail on the funds' redistribution is included in the Act on Sport, Slov-Lex 2022; MINEDU 2019). The interest in individual sport types in foreign countries is one variable in the formula for the funds' allocation. (Varmus et al. 2022). Other countries that were compared were selected for the following purpose. They represent the bordering countries—the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary, all being countries where the sports funding is strongly affected by the government (Hobza and Jiří 2008; Drozda et al. 2020; Kozma et al. 2012). The addition of Germany as a country with great economic power represents the western approach. In such countries, the more popular sports (football) are less supported by the state's budget because they operate on a sports market principle. (Feiler et al. 2019; Breuer and Svenja 2023) The selection of countries followed the initial phases of the research where available databases of sports success of countries were analyzed (e.g., using the portal Worldsportranking 2020). The selection of 30 specific sports followed the situation mapped in Slovakia. These were the sports with the greatest membership bases (MINEDU 2021, 2022).

The results presented in this article fit into a broader context of a larger research project with an overall focus on the sustainable management of sports organizations. This topic includes the analysis of individual sports' popularity in Slovakia (Varmus et al. 2022), marketing communication of sports organizations in relation to sponsorship, as well as the analysis of the sports infrastructure availability and funding (Varmus et al. 2023).

The selection of the variables followed the possible options for the expression of foreign countries in sports. This was then combined with the criteria of data availability as well as their ability to capture reality in a relevant manner. Thus, the selected variables were the ones laying at the intersection of these groups.

The process of data collection and the subsequent analysis is described via the variables that were included. The first variable was *Competitions and tournaments*. This represented a collection of all available sports events for individual countries since 2000 by a complete search of the structure of Wikipedia. This was accompanied by the elimination of duplicity in this data set. Furthermore, only tournaments and competitions for one sport were included (the Olympics and similar events were not considered). The second included variable was *Registered athletes*. This included obtaining data from statistical offices and the websites of the sports associations. The details on the specific data sources are included directly in the results section, following the corresponding findings. The last selected variable was *Google Trends*, represented by the number of searches by keyword using the Google Trends tool and comparing the difference between the analyzed sport and the previous sport.

The sports selected from the previous phase (described above) represented keywords for the search using the Google Trends tool. These keywords were used in the tool, and the most searched option of the particular type of keyword was selected for further steps. After choosing the type of keyword, individual keywords were combined. This followed the presumption that the most searched sport would be the one being the most popular. The order was arranged according to the search comparison. Another step of this analytical process was the resulting ranking, the difference. This followed the formula: $n - (n - 1)$ ranking. In the following step, the total difference was created as $r_n + c_{r_{n-1}}$ (where r_n is the difference between the keyword; $c_{r_{n-1}}$ is the total difference of the previous keyword).

4. Results

The research results are structured first to present the results of the data analysis and interpret the findings, and summarize the main knowledge generated. Outputs of data analysis and conclusions, as well as summaries, are presented below.

This part will be focused on presenting the results obtained by analyzing the collected data. Three parameters were chosen for the analysis: *the number of competitions and tournaments, the number of registered athletes, and Google Trends searches.*

4.1. Competitions and Tournaments

One of the factors for determining the popularity of a sport type is represented by the tournaments held in individual countries. Sports events can be a major driver of tourism for a variety of reasons. First, major sporting events often attract large numbers of visitors, either domestically or from outside the host city or country, as fans travel to see their favorite teams or athletes. These visitors can stay in hotels, eat at local restaurants, and visit local attractions, which can significantly boost the local economy (Zarei et al. 2018). Thus, analyzing the most popular sports in surrounding countries is justified by the sports tourism perspective and its consequences for local economies. Traveling to attend sports events is more convenient precisely for people from countries close to the country of interest.

In addition to economic benefits, sports events can also contribute to the visibility of the destination and attract future tourists. For example, if a city hosts a successful and well-attended sporting event, this may encourage more people to visit it in the future, either to participate in another sporting event or simply to get to know the city's culture and attractions (Ratkowski and Ratkowska 2018).

Sporting events can help create a sense of belonging and bring people together, which can be particularly important for destinations trying to attract tourists. Whether via organized fan events or simply the shared experience of watching a sporting event live, sports can create a sense of belonging that can be an attraction for tourists.

Finally, the impact of the sports events on the development of the sports themselves must be considered because many sports fans can, either actively or only as part of leisure activities, start to participate in the sport and thus contribute to the growth of future athletes. This contributes to the popularity of the given sport and thereby increases its attractiveness (Ramchandani et al. 2017; Bjeljac et al. 2017; Mölenberg et al. 2020). The analysis of the current situation in relation to the interest of people in particular sports in the countries is a necessary precondition for affecting this state effectively in the future whether it is by the whole states and nations or the sports organizations themselves.

Since sports events are a place where many people meet, sponsors are looking for such events, or they get more support from the state. Therefore, the data collection should also focus on sports according to the frequency of sports events organized within them (Rapeli and Söderlund 2022). This supports the academic relevance of including this variable in the analysis.

The main criterion for data collection was the year. Many sporting events have been held for decades. However, only tournaments and competitions from 2000 to 2021 were considered during the data collection. All tournaments were considered, whether domestic or international competitions, which took place on the territory of these countries each year. In addition, not only tournaments that took place in the given country during the entire duration were included. Foreign tournaments, of which only some phase (group, final, etc.) was played on the territory of the country, were included as well. To create the list, it was necessary to exclude sports events that combine several different sports, such as the Olympics.

A database of all available sports events for a selected list of 30 sports was created for all countries. The graphs below show the ten types of sports for each country with the highest occurrence of sports competitions that took place during the given time (Figure 1).
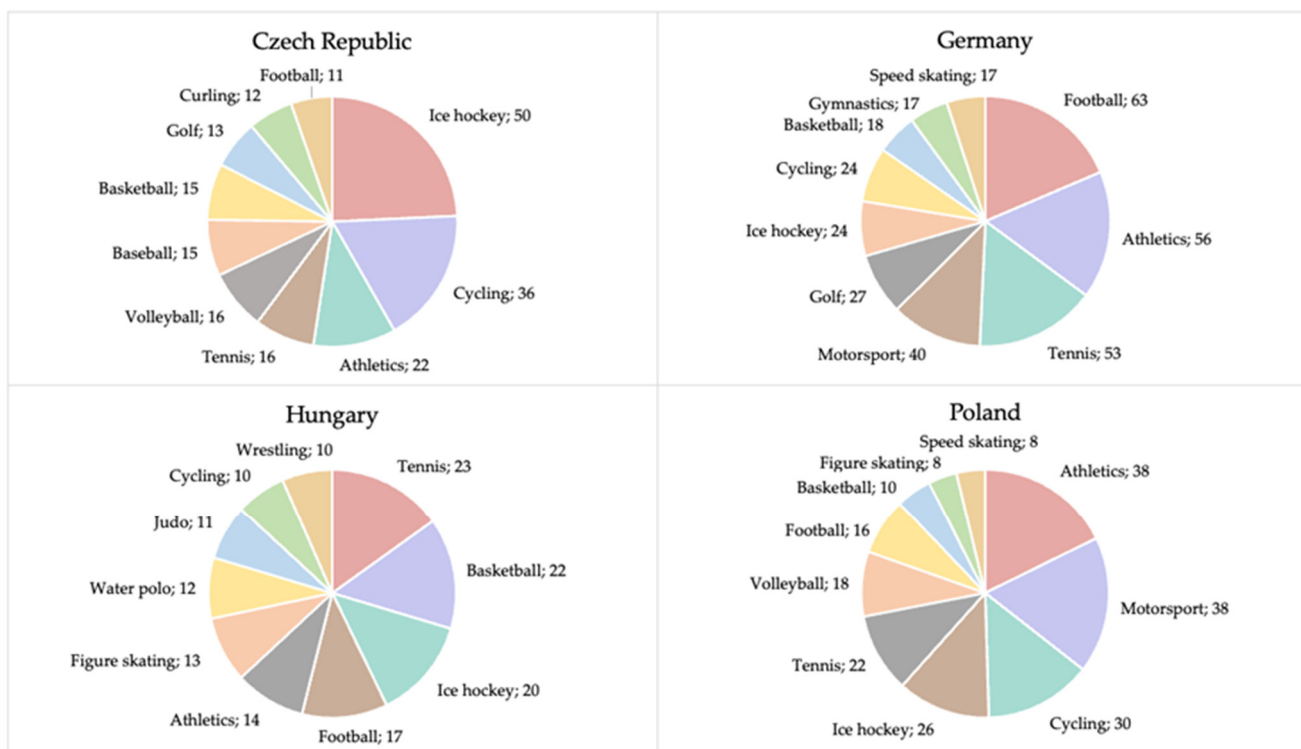
Figure 1. Comparison of sports competitions and tournaments organized in the selected countries; Source: Own elaboration based on the data collected (details are described in Section 3).

Although each country has different conditions for sports, and thus the regularity of certain events varies, sports such as football, hockey, athletics, and cycling are organized quite often in the selected countries. This can be interpreted as high interest in these specific sports. This can be considered a part of the overall comparison of the state of interest of people in sports in the selected countries.

The result of the analysis confirmed the assumption that Germany really is a country where football dominates. This sport is very popular there. For this single sport alone, 63 events have been recorded since 2000, many of which were international events such as the World or European Championships. However, the sports of athletics and tennis also had a large presence here, with numbers higher than 50.

The Czech Republic, on the other hand, is better known mainly for ice hockey, which is also confirmed by the number of competitions organized by this country (50). Ice hockey dominates significantly compared to other countries, which can be seen in the difference between the first two sports. There were 14 more ice hockey events than cycling events. In Germany, athletics is quite popular in this country, but it does not have such a large presence in the number of tournaments.

A smaller number of competitions was assumed for Hungary and Poland than, for example, for Germany. With these countries, it was not determined in advance which sport would have the largest representation. In Hungary, a sport such as baseball appeared in the top three list. Tennis, ice hockey, and football are also popular here. However, the number of competitions is significantly lower, with the highest value of only 23.

Poland has a large presence in motorsports, with 38 events recorded in the analysis. Almost a similar number was achieved in athletics. In addition, cycling and ice hockey are also popular here. All these findings and conclusions represent the first part of the whole picture of the analysis of the interest of people in sports based on the selected variables. Thus, they can be applied by the policy makers and sponsors in their decision-making on investment in sports as well as the fellow researchers studying the situation in other countries or focusing on the steps following these foundations.

4.2. Registered Athletes

The number of registered athletes in each sport can influence its popularity. A sport with many registered athletes may be considered more popular and widespread, which may make it more attractive to people considering trying it. A high number of registered athletes can also lead to more media coverage of the sport, which can further increase its visibility and popularity. In addition, a high number of registered athletes may indicate that there is a well-developed infrastructure for the sport, which may increase its accessibility and make it easier for people to engage in it. Overall, a high number of registered athletes can contribute to the popularity of the sport by making it visible, accessible, and widespread.

The number of registered athletes for some sports is also closely related to GDP and national income. These are usually collective sports that require subsidies from the state and the construction of public training grounds (Kim et al. 2022).

The analysis of this factor consists in collecting data on registered athletes and dividing them into individual categories. The main goal was to find data for a predefined set of sports. The basis was the data divided into "*adults*" and "*juniors*". Secondary, more detailed data such as gender distribution or age categories were also searched for. The obtained data are from 2020. The main criterion was the possible traceability of the data so that the database could be further expanded in the future.

Poland has statistics divided into the categories of adults and juniors. It does not have more specified age categories or gender of athletes. The country publishes statistics every two years. In Figure 2, the number of registered athletes per 100,000 inhabitants in this country is shown.
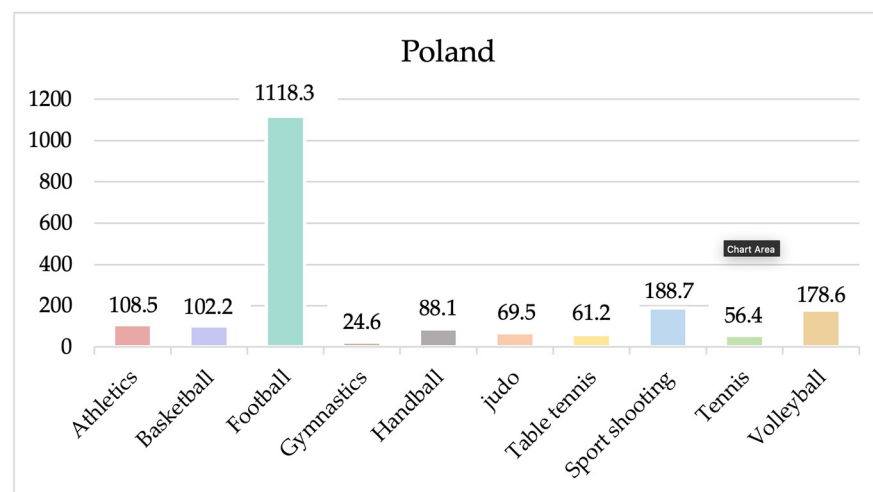

Figure 2. Registered athletes per 100,000 inhabitants: Poland; Source: (Statistics Poland 2022).

More than half of the registered athletes are involved in football, with a difference of up to 929 athletes per 100,000 inhabitants compared to the second sport, shooting. Then the differences in the list are less pronounced, which indicates that football is of the greatest interest in this country from the perspective of the country's registered athletes.

The Czech Republic has defined categories such as adults, teenagers, and pupils. It also has athletes divided by gender. Even in this country, statistics are published regularly every year. The graph captured in Figure 3 shows that, similarly to Poland, the interest in football is significant.
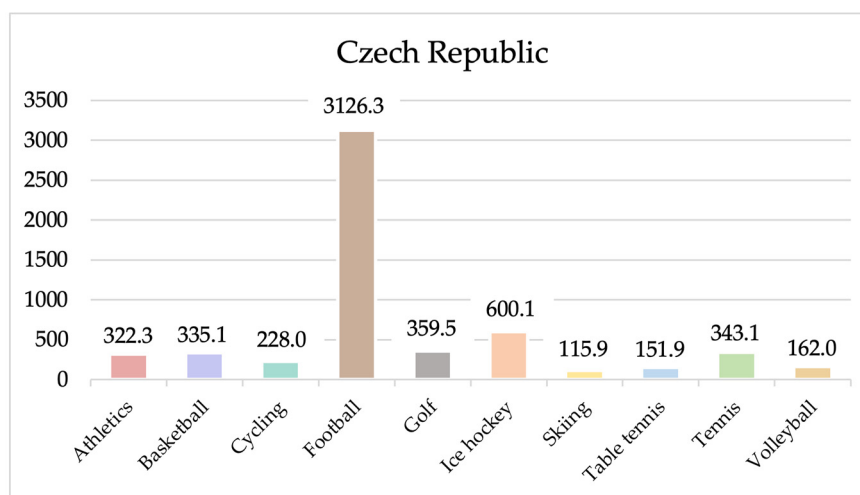
Czech Republic

Figure 3. Registered athletes per 100,000 inhabitants: Czech Republic; Source: (Czech Statistical Office 2022).

Similarly, the dominance of football can be observed with an over-half share. In second place, there was ice hockey, with 600 athletes per 100,000 inhabitants.

Germany had the most detailed statistics of registered athletes among all countries analyzed. Each sport has age categories from 6 to 60+ years and a division of athletes by gender. Statistics are published regularly every year. Figure 4 shows that Germany has a much larger number of athletes. Football also has the largest representation, but in this case, there are up to 8486 athletes per 100,000 inhabitants. This is a significant difference compared to the Czech Republic and Poland.
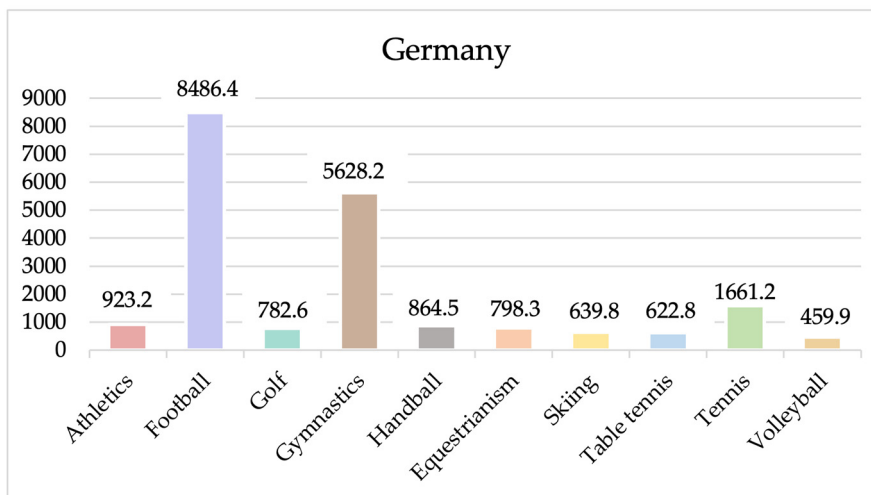
Germany

Figure 4. Registered athletes per 100,000 inhabitants: Germany; Source: (Federal Statistical Office of Germany 2022).

Although most athletes are involved in football, two other sports dominate in Germany, namely athletics, which reached a value of 5628, and tennis, with a value of 1661.

The main findings of this part of the analysis include the following points. The availability of information varies between the selected countries; Hungary does not publish this type of information. Germany, which has the largest population and significantly higher GDP among the observed countries, also has the best sports infrastructure and the availability of information in this area. The greatest number of active registered athletes was recorded in Germany (related to population and GDP), while it was possible to categorize them not only by gender but also by age categories from 6 to 60+ years. Poland and the

Czech Republic achieved similar numbers of registered athletes for individual sports, but when recalculated per 100,000 inhabitants, the Czech Republic had higher values. The Czech Republic also has better data availability, as it was possible to categorize athletes into the categories of pupils, youth, adolescents, and adults; the categories of adults and adolescents could still be divided by gender; only adult and junior categories were available for Poland.

From the perspective of the applicability of the results captured above, not only the values themselves are important. These cover another part of the overall picture of the current situation within the interest of people in sports in its consequences for the defined stakeholders. This time, however, the meta-results have their significance too. These are represented by the description of the data available in the selected countries. Therefore, other possible cases of the results' application by the policy makers emerge. The results can be used to improve the data available so that future research can be performed using more precise data. The countries lacking behind can get inspiration from those providing more complex data on sports, more specifically on the athletes themselves.

4.3. Google Trends Searches

The last factor of the analysis was the search for sports in individual countries. The tool used for this ranking is *Google Trends*. The reason for choosing this tool is the market share of search platforms, where Google covers 63.8% of searches.

The selected sports represent keywords in the search. Subsequently, a keyword was entered into the selected tool, and the most searched option of the type of keyword (e.g., sport, topic, martial art) was selected. After choosing the type of keyword, the stage of comparing individual keywords with each other was performed based on the hypothesis that the most searched sport would be the one that is the most popular. The order from the hypothesis was then arranged according to the search comparison. Another column was created for the resulting ranking, called the difference according to the formula: $n - (n - 1)$ ranking. *Total difference* was created as $r_n + cr_{n-1}$, where r_n is the difference between the keyword and cr_{n-1} is the total difference of the previous keyword. An overall table was created from individual tables for searches in individual countries. Table 1 shows an example process for Germany.

Table 1. Google Trends searches—Germany, data from 2021.

Ranking	Term	Sport	Difference	Total Difference
1	sport	football	16	136
2	7 players	handball	1	120
3	sport	tennis	9	119
4	sport	golf	2	110
5	sport	ice hockey	2	108
6	sport	skiing	1	106
7	sport	biathlon	2	105
8	sport	cycling	3	103
9	sport	volleyball	1	100
10	sport	table tennis	6	99

Source: Own elaboration based on the deliberate searches of keywords via Google Trends.

The term column represents the type of keyword for the selected sport with the greatest search, the difference column represents the difference in search order between the analysed and previous sport, and *Total difference* is the sum of the past differences between the selected sports and the difference of the selected sport.

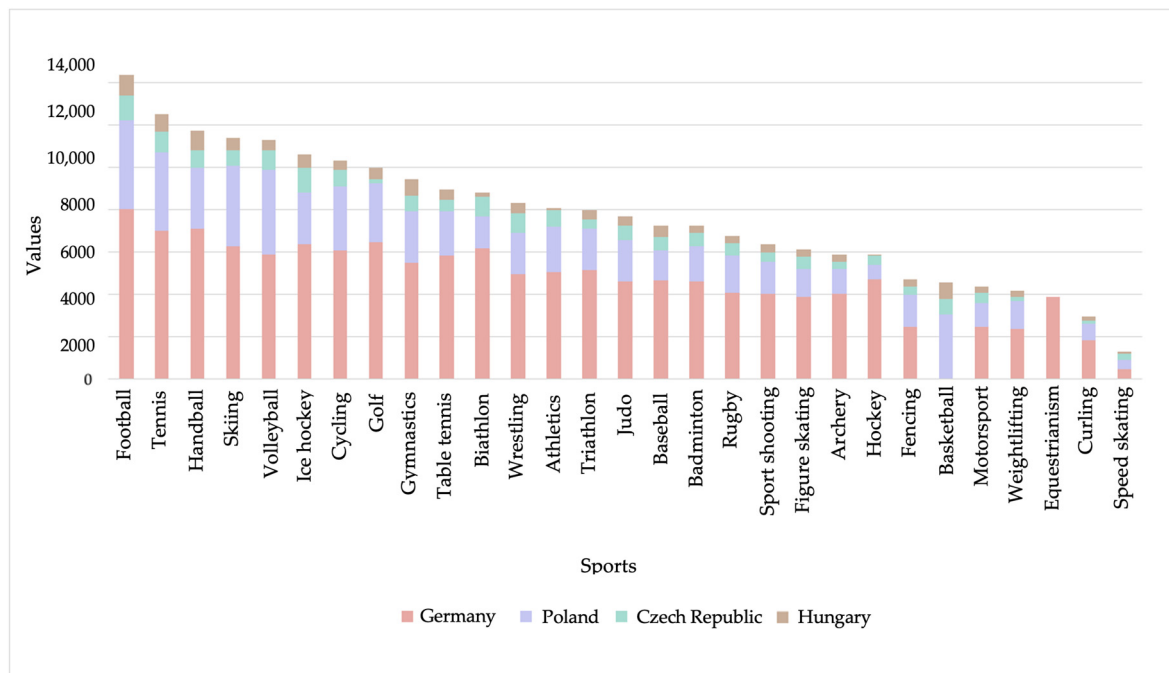Figure 5 shows the resulting ranking of sports based on a search using the Google Trends tool.

Figure 5. Final ranking of sports according to Google Trends searches; Source: Own elaboration based on the deliberate searches of keywords via Google Trends.

After the total summarization of the number of searches in individual countries, it was identified which sports are the most popular among fans. Football achieved the most searches with a noticeable difference compared to the second place. Other places in the ranking were occupied by sports such as tennis, handball, or skiing. The exact comparison within all the selected sports among the countries included in the analysis can be seen in Figure 5.

From the analysis using the Google Trends tool, several findings were identified. Box as a sports type has a problem with this expression because the keyword cannot be categorized into the type of sport, and there are other alternatives for the expression that is also very popular—the existence of an anomaly in the search. The biggest differences in searches between the selected sports are found for *Poland* and the smallest for *the Czech Republic*. From *the macroeconomic perspective, Germany* has the greatest influence among the selected countries, which accounts for more than half of the GDP as well as *the population*. In the subsequent research activities, the classification of GDP per inhabitant could be considered, representing the maturity and prosperity of the country. The original hypotheses and assumptions investigated in the research were largely confirmed, but there were also a few abnormalities that were not expected during data processing. *Handball*, based on the selected region, finished in third place. Due to the great interest in Germany, *equestrianism* did not finish in last place. *Ice hockey* (sixth place in the created overall ranking) was not placed in the top three most popular sports.

These results complete the picture of the analysis of people's interest in sports in the selected countries. The stakeholders themselves can choose which of the angles presented (based on the individual variable) is the most suitable for their decision-making while appraising their sports-oriented investments.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

The main aim was to determine what affects an interest in sports and to express the popularity of individual sports in selected countries via the collected data.

5.1. Conclusions

The main finding from the perspective of competitions is the confirmation of the assumed fact that football and ice hockey are among the most popular sports. Most tournaments are held for these sports. It was also confirmed that Germany is really a football country. However, not only large events but also smaller local tournaments occurred during data collection. As a result, it would be appropriate to continue with the subsequent evaluation of individual events from the perspective of significance and repeatability. However, individual tournaments have different meanings, both for the athletes themselves and for the fans. Many people prefer small local tournaments organized only for athletes of one country, but more important are large international tournaments, which are usually organized every year in a different country. That is why competitions such as the World Championships will be more important for evaluation. When determining popularity, distinguishing whether the tournament is repeated regularly or it was just a one-time event also has a lot of weight.

Data from various statistical offices were collected for the parameter registered athletes. However, the dominant positions of sports such as football, ice hockey, and tennis were also confirmed by this part of the analysis. It turns out that the data is not equally accessible for every selected country. The biggest complications arose for Hungary, which does not have publicly available data.

Data were similarly collected for registered athletes. However, it was not possible to directly compare the data as such among individual countries because the number of registered athletes alone does not provide unequivocal results for the analysis. Therefore, the size of the country was included. It was necessary to start with the population of individual countries and determine the ratio of athletes in particular sports to the total population. With this procedure, it was possible to get much more precise results representing the interest in individual sports, but especially the overall interest in sports in the selected countries. This was captured in the corresponding section of results, adding another layer to the overall comparison of interest of people in sports in the selected countries.

The third factor was based on the Google Trends tool. It was a search for keywords for individual sports and the subsequent comparison with each other. It was assumed that the most sought-after sports would also be the most popular ones. The fact that football is the most popular and sought-after sport was confirmed even in this analysis as well. Similarly to the situation with the competitions, ice hockey was ranked first in the search for the Czech Republic. Detailed results were captured via the chart included in the corresponding results section. Combining all the parts of the analysis, based on the selected variables, it was possible to identify and quantify the interest of people in sports in the selected countries. These findings can thus be applied in the process of investments appraisal performed by the relevant stakeholders (policy makers, businesses sponsoring sport, fellow researchers, and academicians performing further research within this topic).

5.2. Discussion

As part of the discussion, the results of this research must be compared with the results of other authors studying the same topic. Such results support that sponsoring sports organizations has a significant effect on sponsoring businesses (sponsors). As stated by Peluso et al. (2019), increasing the popularity of sports provides sponsors with a unique opportunity to reach many potential customers or to remind current customers of the products provided. Therefore, the initial information on the current state of popularity in the countries can be considered an important piece of information for the sponsors assessing their investments in particular sports organizations. The need to examine this topic from multiple perspectives, considering all interested parties, is emphasized by Buser et al. (2022). According to them, when creating value in the field of sports, it is necessary to perceive this phenomenon as a complete ecosystem and approach it with the application of this logic. Jankalová and Jankal (2016) then deal with the need for

sufficient data for evaluating businesses' investments in their CSR, which also includes sports sponsorship.

The study by Hahn emphasizes that it is necessary to consider the fan's interest in the chosen sport and, consequently, his/her level of knowledge in a specific sport to refine the result of the effect of the experience factor. Another result is to support the fact that the fan needs to be understood multidimensionally, considering a plethora of factors that influence him/her. Therefore, it is necessary to use multidimensional equations for the prediction of fans' behavior as an aspect of the sport's popularity and the interest of people in sports (Hahn and Cummins 2017).

The relevance of the application of the Google Trends tool for the purpose of data analysis is supported by the study performed by Čular et al. (2020). However, other authors also point out different possible sources of valuable data. These include the data related to betting on sports and the success of teams or athletes in sports events and competitions (Killick and Griffiths 2019).

5.3. Implications for Sponsoring Businesses, Sports Organizations, and States

The results of the presented research can be used by businesses inclined to invest in support of individual sports organizations in the form of sponsorship as a part of the application of CSR and the newer ESG concept to their business making. Based on topical pieces of knowledge, the managers of these businesses will be able to better determine and estimate the return of such investments in their marketing. Due to this, they will be able to strengthen their position as socially responsible businesses.

It is also valuable knowledge for the sports organizations themselves. Based on the measured interest in the given sport, their managers will be able to better estimate what funds can be allocated to them in the future as part of the state support for sports from the budgets of individual countries. They will also have a better basis for setting up how to appropriately communicate their options to sponsors. Based on the quantified interest in the specific sport, they will be able to choose a perspective. They can therefore decide whether they will attract sponsors on the basis that there is an overall high interest in their sport both in the given country and abroad. On the other hand, organizations operating in less popular sports, for which there is less interest identified via the data-based analysis, must choose a different strategy. These can engage in grant schemes and projects aimed at the inclusion and promotion of diversity and approach those businesses for sponsorship for which this aligns with their own marketing philosophy. As emphasized by Greenhalgh et al. (2021), these niche sports provide the sponsors with much more precisely targeted demographics than the most popular sports in the country.

For the states (and the policy makers being engaged in the strategic decision-making), the results of the research create the opportunity to have their decisions on the allocation of funds for specific sports supported by proper data analysis. This complex analysis considers several factors, variables, and perspectives. This way, the states will achieve results that better represent reality they can use to appraise their investments in sports.

5.4. Research Limitations and Future Directions

The overall limitations of the research presented in this article include several parts. The first is the deliberate selection of variables that represent the interest of individual countries in individual sports. The second is the selection of the countries included in the research. The third is the application of selected analytical methods. Furthermore, it is also the limited availability of the necessary data, which is influenced by the current state of the database infrastructure and the transparency of such data.

In future research, it would be possible not only to assign weights to some variables (as in the case of sports events) but also to obtain data for other factors applicable. As a result, this could bring other relevant outputs, considering which it would be possible to adjust the list of the most popular sports. Subsequently, this will further support the ability

to sponsor businesses and the states themselves to estimate the return on investments in sports and to constantly increase the efficiency of these investments.

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