This is the published version of a paper published in *Sport, Education and Society*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Karlsson, J., Kilger, M., Bäckström, Å., Redelius, K. (2023) Selling youth sport: the production and promotion of immaterial values in commercialised child and youth sport 
*Sport, Education and Society*, : 565-578
https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2022.2057462

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:gh:diva-7031
Selling youth sport: the production and promotion of immaterial values in commercialised child and youth sport

Jesper Karlsson, Magnus Kilger, Åsa Bäckström & Karin Redelius

To cite this article: Jesper Karlsson, Magnus Kilger, Åsa Bäckström & Karin Redelius (2022): Selling youth sport: the production and promotion of immaterial values in commercialised child and youth sport, Sport, Education and Society, DOI: 10.1080/13573322.2022.2057462

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2022.2057462

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 31 Mar 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 190

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Selling youth sport: the production and promotion of immaterial values in commercialised child and youth sport

Jesper Karlsson, Magnus Kilger, Åsa Bäckström and Karin Redelius

Department of Movement, Culture and Society, The Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences (GIH), Stockholm, Sweden; Department of Child and Youth Studies, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

ABSTRACT

The contexts in which young people participate in sport are diverse. In Scandinavia, as in many other countries, child and youth sport is mainly organised in non-profit, membership-based and voluntary driven sports clubs. In Sweden, this model is now challenged by commercial businesses providing child and youth sport services. The overall aim of this article is to provide empirically based knowledge about these ongoing and largely unexplored commercialisation processes. The focus of the article is to illuminate how commercial businesses produce immaterial values through the promotion of sport services. In this article, we have explored the cultural and social values produced and promoted by commercial businesses in youth sport. Drawing on the website communications of eight commercial businesses from four different commercial strands, we use the concept of immaterial labour to consider the values produced when child and youth sport is turned into a desirable product on the market. The values generated from the texts on the selected websites are the immaterial values of (i) competence, (ii) individually adjusted training and, (iii) happiness. These values are enunciated differently by the businesses in the different strands. We situate the findings in relation to western social and cultural values and discuss the potential consequences of these value productions for contemporary ideas about youth sport and the way it should be organised.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 May 2021
Accepted 21 March 2022

KEYWORDS

Immaterial labour; competence; individualization; happiness; affect; desire

Introduction

For decades, sports have become increasingly commercialised (Gruneau, 2017). The process of commercialisation has also gradually come to include youth sports. However, the contexts in which young people participate in sport are diverse. In Australia and New Zealand, for example, schools are the main providers of sport for young people but community sport clubs as well as commercial clubs are also important contexts for youth sport (Macdonald & Mallett, 2016). In that sense, school sport programmes, community sport clubs and commercial clubs, all provide pathways to sport participation. But, as Macdonald and Mallett (2016) point out, they can also compete for participants, access to sporting venues, volunteer labour, etc. Another example of a diverse situation is the United States, where youth sport is fragmented and there is no interconnected youth sport system that is governed by any national state or local body (Coakley, 2016). Instead, the different

CONTACT Jesper Karlsson jesper.karlsson@gih.se Department of Movement, Culture and Society, The Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences (GIH) Stockholm, Sweden

© 2022 The Author(s), Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.
systems are sponsored by a milliard of organizations ranging from ‘private-for-profit businesses to local public agencies’ (Coakley, 2016, p. 85) and the multisector partners are common (Legg et al., 2018). A third example of settings for youth sport can be seen in the latest Eurobarometer (2014), the official polling instrument used by the European Parliament, the European Commission and other EU institutions. Apart from informal venues, such as parks and outdoors, youth sport activities are mostly organised in formal settings such as schools, universities, fitness centres and, not least, in community sport clubs. In European countries, such as the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, as well as in Canada and Australia, club sport forms an important part of young people’s experience of and participation in sport (Light et al., 2013). This is also the case in Sweden and Norway where sport clubs are not just the main provider of youth sport, they are the only provider. In that sense, Scandinavia appears to ‘make up an exceptionalism in the field of youth sport’ (Green, 2016, p. 72).

Sweden and Norway have a long and strong history of organising youth sport in voluntary, membership-based, democratically governed, non-commercial and independent sports clubs (Carlsson & Hedenborg, 2011; Toftegaard Støckel et al., 2010). This Scandinavian sport model has developed in connection with the state and the social democratic welfare model. The model embraces elite sport as well as youth and recreational sport and it is anchored in civic society through the Swedish Sport Confederation (SSC), a non-governmental organisation founded in 1904. Although the SSC is an independent organisation, it depends upon public funding. The reason for the state’s interest in organised sport can be summarised through its political goals for sport, which go hand in hand with a ‘sport for all’ ideology. As of today, SSC consists of around 70 special sports federations, together with over 20,000 sports clubs around the country. Most coaches and leaders work on a voluntary basis and receive little or no monetary compensation. Currently, there are roughly half a million leaders in youth sport, many of whom are parents working as coaches (Kilger, 2020). Historically, the model has been highly successful in recruiting children and youth to sport (Bairner & Darby, 2001; Bergsgard & Norberg, 2010; Giulianotti et al., 2019; Norberg, 2011). In Sweden, almost all youth are members of a sport club at some time or other during their upbringing (Thedin Jakobsson, 2015).

The provision of substantial state support has enabled SSC to remain a relatively autonomous and self-regulated organisation. However, times are changing and today this extensive, widespread, uniform and cohesive Swedish youth sport model is challenged. Private businesses providing child and youth sport services have entered the scene and are now part of the youth sport landscape. This commercialisation process obviously stands in stark contrast to how youth sport is traditionally organised. Empirical research is yet scarce apart from an initial first mapping identifying four different types or strands, of commercialisation processes with different relations to the SSC model (Karlsson et al., 2021). Scholars have paid attention to and called for further investigations into the emerging new youth sport landscape (Carlsson & Hedenborg, 2011; Norberg & Redelius, 2012; Wagansson & Augustsson, 2015). Questions raised are for example: Could commercial child and youth sports undermine the voluntary work carried out in sport clubs? How is sports’ social credibility affected by processes where children and parents are seen as customers? How does this new landscape affect the availability of youth sport? What is at stake in the long run – how is youth sport sold and what ideas about sport are brought up on a competitive marketplace to make youth sport appealing?

In this article, we will focus on the last question raised. We believe that the ongoing transformation of a uniform child and youth sport model into a more fragmented one where commercial business are part of the landscape makes up an interesting case. Such cases provide insights into sport(s) as floating and malleable formations that are shaped through an interplay of different forces (Gruneau, 2017). In this sense, how commercialisation, as a force, influences ideas about child and youth sport. We will use the concept immaterial labour (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Lazzarato, 1996) to illuminate how the sporting activities on offer are turned into desirable products. Consequently, the aim is to study how commercial businesses in Sweden produce immaterial values through the promotion of sport services to children and youth on their websites. We will discuss
the potential consequences of these value promotions for contemporary ideas about youth sport and how it should be carried out.

Child and youth sport in the age of neoliberalism

To understand youth sport contexts in general, Evans and Davies (2010, 2014a) point out that youth sport needs to be situated in relation to the expansion of the service sector as a whole. Today’s parents are part of an educational service market, with the possibility to buy the different services provided by both the public and the private sectors. Evans et al. (2008) argue that the expansion of these services is the result of a contemporary parenting discourse, which is about eliminating risks, such as failure at school, physical inactivity, obesity and drug abuse. As it is a parental duty to counter such risks, this is also part of a neoliberal rationality regarding the individual’s responsibility. Neoliberal rhetoric emphasises choice, where self-governance is essential and where the ‘wrong’ choices are placed on the subjects themselves (Coakley, 2010; de Benedictis, 2012). In such a climate, it is argued that parents increasingly request services that counter potential risks and where physical educational opportunities count as one preventive solution (Evans & Davies, 2010). Coakley (2010) observes that as child and youth sport entrepreneurs emerged in the United States during the 1980s, programmes needed to resonate with parents’ desires regarding what they wanted for their children. ‘After all, it was parents who registered children for programs, paid fees, bought uniforms and gassed up SUVs to drive the family to practices, games, tournaments and national championships at Disney World’ (Coakley, 2010, p. 17). As part of this neoliberalisation of the family, the idea that the characters and actions of children are shaped exclusively by parents led to parents dedicating themselves to the success of their children. Many parents became obsessed with nurturing the dreams of their children and therefore sought culturally valued and professionally supervised activities for them. Due to parents’ calls for opportunities to maintain social advantages for their children and as a way of proving good parenting, a new generation of specialist childhood PE/sports advisers and services have emerged (Coakley, 2010; Evans & Davies, 2010).

Another example of how the organisation of child and youth sport has changed because of larger global and neoliberal societal changes, is the outsourcing of physical education (PE) which has created a large interest (Enright et al., 2020; Evans & Davies, 2010; Evans & Davies, 2014a; Evans & Davies, 2014b; Mangione et al., 2020; Powell, 2015; Sperka & Enright, 2018; Stirrup et al., 2015). For instance, Powell (2015) examines the commercialisation and privatisation of PE in New Zealand’s primary schools and shows that in their ambitions to improve PE, different authorities and actors also shape teachers’ thoughts, actions and beliefs about themselves as teachers and about PE as a subject. External providers of PE are positioned and promoted as experts by the external providers, principals and PE teachers themselves. In this way, teachers position themselves and are positioned as less competent. In fact, being considered as ‘experts’ was the most frequent justification as to why external providers were given access to PE (Sperka & Enright, 2018). The consequences of external providers in the field of PE is valuable when exploring how youth sports are promoted by commercial alternatives in Sweden and how that may influence ideas about youth sport and how it should be organised.

Promotional culture and immaterial labour

We also see child and youth sports as a phenomenon consisting of relations intimately interwoven with contemporary western economies (Andrews & Silk, 2018; Denzin, 2012). Today, this implies that businesses are forced to adapt to a society that has become communication and information orientated (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Lazzarato, 1996; Lazzarato, 2014). Wernick (1991) called this promotional culture and argued that for goods and money to be exchanged, information had to be exchanged as well. In a promotional culture context, communication operates by means of dialogical persuasion, where its fundamental aim is to turn a potential customer into a buyer. This is done by highlighting
what the individual can achieve through purchase, which in turn leads to a desire for self-transformation through some form of consumption. This has been one of the fundamental aspects of promotional and advertising culture since the Industrial revolution (Marshall & Morreale, 2018). Lazzarato (1996) defined this as immaterial labour, which is work that does not relate to a product but still materialises desires and imaginations that produce collective subjectivities. Immaterial labour then is work that is concerned with defining and attaching or fixing, cultural and social values of products and services. The value that is being produced through the attachment of cultural and social norms is the products’ ‘ideological’ and cultural environment (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Lazzarato, 1996; Lazzarato, 2014; Paulsen, 2017). In this article, we call the cultural and social attachment of values produced by commercial businesses the production of immaterial values. The attention of the article is directed towards how commercial businesses in Sweden produce immaterial values through the promotion of sport services to children and youth on their websites. The research question guiding the study is: What kind of cultural and social values are produced and promoted through the immaterial labour of commercial businesses?

Methodology

An essential part of immaterial labour is the use of symbolic semiotics, which are designed to arrange the aspects between business communication and customers (Lazzarato, 2014). As websites use multiple symbolic semiotics, the analysis of business communication is complex. In this article, we focus on text communication and assume that text, as a symbolic semiotic device, is a crucial tool used by businesses to describe their services to potential customers. Another aspect that is worth highlighting is that website texts mainly consist of hypertext. This means that the text does not follow a linear path like a book. Rather, hypertext is the text that guides us to certain content on a website. Different links can lead us to the same content or content that is similar under a different link. We emphasise this notion of hypertext in our analysis to focus on the written communications of the selected businesses and how the text they use produces immaterial values in the field of child and youth sport. It is also important to remember Lazzarato’s (2014) belief, namely that every enunciation is dialogic, strategic, event-generating and based on pre-signifying corporeal semiotics. In other words, the dialogue occurs between the person engaging with the website and the communication that occurs on it.

The websites were chosen to show the range and differences in the commercial child and youth sport services provided by the selected businesses (CSS). We used a purposive sampling approach to ensure variety and that the sample units differed from each other in terms of key characteristics and context (Bryman, 2016). Our sample exemplifies the population (i.e. the businesses) under consideration (Bryman, 2016). It is informed by previous research findings and reflects the range of four different commercialisation strands as explained below (see also Karlsson et al., 2021).

The first strand mainly consists of businesses offering different forms of physical activities (e.g. gymnastics, football and dance) on a weekly basis to children aged 2–8 years, i.e. children too young to be members of a sports club, but with the possibility to become sport club members when they are old enough. Here, our sample consists of two businesses operating in several towns across Sweden.

The second strand consists of businesses organising sport camps for children aged 9–15 years in different sports, mainly during school holidays. In relation to the services for children who are too young to be members of a sports club, these camps provide activities alongside the SSC model, in that those recruited do not have to, but still can be part of a club. In this strand, our sample consists of two businesses that arrange summer camps for children aged 9–16 years. In relation to our overall sample, these two businesses offer the broadest selection of sport at their camps, with over 15 different sports to choose from at the same time at the same location.

The third strand provides activities that are either parallel to the SSC model or are interwoven with its activities. These businesses provide extra training sessions in specific sports and their
potential customers are already doing sport in traditional clubs. Businesses in this strand are open to all paying customers. Here, our sample consists of one business specialising in football only and one business in ice hockey. Football and ice hockey are also two of the most commercialised sport in Sweden (Ljungren, 2020).

The fourth strand consists of businesses that provide training for invited or specially selected young athletes. These children and youth are also club members who train and compete in traditional non-profit sport clubs. The sample here consists of two businesses that select or invite youth to their academy or ‘selected camps’—one specialising in floorball and the other in tennis.

Overall, the sample consists in total of eight businesses two from each commercialisation strand as mentioned above. The sample is also demonstrated in detail in Table 1. It shows the number of webpages, the number of words on them and the different activities that are offered according to age, gender and proficiency. All the websites were downloaded to an external hard drive to ensure that they were not changed or updated during the analysis.

In accordance with the six-phase model for thematic analysis suggested by Braun et al. (2016), we worked systematically through the stages of familiarisation and coding, followed by theme development, refinement and naming. Familiarisation was done by connecting to the selected websites several times and copying all the written text into different documents, one for each business. Coding how the different businesses presented themselves in their written communications was guided by the purpose and theoretical considerations of the article. Two analytical questions were formulated: How do the businesses write about themselves? What do they highlight about their sporting services? To answer these questions, we developed codes based on the websites’ written statements. For example: ‘Our leaders have a background in sports and the heart in the right place. All Sport Play leaders have completed Be Sporty’s leadership training’ was interpreted as statements about coaches. The statements were translated from Swedish to English as closely as possible. The codes were then used in the formation of themes by means of a reflexive process that included refinement and returning to the raw data several times (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The example above, informed the theme ‘it is important with educated coaches’. In turn, this theme has implications for the results presented as the immaterial value of competence. In other words, the theme informs the final phase of the analysis in the process of writing up.

**Findings**

Using the concept of immaterial values, we will now show how commercial businesses communicate and promote their services to attract customers. In line with our theoretical starting point, immaterial labour is directed towards attaching or fixing, the cultural and social environment of businesses. We begin by showing the different aspects of values that the selected businesses produce and promote for their potential customer groups. First, we want to point out that even if the studied websites differ in terms of structure and how the values are highlighted, there are patterns in the production of specific immaterial values. The immaterial values that the businesses use to promote their services are as follows: (i) competence, (ii) individually adjusted training, and (iii) happiness. It is important to note that these three immaterial values are produced on all the visited websites, albeit differently depending on the potential customers, as will show.

**The production of the immaterial value of competence**

The value of competence is produced through enunciations about how well-equipped and educated the coaches are. There should be no doubt that they are able and willing to provide a nurturing breeding ground for child and youth sport development. Competence is produced differently on the various websites and various types of previous coaching or teaching experiences are constructed as important and produced as a value. On the *Sweden Sport Academy* and *Be Sporty* (first strand) websites, concepts such as pedagogy, education and experience materialise as ways of producing the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business</th>
<th>Number of web pages</th>
<th>Amount of text (words)</th>
<th>Form of activity</th>
<th>Type of activity</th>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Proficiency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweden Sport Academy</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7547</td>
<td>Weekly training sessions</td>
<td>5 different services</td>
<td>Mainly 2–8</td>
<td>Boys and girls</td>
<td>Beginners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be sporty</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6806</td>
<td>Weekly training sessions</td>
<td>5 different service</td>
<td>Mainly 2–8</td>
<td>Boys and girls</td>
<td>Beginners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stadium sport camp</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>12,453</td>
<td>Summer camps</td>
<td>22 different sports</td>
<td>8–10, 11–15</td>
<td>Boys and girls</td>
<td>All levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports heart</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6077</td>
<td>Summer camps</td>
<td>16 different sports</td>
<td>8–11, 12–15</td>
<td>Boys and girls</td>
<td>All levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish Football Academy</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5003</td>
<td>Camps, individual sessions, consultants Club services</td>
<td>Specialized in football</td>
<td>8–14</td>
<td>Boys and girls</td>
<td>All levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TopHockey</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8028</td>
<td>Camps, individual sessions, consultants Club services</td>
<td>Specialized in ice hockey</td>
<td>11-senior</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>All levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good to great</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>5666</td>
<td>Academy, camps, individual sessions</td>
<td>Specialized in tennis</td>
<td>11-senior</td>
<td>Boys and girls</td>
<td>All levels but the academy require application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selected player</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1612</td>
<td>Camps</td>
<td>Specialized in floorball</td>
<td>8–17</td>
<td>Boys and girls</td>
<td>All levels, but selection to special camps</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
immaterial value of competence when promoting their services. For example, on the Be Sporty website, it is stressed that:

Our actives are developed by pedagogues with long experience of children’s sport. All our coaches in ‘Sport Play’ have passed a thorough basic education and participate in continuous trainings.

In addition, the Sweden Sport Academy website emphasises that:

Before each semester, our leaders undergo Sweden Sport Academy’s leadership training. There they are trained in our arrangements and pedagogy. Many of the leaders also work in preschools or other children’s activities every day.

In these examples, the immaterial value of competence is produced and promoted by creating associations with preschool teachers who have experience of working with young children and therefore have the children’s best interests at heart on a daily basis. On the websites of the businesses offering sport camps during the summer, Sports Heart and Stadium Sports Camp (second strand), their coaches are described as socially minded, such as on the Sports Heart site.

The coaches have a social leadership in focus and pay attention to every participant to develop as an individual and in their sport. Through sports we open up an arena where everyone is welcome with a heart that beats for the future.

In similar vein, Stadium Sports Camp highlights that:

Every summer we have some of the country’s best youth coaches at the camp and they have as their top priority to give all participants the best week of the summer.

These examples show how the immaterial value of competence can vary and be produced differently in the promotion of child and youth sport services. In the case of Sports Heart, a social aspect is included that is obtained by a certain type of leadership. In the second example, competence becomes a value that for participants to cherish and a confirmation that the businesses manages to attract the best coaches every summer. Even though the coaches are described as socially competent and having pedagogical experience from elsewhere, the sites also stress that the businesses contribute to the coaches’ competence by in-service education. Sports Heart highlights that: ‘all of our coaches have experience of child and youth sport. They also undergo a training education in social leadership through Sports Heart’. In our analyses, the production of the immaterial values of the coaches as being socially and pedagogically competent in player development can be seen as part of how these businesses promote themselves and orientate towards children and youth who are already active as well as towards those who are not.

In relation to the businesses specialising in only one sport (third and fourth strands), such as TopHockey, The Swedish Football Academy, Good to Great and Selected Player, the immaterial value of competence is produced in yet another way. These businesses focus mainly on their coaches as competent and even professional when it comes to developing sporting skills. The Swedish Football Academy states that:

Our camps and clinics are for players that want to fill their school breaks and weekends with fun and developing football trainings- under the supervision of professional coaches.

Moreover, The Swedish Football Academy and TopHockey claim to have professional coaches who are ready to offer specialist help with anything relating to technique, nutrition, mental development and rehabilitation. With these businesses, the immaterial value of competence is exemplified by highlighting their coaches as experts who know everything that an athlete needs to know when trying to persuade potential customers to purchase their services.

Expert coaches may draw on education or their own previous experiences. Good to Great’s (fourth strand) expert coaches have experience of being elite athletes themselves and are therefore trusted to have the necessary knowledge to develop the next generation of sports stars.
We know what it takes to get to the top. There are many hard hours that are behind success, but we can promise you that it is worth every second the day you are standing with a cup over your head. Through our experience our goal is to develop tennis players from good to great and prepare the youth for a life inside and outside the tennis court.

Good to Great’s coaches are headhunted specifically for this task and underlining this is a way of promoting their services to potential customers. Selected Player (fourth strand) does not promote its coaches in the same way but emphasises that its training concept of KeyTraining, which their coaches are educated in, has been developed by its founder, who also is a former professional player. The Good to Great site claims that:

[...] we use the successful training model KeyTraining Floorball to quickly and easily develop the player’s basic technique. Our educated coaches instruct the participants in the specially designed technology courses, so that each player gets the best possible effect from the training. KeyTraining Floorball was developed by triple world champion Jonathan Kronstrand.

In relation to the other businesses orientated towards sport development, these businesses produce and promote the immaterial value of competence by emphasising that their founders are former elite players. Therefore, as the logic goes, they are good choices for young athletes who want to develop themselves. The value of competence is seemingly produced and promoted on a scale between ‘social competence’ and ‘sport competence’, where the focus on children and adolescents accordingly requires more social skills than developing proficiency in a particular sport.

The production of the immaterial value of individually adjusted training

The second immaterial value we identified on the websites was that of individually adjusted training. Like competence, this immaterial value is produced and promoted differently in relation to potential customers. On the Be Sporty (first strand) website, it states that ‘the purpose of Sport Play is for your child to discover the joy of moving where everyone can participate based on their ability’. On the Sweden Sport Academy site for Adventure Dance (first strand), it is pointed out that ‘Our leaders are responsible and will work to make your child feel safe and have fun while testing dance on his or her own level’.

The businesses offering sport camps during the summer (second strand) also emphasise the individually adjusted aspect of their trainings. On the Stadium Sports Camp badminton site, it highlights that:

The focus of the trainings is mainly on technique and basics. We will of course adapt the training based on your level, no matter if you are a beginner or have played for years.

On the Sports Heart page, the emphasis is as follows:

Sports Heart works for all children’s right to sports and health. Through inspiration, dissemination of knowledge and education, we contribute to a joyful, developing and welcoming sport environment. An environment that confirms and meets each individual where he or she is as a person and athlete.

The above examples show the production and promotion of the immaterial value of individual level-adjusted training, albeit in different ways. The main focus is on everyone being able to participate, albeit ability. However, these examples of individually adjusted training are not as explicit as those on the websites of businesses specialising in one sport (third and fourth strands). For instance, the TopHockey site asks:

Do you like to develop? Then you will flourish on our camps. We eat, sleep, train and talk ice hockey’ [...] our coaches and consults are passionate about individual training. That is when we are on top. There is nothing that satisfies us more than when you get to the next level. [...] Hockey is a team sport but more and more people understand the importance of individual development as a crucial part of success. As a coach for a team, it is a great challenge to see and develop each player’s individual abilities. Conditions for each player differ in many ways.
The Swedish Football Academy site states:

If you as a player will reach your full potential, you need to train on your own. The clubs seldom have the resources nor time that is needed to give their players enough individual training [...] we have an ambition that the individual football player will be offered the same opportunity for individual training as for example a track & field athlete or a swimmer [...] Common to all trainings is that the individual’s development is the focus. We always strive to give you as a player a developing training environment where your development as a football player is the focus.

In the above excerpts, it is even suggested that the business has something that the clubs do not have – individual training opportunities. On the Good to Great and Selected Player websites, (fourth strand), the production and promotion of the immaterial value of level-adjusted training are similar to that on The Swedish Football Academy and TopHockey sites. The Good to Great site states that: ‘We focus on the individual and have all the time a long-term focus, grounded on our Good to Great model and with coaches’ experience from world-class’. Here the emphasis is on ‘As mentioned, we work very individually with each player and take into account progression in physical development and age’. Selected Player similarly highlights: ‘We believe that level-adjusted training is A and O for the development of young players. Therefore, we always start from the participants’ current level on our camps’.

In this sense, the production and promotion of the immaterial value of individual level-adjusted training is directed towards individual sporting development. Viewed in this way, the production and promotion of the immaterial value differ among the different businesses.

The production of the immaterial value of happiness

The third immaterial value is happiness. The way happiness is promoted is mainly demonstrated through the descriptions of the activities on offer. The businesses offering services to children aged 2–8 years (first strand), Sweden Sport Academy and Be Sporty, emphasise the following:

We want to contribute to create curiosity and interest for sports and movement at an early stage in life. Simply movement joy!

The purpose with Sport Play is for your child to discover the joy of moving and everyone can participate based on their ability. Our key words of happiness, practice and fellowship permeate all our lessons.

In these examples, happiness as an immaterial value, in the form of joy in movement, is used to promote the services. Playfulness and joy are also keywords that are used to provide information about their services to potential customers.

On the websites of the businesses offering sport camps during the summer (second strand) – Sports Heart and Stadium Sports Camp – another form of happiness comes to the fore. In this form, the immaterial value of happiness stretches beyond sport and physical activity and promotes the sport camps as ‘more than sport’. For example, on the Sports Heart website the activities are described like this:

Sweden’s warmest camp where child, youth and coaches from all over Sweden get together and enjoy the summer at its best. You will develop as an individual in your sport together with famous sport profiles that will coach you, no matter if you are chasing a sports career or just do sports for the fun of it [...] During the evenings on the camp, we will barbecue, take a swim and have beautiful summer hours together with new friends.

This example shows how values such as ‘friendship’, ‘fun’ and evening activities beyond the actual sports training are emphasised. In this way, both the affective aspects of the camps and values ‘beyond sporting skills’ are underlined. As indicated by Hardt and Negri (2000), this is an important part of immaterial labour, in that values are produced from affective and cognitive activities. Another example from the Stadium Sports Camp website accentuates the following:
[...] during the week you have two training sessions a day, but for us Stadium Sports Camp is about so much more. It is about experiences, fellowship, challenges and, above all, it’s about friends – both new and old.

Also in this example, values beyond the sporting activity are highlighted and promoted. In this case, the immaterial value is produced and promoted by a societal portrayal of happiness that orientates thoughts towards values of fellowship, joy and social skills. In this example it is underlined by a description of warm summer days where children do the sports they enjoy, try out new ones and meet old and new friends. This enunciation of values is an important part of immaterial labour (Lazzarato, 1996) – in this case, to attract children who are not already club sport participants.

The immaterial value of happiness permeates the websites of the more specialised businesses too, although not as explicitly as the above businesses. For instance, TopHockey (third strand) underlines that:

> We want to take care of the happiness in the sport. It is fun to play ice-hockey. It is wonderful to grow. It is pleasurable to succeed. We provide the right training, mentally and physically, in combination with a holistic view on personal development. That makes our players stronger on the ice and in life.

Moreover, The Swedish Football Academy (third strand) states: ‘the training sessions are joyful settings with the aim to develop the players’ skills, both technical and tactical’. Both of the above examples show how the immaterial value of happiness is entangled with the promotion of skills development oriented towards the future. As stressed by Colebrook (2003), happiness is not only the emotional response to what we want here and now. It is also the power to think about what we want from life as a whole and to think beyond our current life. Happiness is thus a power that can turn means and ends into a whole. It can be argued that happiness and development to promote sport services helps young athletes, coaches and non-profit clubs to imagine future possibilities and dream about excelling in their chosen sport. This kind of happiness is more explicitly communicated by the businesses offering sports services to selected and invited young athletes, such as Selected Player and Good to Great (fourth strand). For instance, Selected Player underlines:

> Did you know that three out of four players in the Swedish U19-national team are Selected Players? In other words, they have been part of our world-class education for floorball players [...] What is learned here you have a great benefit from in the matches with your club team- and who knows maybe the national team one day?

Thus, there are many ways of producing and promoting an overall image that we label happiness. It is noteworthy that happiness is produced and promoted as an intrinsic value – buying our sport service will make you happy (strands one and two) or as an instrumental value – buying our sport service will develop your skills and that will make you happy (strands three and four). The differentiation in how all values are produced can be regarded as variations in how the businesses produce their ‘ideological’ and cultural environment, which is what immaterial labour is about (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Lazzarato, 1996; Lazzarato, 2014; Paulsen, 2017). In this way, the services promoted appeal to different potential groups of customers.

In the final part of the article, we discuss the findings and potential consequences of these value promotions for contemporary ideas about youth sport and the way it should be carried out.

**Discussion**

This study illustrates how specific immaterial values are produced and promoted by commercial child and youth sport businesses to create child and youth sport as a desirable product to buy. Building on the extensive theoretical starting point of promotional culture and immaterial labour (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Lazzarato, 1996; Lazzarato, 2014; Marshall & Morreale, 2018; Wernick, 1991), these immaterial values produce and promote a product intended to attract potential child and youth sport consumers. In our analysis, we identify three different immaterial values produced on the various websites: *competence, individually adjusted training and happiness*. These values take on different
meanings to suit different potential customers. In this section, we discuss the values promoted and how they might influence and shape ideas about child and youth sport and the way it should be conducted.

**Buy our product – we have competent coaches**

All the business included in this study emphasise how competent their coaches are. Even though this promotional approach is different in relation to different commercialisation strands, it is suggested that every business have the best equipped coaches for the purpose. The coaches are all said to have the right experience, be it within preschool services or within elite sport. They are expressed as well-educated and thus labelled as ‘professional’. As Sperka and Enright (2018) argue, the notion that external providers are specialists and experts is a common reason for bringing in external PE providers. Powell (2015) claims that through this discourse of external providers as experts, teachers position themselves as less competent in certain sports and as not having the required skills. The production of the immaterial value of competence, through the promotion of expert coaches that are educated produce ideas about youth sport indicating that ‘professional’ coaches are a prerequisite for optimal development.

The idea that youth sport should be conducted by professional coaches can be contrasted to how community sport clubs are traditionally run, not least in the Scandinavian countries. Grassroots level as well as elite level training and competitions are organized within non-profit clubs and based on non-salaried voluntary work. Additionally, organized child and youth sport are especially based upon parental engagement and, thereby, managed by people who are not necessarily ‘sports educated’. While this might not always be optimal, voluntary leaders are nonetheless crucial for running day-to-day activities and for opening doors to the huge numbers of youth being involved in sport. The financial value of the annual contribution provided by voluntary leaders is estimated to be EUR 2 billion (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2019). Still, the implicit meaning produced on these websites is that voluntary sport clubs cannot deliver the same quality of sports training as commercial businesses can.

**Buy our product – it is individually adjusted to suit you (=your child)**

The second immaterial value to be highlighted in this article is individually adjusted training. On the business’ sites that are orientated towards younger children (strand 1) and those organising sport camps (stand 2), the emphasis is on individually adjusted services so that everyone can participate. These enunciations of individually adjusted training are not as explicit as they are on the more specialised sport business websites (strand 3 and 4). On these sites, the chance for individual development is strongly enhanced. This by highlighting that individually adjusted training is important for an athlete to develop their sporting skills. Promoting this value challenges traditional sport clubs, in that it produces ideas that sports clubs are unable to provide what young athletes need to develop, as seen for instance on the websites of TopHockey and The Swedish Football Academy. These businesses are selling sport services in team sports, but the individual focus is strong and the meaning produced is; to develop as an athlete, extra and individually adjusted training via commercial businesses is required.

This focus on individual development – regardless of it is a team sport or not – can be contrasted to opposing values connected to club sport participation. Scandinavian research shows that the dominating values relate to social dimensions such as the creation of collective meaning, as well as opportunities to increase young peoples’ sense of belonging in terms of togetherness, making friends and having fun. Other values are the fostering of ‘team spirit’ and cooperation skills (Eliasson, 2015; Fahlén & Sjöblom, 2012; Thedin Jakobsson, 2015). In contrast to these values, the notion of individually adjusted training and competent coaches can be said to follow a neoliberal idea that emphasizes the importance of individualization in order to reach ones ‘full potential’.
Buy our product – it makes you happy (you have fun or fulfil your dream)

The third immaterial value highlighted in this article is the value of happiness. As Frawley (2015) emphasises, in the pursuit of happiness it is taken for granted that humans are in need of guidance. Expertise is implicitly sought, not only when things go wrong but also to ensure that things will go right. However, enunciations about happiness on these sites differ according to potential customer group. The businesses oriented towards younger children (strand 1) and businesses offering sport camps in different sports (strand 2), promote their businesses as playful, joyful and something more than just sport. Happiness on these websites is more of a guarantee and something that everyone will experience when buying these services. The businesses specialized in one sport (strand 3 and 4) promote happiness more as an end. On these businesses websites, happiness is promoted as something that one will feel if one fulfils the dream of reaching the elite level. In this sense, it is also clear that these businesses are aiming at different potential customers with different sporting desires.

Immaterial labour is work that does not relate to a product yet still materialises desires and imaginations that produce collective subjectivities (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Lazzarato, 1996; Paulsen, 2017). What commercial businesses, such as the ones studied, do through the promotion of their services is to shape ideas and affect what child and youth sport is all about. Milani and Richardson (2020) underline that affect is about the movement of desires and how we should move in order to fulfil those desires. What we have shown in this article is that this commercial shaping of child and youth sport moves in different directions through similar values yet differently enunciated in order to attract different customers ranging from those that just want their children to have fun doing sports to customers that want their children to develop and improve in certain directions.

Conclusion

Commercialisation in sport should be regarded as a process with different starting points in different contexts and with different outcomes (Grunneau, 2017; Andrews & Silk, 2018). Yet despite a wealth of literature on the ways by which commercialisation processes have impacted and changed sport over the years, we know relatively little about how commercialisation affect child and youth sport. Coakley (2010) has argued that the privatisation and commercialisation of youth sports in the United States has had profound consequences for how the sport is practiced. We hope that this study will contribute with more knowledge about how commercialisation, as a force, influence ideas about child and youth sport.

It is important to emphasize that enunciations, such as those highlighted herein, are affective in their dialogues between the kind of sport opportunities parents/children/adolescents have and what they desire. Therefore, it may also be important to explore what kind of sporting opportunities children attending these different commercial services have and what they desire from sport. Wagnsson and Augustsson (2015) and Stirrup et al. (2015) illustrate that it is foremost middle-class parents who buy these services and it can therefore be fruitful to consider these results in relation to neoliberal parenting (Coakley, 2010; Evans & Davies, 2010). Notions of being a good (sport) parent may pave the way for commercial child and youth sport alternatives in more countries as it has in the US (Coakley, 2010). It would also be fruitful to investigate how commercial services connect to other intersectional power axes than social class in order to analyse how (commercial) culture is intimately interwoven with (sports) practice and work in a dialogical way (Lazzarato, 2014). Finally, we urge other scholars to direct a critical gaze on commercial businesses in sports and how specific social and cultural values are promoted and produced in different contexts and, ultimately, how this may affect the landscape of child and youth sport in the future.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Åsa Bäckström http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1230-3415
Karin Redelius http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9965-0123

References


