European Journal for Sport and Society

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ress20

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To cite this article: Stefan Wagnsson, Christian Augustsson & Martina Jordan (09 Oct 2023): To pay or not to pay? Parents' view of the commercialisation process in children and youth sports, European Journal for Sport and Society, DOI: 10.1080/16138171.2023.2265719

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2023.2265719

Published online: 09 Oct 2023.

EUROPEAN JOURNAL FOR SPORT AND SOCIETY
https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2023.2265719

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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To pay or not to pay? Parents' view of the commercialisation process in children and youth sports

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ABSTRACT

The commercialisation of children's and youth sports has experienced a significant rise in recent decades. Currently, there is a lack of in-depth knowledge regarding the implications of this commercialisation for Swedish youth participating in sport as well as family members directly involved in the youth sport experience. As such, the purpose of this study was to investigate parents' perceptions of commercialisation processes in children and youth sports in Sweden. In particular, we sought to examine why some parents are willing to pay for commercial alternatives and how the increased commercialisation of youth sport are associated with youth sport participation. We also sought to investigate parents' views about the impact of commercialised alternatives on coaches and voluntary sports clubs, both now and in the future. A total of nine focus group interviews were conducted, including a total of 48 parents (22 men and 26 women) strategically chosen based on their children's participation in different strands of commercialised sports businesses. The findings indicate that the excessive demands from voluntary sports clubs combined with the desire to be considered a good parent appear to influence parents' willingness to pay for commercialised businesses.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 21 February 2023
Accepted 28 September 2023

KEYWORDS
Commercialisation; children and youth sport; good parenting; family habitus

Introduction

In many Westernised societies, there has been a gradual increase in youth participation in organised sports[1] (Green et al., 2018). Especially vibrant has this growth been in the Nordic countries (e.g., Sweden, Norway, Denmark) were nearly two-thirds of all children and a third of all adolescents (age 15–24) are regularly involved in a sport club (Swedish Research Council for Sport Science [SRCSS], 2023, van Tuyckom, 2018). In the Nordic countries as well as in most other European countries (e.g., Netherlands, Germany, France) organised youth sport is governed by a network of national

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federations, with a long-standing tradition of volunteer-based sports clubs (Stefansen et al., 2018). In the past, the volunteer workforce was comprised mainly of sport enthusiasts such as PE teachers and former athletes. However, nowadays it primarily consists of parents who take on various roles, such as driving to competitions, selling lottery tickets, or serving as volunteer coaches or team managers (Kilger, 2020). For many traditional voluntary sports clubs (VSC),[2] the commitment from parents has become critical for their existence, particularly in the Nordic countries where this is rooted in ideals of civic engagement and "sports for all" policies (Giulianotti et al., 2019; Green et al., 2018).

The rise of neoliberalism, characterised by deregulation, privatisation, a focus on personal responsibility, outsourcing and competition, has led to increased commercialisation (i.e., the process of bringing new products or services to the market for financial gain) in children's and youth sports, leading to a greater acceptance of paying for sport-related goods and services (Coakley, 2018). As a result, traditional sports clubs are now facing heightened competition from various commercial enterprises operating within the youth sport sector (Coakley, 2018; Norberg & Redelius, 2012). Although the commercialisation process within youth sport has been given some research attention, it has mostly been focusing on the outsourcing of health and physical education or on mapping out various forms of commercial sport enterprises (see Karlsson, et al., 2022). In addition, there is a significant gap in research examining the commercialisation process from the perspective of consumers. Given the central role that parents play in their children's participation in organised sports (i.e., socialising their children into sports and being involved in various activities related to their sports clubs), it is crucial to gain an understanding of parents' perspectives on different commercialised sport businesses (CSB)[3] in children and youth sport. Insofar as the decision to pay or not to pay for commercial alternatives falls on parents to consider. In the this study we have chosen to focus on parents residing in Sweden, where the commercialisation process is still in its infancy compared to other Western countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom (Giulianotti et al., 2019; Karlsson et al., 2022). Studying the implications of the increased commercialisation in Sweden from the perspective of a key sport stakeholder, namely parents, may provide greater insight into how commercialisation businesses impacts parents and youths as well as sports clubs in other similar western countries (e.g., other Nordic countries, Germany, Netherlands). Hence, our aim in the current study is to examine parents' views of the commercialisation process in Swedish youth sport. Given that parents are pivotal figures in the lives of their children, combined with the fact that parents bear the financial costs associated with their children's sport involvement, it is vital to ascertain the parents' perspectives on this issue. In particular, we seek a deeper understanding of why parents assume the financial burden associated with commercial sport.

The Swedish context

Sweden, along with other Nordic countries, has a high proportion of youth sport club memberships (van Tuyckom, 2018), and organised sports therefore play a central role in many Swedish families' cultural experiences (Green et al., 2018). There are

approximately 19,000 sports clubs in Sweden that are indirectly funded by the government, where the funds are handled by the non-profit Swedish Sport Confederation. Swedish sports clubs are democratic, member-based organisations, primarily driven by volunteer workforces. It is estimated that if these volunteers were paid, the cost to employers would be approximately two billion Euro annually to support organised sports, recognising the role it plays in promoting character building, fostering law-abiding and healthy citizens, and benefiting society in the long run (National Sport Federation, 2023; SRCSS, 2023).

In Sweden, as well as in many other countries across Europe, a significant proportion of parents are involved in their children's sports clubs in various capacities. Typically, fathers are more directly involved in the sports related activities (e.g., coaching, instructing and serving as a board member), while mothers tend to contribute in a more indirectly manner through administration, selling lottery tickets and working in the kiosk (Trussell & Shaw, 2012; Kilger, 2020). Getting involved in their children's sport clubs may appear to be voluntary, but since these organisations would not survive without these parents, there is a social pressure to get involved (Wicker et al., 2018).

Most recently, Karlsson et al (2022) has mapped out four overarching strands of CSB that operates in Sweden. The first strand, *Physical activity businesses*, are primarily aiming to attract a younger group of children (below 7 years), in which parents usually are paying for a set of training sessions or paying a separate fee for each semester. The businesses are generally characterised by mixing both boys and girls and providing opportunities to try several different sports. The second strand, *Sport fusion businesses*, offers a variety of sports and activities aimed to attract the broad masses of children and youths during the school holidays (i.e., organising sport camps). Either by focusing on having fun, while being physically active, or on children's sport development. The third strand, *Sport development businesses* is primarily directed by VSC themselves and can therefore also be called a *Hybrid business*, since the differences between CSB and VSC is not always clear. This strand has specialised to attract children and youths who are striving to become as successful as possible in one particular sport. The reason why this form of business has emerged can partly be attributed to a steady increase in costs related to participation in VSC (e.g., accommodation costs when playing tournaments, paying high training fees in order to cover semi-professional coaches). In response to these challenges, numerous VSCs have commenced offering specialised sports camps, catering to children and young individuals aspiring to achieve elite levels. Another manifestation of this hybrid business model is the provision of additional training sessions led by "trained and experienced instructors" for a fee (e.g., individual training sessions, training packages, and consultancy), or the adoption of excessive membership and training fees by sports clubs. The primary purpose of such financial arrangements is to employ coaches who are responsible for designing and implementing elite training programs within specialised academy schools. Finally, *Player invitation businesses,* is characterised by a system where children and youths are scouted, selected and then invited to take part in a camp or in a special training group throughout the year. In order to attract parents to opt for commercialised options, companies adopt slightly distinct approaches in their targeting strategy. By promoting their products, these companies aim to convey the notion that they

provide competent adult supervision, promote athletic success, foster character development and offer opportunities for both fun and meeting new friends (Karlsson et al., 2023).

The role of parents for youth sport involvement

In the present study, we will use the concepts of *good/ideal* and *problematic parenthood* as a starting point for our analyzes and relate these to the commercialisation process in children and youth sport to try to understand why parents want to pay (or not to pay) for commercialised alternatives. The increasing prominence of children's and youth sports has led to a rise in parents viewing the success of their children in sports as a reflection of their own parenting skills (Coakley, 2018). This mindset has sparked greater among parents over finding the most effective ways to support their children in making the right choices and decisions to maximise their success both on and off the playing field. In accordance with Coakleys' perspective, Forsberg (2009) refers to the term *involved parenthood* when describing the cultural norms and expectations that are imposed on Swedish parents, which are especially endorsed by middle-class mothers and fathers. According to norms, implicit expectations are pervasive about what is considered a good parent, regarding the need to spend as much time as possible with one's children and to the importance of developing close relationships with them (Forsberg, 2009). In a similar manner, Widding (2015) uses the concepts of ideal and problematic parenthood, to describe the dominant discourses related to parenting among middle class parents in Sweden. The ideal parent is described as someone who is child centred, responsible, always present, sincerely involved in their child's endeavours and who is constantly striving for the best for his/her child. Moreover, an ideal parent is expected to both engage their children in healthy activities (e.g., sports, playing outside) while also engaging with their kids in such activities (e.g., being involved as a coach). In contrast, the problematic or bad parenthood is described as someone who is ignorant about the importance of boundaries, and someone who is unwilling or incapable of taking responsibility.

Dukes and Coakley (2002) proposed the idea that the qualities of a good parent are socially imprinted and are related to the system of internalised structures, perceptions, tastes, preferences and activities that characterise families from the same class or with equal socio-economic background. To describe this phenomenon, the authors introduced the concept of *family habitus* which refers to "… historically and socially situated system of dispositions and associated family activities" (Dukes & Coakley, 2002, p. 193). This concept extends and applies Bourdieu's (1984) theoretical framework. Furthermore, Dukes and Coakley (2002) claim that there is an association between family habitus and commitment to children's participation in organised sports. This is particularly evident among middle and upper-middle-income families who prioritise this type of participation due to their financial stability and their desire to have their children compare themselves with their peers. The parents also view the sports arena as a platform for their children to build both social capital in the form of peer acceptance and cultural capital in the form of knowledge on how to succeed in organised and competitive environments such as school and work. Dukes and Coakley

(2002) suggest that the family habitus of middle and upper-middle class parents is related to a high level of sport specialisation, year-round sports participation, and a willingness to invest in specialised sport lessons for their children, providing them with an advantage over their peers.

The increase of commercialisation in sport for both children and parents has been attributed to a combination of various cultural and societal changes related to family, parenting and childhood that has occurred since the end of the twentieth century (Coakley, 2018). For example, a neoliberal agenda has become more prevalent, which has been linked to a change in attitude concerning the responsibility for children's upbringing and development, shifting from various government institutions to being something that the parents are solely responsible for. At the same time, a service market has emerged where both the private and public sectors offer services that cater to parents' needs and desires to appear as good parents. There has also emerged a growing concern that children will be harmed if not supervised by adults round-the-clock (Coakley, 2018). Moreover, there has been an increase in households where both parents work full-time outside home, which has created greater opportunities to spend money on their children, while also resulting in reduced opportunities to actively participate in VSC activities. Coupled with a general perception that participation in sports clubs is a character-building and health promotive arena has led parents to view organised sports, not only as an ideal environment for their children to be a part of, but also an activity well worth the investment (Coakley, 2018; Stefansen et al., 2018; Trussell & Shaw, 2012).

As previously stated, research on parents' view of CSB is highly deficient. However, some research has been conducted in relation to VSC, focusing on parents' views on why they want their children, but also themselves to be (or not to be) involved in their children's sports. Elucidating the parents' view of VSC can give an indication of which processes may form the basis for why they choose to let their children participate in CSB, and moreover to provide a contrasting picture in order to detect presumable differences and similarities between these types of businesses.

In a study conducted by Trussell and Shaw (2012), in which they investigated the reasons why parents support their children's participation in VSC, results indicated that the majority of parents saw sports as an important aspect of child development and believed that participating in sports would help build their children's character. Additionally, the study found that parents viewed sports as a way to demonstrate their own moral worth as parents. Many parents went to great lengths to be seen as a good parent, including incurring significant expenses and dedicating significant amounts of time to provide their children with opportunities to participate in sports. Some parents even expressed that their children's sport controlled their lives. The study also revealed that parents expressed criticism towards those who were not as actively involved in their children's sports, viewing them as neglectful. Trussell and Shaws' (2012) findings suggests that some parents have difficulties to acknowledge and appreciate different parenting styles and decisions that differs from their own. These challenges may include limited resources, such as time and money, which may prevent the involvement of other parents in organised sports.

Scholars have noted that it is mainly the parents from middle and upper socio-economic classes who have the time and resources to allow their children to participate in organised sports (e.g., Dukes & Coakley, 2002; Kilger, 2020). However, Stefansen et al. (2018) found that parents from all social classes exhibit interest in their children's sports, including paying fees and equipment, attending matches and competitions, and volunteering at the children's sport clubs. Nevertheless, a distinction can be observed where parents from working-class households tend to adopt a more laid-back approach, where their children's participation in activities is primarily driven by their own motivation, while parents from upper-middle-class households tend to be more controlling and deeply involved in their child's sports, using it as a means of both bonding with their child and developing both sports and life skills. These findings are supported by the work of Stefansen et al. (2018) and Strandbu et al. (2020), who showed that parents, particularly fathers, are more involved than previous generations. This increased involvement is attributed to a new generation of fathers who have developed a sporting capital, making them feel more confident and capable in this setting. This allows them to spend more time bonding with their children and fulfil their roles as good parents, something that can be difficult to achieve in other social contexts without challenging dominant gender ideologies (Gottzén & Kremer-Sadlik, 2012; Kilger, 2020).

Regarding parents' involvement in VSC, Wicker et al. (2018) has shown that approximately half of the parents surveyed expressed a willingness to volunteer in the club, while the other half were willing to pay for the services provided. When studying the results in detail, it was revealed that parents were more likely to volunteer if the club was facing financial trouble, as the feeling of paying money to such a club would be akin to throw the money into a black hole. Conversely, an increase in membership fees, made them less inclined to volunteer and more willing make direct payment to the club. The study also revealed that the willingness to engage voluntarily did not change with the present of compensation. However, a higher number of paid employees in the club, corresponded with a decrease to get involved voluntarily, while the willingness to pay fees increased. These findings suggest that there is a tension between voluntary involvement and the level of paid employment in sports clubs, as parents are less inclined to engage voluntarily if someone else is receiving payment for similar work.

Taken together, research focusing on parents' perception of the increasing commercialisation in children and youth sport is warranted. Hence, the central research question guiding the study is: How do parents of children who have participated in CSB perceive and reflect about the impact of this business on themselves, their children, coaches and VSC both currently and in the future? The generated knowledge is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of challenges faced by VSC in attracting and retaining children and youths and to examine the influence of this commercialisation process on parents and its consequences for children's and youth's opportunities to participate in organised physical activities, regardless of the form of organisational structure.

Method

Procedure

Upon university ethics committee approval, data was collected using semi-structured focus group interviews. The advantage of this methodology is that it stimulates active participation and foster a conversational atmosphere, resulting in more in-depth and insightful statements compared to individual interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Moreover, this method is especially relevant when researchers intend to examine the collective reasoning process of a group of individuals concerning a specific theme, such as exploring perspectives on the commercialisation process in youth sports. It facilitates the exchange of opinions, allowing participants to actively participate in discussions and mutually challenge each other. This interactive dynamic is more appropriate compared to individual in-depth interviews as it may foster deeper and more nuanced responses (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To ensure a well-rounded and comprehensive understanding of CSB, participants were strategically selected based on their children's involvement in various strands of CSB, representing businesses in large cities (four), medium-sized cities (four), and a small town, with equal gender representation among both parents and children, and across the age categories 5–9 years, 10–12 years, and 13–15 years. It is noteworthy that despite the selection of respondents based on their children's involvement in CSB, the responses were based on parents' experiences with all of their children. Although a formal assessment of social class affiliation was not conducted, the majority of the parents were revealed to belong to middle and upper-middle class families, as indicated by their discussions of talking of "the other parents" outside of the focus group in terms of not affording to pay for their children's sport, or as themselves as predominantly white academics parents. In order to identify the various strands of CSB upon which we based our focus group interviews, we initiated our analysis by referencing the mapping provided by Norberg and Redelius (2012). This was further enhanced by conducting online searches utilising keywords related to CSB (e.g., additional fees, expenses for camps, supplementary training, player selection). Given that we discovered similar commercialisation strands as identified by Karlsson et al. (2022), for the purpose of clarity, we have adopted the same strands in our present study.

In order to get in contact with the target group, we searched the internet for various strands of commercial sport businesses in close proximity to the author's region in Sweden. Thereafter, we contacted the representatives of each businesses and asked for permission to conduct the study, when the training sessions were to be held and which coach to contact. After getting permission, we contacted parents at relevant training sessions. Following informed consent procedures, a convenient time and place were established for the focus group interviews. Interviews occurred in private conference rooms, cafeterias or in dressing rooms, while their children were training. In the autumn 2014, nine focus group interviews were conducted including a total of 48 parents (22 men and 26 women; 30–55 years) (see Table 1). The audio-recorded interviews lasted on average 57 min (between 42 and 72 min) and were transcribed verbatim. In order to ensure the quality of the collected data, at least two authors were present during each focus group interview. One author served as the moderator, while

Table 1. The characteristics of the conducted focus groups interviews.

Focus group	Commercialised sports	Gender	Age span	Length of interview
1	PAB, SFB, SDB	2 mothers	40–45 years	42 min
2	SFB, PIB	4 fathers, 5 mothers	35–50, 30–45 years	56 min
3	SFB, PIB	2 fathers, 3 mothers	40–45, 40–50 years	48 min
4	PAB	2 fathers, 3 mothers	35–50, 30–45 years	42 min
5	SFB, SDB	4 fathers, 3 mothers	40–55, 35–45 years	52 min
6	SFB, SDB	4 fathers, 2 mothers	35–45, 35–45 years	50 min
7	SDB	3 fathers, 2 mothers	40–55, 40–45 years	72 min
8	SFB, SDB	1 father, 3 mothers	50, 35–45 years	64 min
9	SFB, SDB	2 fathers, 3 mothers	45–50, 40–45 years	72 min

Note. PAB: Physical Activity Businesses; SFB: Sport Fusion Businesses; PIB: Player Invitation Businesses; SDB: Sport Development Businesses/Hybrid Businesses.

the other took detailed notes and monitored that all questions listed in the interview guide were covered before the interview was concluded. Furthermore, to capture as many diverse perspectives as possible, special consideration was given to including participants who were less inclined to initiate conversation (see Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The focus group guide covered questions based on seven different areas related to the aim and the research question that guided the study (see Appendix 1). The first area dealt with parents perceptions of organised sports in general and the voluntary job that many of them feel compelled to do in VSC specifically. In order to have a smooth transition to issues that mainly concerned CSB, the second area focused on parents' general view of CSB. The third area focused on parent's motives for paying for their children's involvement in various forms of CSB and the fourth area with parents' perspective on their own and their children's positive and negative experiences of CSB. The fifth area dealt with the role and importance of coaches in CSB in relation to coaches in VSC, while the sixth area centred round the financial limits/opportunities regarding CSB. The seventh and final area focused on parents' views on the significance of CSB in the future. The ordering of questions varied depending upon the flow of conversation in each focus group interview.

Data analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis approach was employed to identify, analyse, and report patterns in the qualitative data. This analytical method, in which the researchers actively create themes, is favoured in situations where there is limited research on a topic and when the objective is to provide an in-depth and detailed analysis of participant perspectives or to examine the intricacies and complexities of the subject matter under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Along these lines, we followed the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013) which describes strategies for establishing trustworthiness during each part of the data analysis. Initially, after transcribing verbatim and checking for accuracy, all authors became familiar with the data by actively, analytically and critically reading the interview transcripts. Using NVivo computer software, data were then coded through an active and reflective process, where the first and second authors sat down simultaneously and discussed the rationale behind each coding decision. The codes were then compared with each other to identify common and recurring patterns, which were then used to generate four overarching themes.

Through a critical friend process, including the third author, the generated themes were reviewed in order to ensure that each theme represented a distinct conceptual idea based on the interpretation of data. Throughout the interpretation process, both a deductive (i.e., related to the concepts of "good" and "problematic" parenting) and an inductive approach (i.e., related to Dukes' and Coakleys', 2002, concept of "family habitus") were used, partly to filter, summarise, and interpret text concerning the theoretical concepts, partly to be able to generate additional patterns that might support or challenge the research questions and/or the created themes.

Results and discussion

When conducting the thematic analysis, we identified four main themes regarding parents' perceptions of the commercialisation process in Swedish youth sport, namely: (1) The charitable voluntary sport, (2) excessive demands, (3) buying yourself free from demands, and (4) ambivalent feelings.

The charitable voluntary sport

Although some parents highlighted a number of negative aspects of their children's organised sport involvement (e.g., difficulties catching up with missed school work, deselection from teams, and high-performance demands), parents in general expressed that their children's involvement provided them with numerous opportunities for fun and beneficial short and long-term experiences (e.g., long lasting friendship, learning to take responsibility and deal with adversity, being physically active throughout life and staying healthy). This positive view of VSC and the importance parents placed on it, made it an optimal arena for parents to put their children in. By doing this parents could show that they take responsibility for their children and thus live up to the cultural norms and expectations of being a good parent (Coakley, 2018; Widding, 2015). The following quotation illustrates the value parents placed on children's sport participation but also how norm-breaking behaviours (children's non-sport involvement) may create unpleasant feelings among a group of parents:

> [9] Mother (M): I once sat at a dinner and then the natural topic of the conversation was: "What do your children do?" They said that they were involved in sports … Floorball and all of these classic sports, and then a mom said: "My daughter writes tweets." You know … It became dead quiet at the table, and like … What the hell is the follow-up question to that?! Oh, how uncomfortable it was! It would have been better if she had said horse riding. Then we would have felt at ease …

Implicit in the aforementioned mother's quote is also an indirect accusation of being a bad parent who is irresponsible and not caring about the well-being and positive development of one's child (see Forsberg, 2009). As Forsberg (2009) has pointed out, the norm of being a good parent also includes indirect involvement (e.g., transport to training, cooking nutritious food), and direct involvement (e.g., being a coach or a functionary) in one's child's activities. In line with this normative behaviour, and despite the fact that sport occupied a significant amount of time in

parents and youth's lives, parents were nonetheless willing to enrol their kids in organised sports:

> [2] M: I drive my kids to training despite the rather short distance, and I watch everything and try to have a logistics that is extraordinary sometimes. And if you do not master it and have this burning interest, and have that experience, and have been involved in sports, then it will not be natural today. Because then there are too many other things that are attractive. I prioritize an awful lot, and we are a large group of parents here that prioritize a lot of things due to our children; [we do it] because we feel good about it.

As the above quote epitomised, parents were adamant that to feel good about oneself as a parent meant investing time, energy and efforts into one's child's sporting opportunities. This sentiment has also formerly been highlighted by Stefansen et al. (2018), who point out that, in contrast with today, being a good parent during the 1970- and 1980s was not related to active involvement and emotional investment in organised sports.

Excessive demands

In addition to experiencing positive feelings linked to support of their children's sport involvement, some parents expressed that they appreciated being directly involved in non-profit sports clubs activities (e.g., selling food and beverages or being team moms/dads) as it created a sense of community with other parents and provided a meaningful leisure time activity for themselves. However, interviews revealed that most of the parents were critical of the way VSC were operating. In particular, parents reported high and sometimes excessive demands to engage in activities initiated by the sports clubs:

> [4] M: But then at the same time there is this pressure that if it takes as much of parents as it does, then maybe we could not have our children on certain activities because we cannot put up with everything as it is. And that's terrible, both that it costs a lot and that you actually do not have the time. I think that should really change. Otherwise, you can feel really bad as a parent.

The high demands put on the parents were partly due to increases in costs associated with youth sport, such as higher membership and training fees, but also related to elevated costs pertaining to travel to and from tournaments. According to parents, some VSC charged extremely high membership and training fees. The purpose of the fees seemed to be difficult for the parents to understand and some parents expressed frustration over having to pay these fees, since clubs did not always provide a clear rationale for their need: [7] M2: "You only pay the membership fee, really, but if you're part of [the name of the sport club], they have a membership fee and then they have a training fee. I don't know why, I haven't understood it … ". Moreover, to raise money for these activities, parents indicated that they were expected to be involved in fund-raising activities for example selling lottery tickets, standing in kiosks, or arranging sponsors, which was also seen as prerequisites for their children to continue participating in sports:

> [8] M1: I also think that it's not just about … I believe that most children who don't have involved parents have kind of already quit. Because it requires quite a lot from the

parents in this club too, that they have to be involved and attend matches and make sure that … It feels like you can't just …

M2: And work in the kiosk.

M1: Yes, work in the kiosk and …

During the focus groups, parents expressed gratitude towards other parents who got involved in team/club functions (e.g., functionary, board member, coaching). In particularly those who assumed leadership roles such as coaching, since these activities were considered especially challenging as not all parents felt they had sufficient competence or time to undertake such roles given competing responsibilities (e.g., jobs, families, etc). The parents also believed that volunteer coaches, could in some instances be exploited by taking on too many responsibilities. Discussion within the focus groups revealed that such exploitation might lead to future difficulties recruiting and retaining volunteer coaches:

[5] M: But then if you are going to talk about the negative aspects of volunteering … The risk exists … Now I have not experienced it in this club, but I have other experiences with me as well, where some [volunteers] become very lonely and become very exploited and everything ends up in the lap of a few people. That is the risk with the non-profit work, if you don't get help and a greater commitment from several, then it can be a problem.

As can be seen in the above quote, volunteers in non-profit youth sport clubs/teams can be fragile and consequently suffers the risk of discontinuity. This might be a reason why commercial sports have become more widespread in the last decade, since in this form of activity, the coaches are paid and thus the organiser can in a completely different way attract coaches who are continuously on site.

Most of the parents felt they had sufficient financial resources to allocate to their kids sport involvement, but did not have adequate time to get involved. In order to solve the time/involvement dilemma some parents proposed the notion of paying someone to do volunteer work on their behalf. In so doing, it was felt that one could simultaneously be a "responsible parent" and negotiate personal (e.g., work, family) demands. One of the parents suggested that VSC should provide youth sport as a service on a market, similar to the services provided by large grocery stores:

[4] Father (F): One would like it … like going in to ICA [one of the largest grocery stores in Sweden] and just buy some milk. I would be ready to invest money in it [paying coaches to do the job in VSC], if it was possible to do that, because I haven't got the time to be a youth sport coach. At least not right now …

However, parents were also well aware that paying others to do certain jobs in the VSC could be problematic and could cause a lot of inconvenience:

[7] F1: I work as a consultant … I'm traveling in my work … There's no time left and when I feel that I have a half day extra, free from work, I'd rather go out jogging than standing in a kiosk. But, I could also work an extra hour and use the money to pay someone else to do the job. But then again … I think this will not work out well, since it has to be fair in both directions. Some may have the time, but cannot afford it, while others can afford it, but haven't got the time. So it's damn hard! I'm almost exploding because it [sports] must be for everyone! I cannot pull it together in my head either!

This statement exemplifies the dilemma that the majority of the parents were dealing with when attempting to help their children's sports clubs with various assignments, while also trying to manage their daily lives. While some parents advocated the possibility paying others to do the job in order to solve the time/sport involvement dilemma, these parents were also aware that not all parents had the financial means to adopt such a course of action and that doing so, could leave an unfair burden on some parents that would be overly onerous. As one parent expressed [1] M: "Someone has to take care of the clock at the games, and if I pay someone else to do the job, no one will be sitting there".

Buying yourself free from demands

As highlighted above, many parents felt inadequate and stressed about the demands that they perceive that VSC imposed on them. They also highlighted stress associated with the need to be seen as a good parent by assuming responsibility for their kids actions and behaviours during long days at competitive events. Consequently, one of the most prominent incentives for letting their child participate in CSB, appeared to be related to trying to solve the dilemma of acting as a responsible parent while simultaneously coping with life's daily demands. This argument was supported by several parents who expressed relief over not having to be engaged in their children's activities when paying for commercial based-sports:

> [6] F: The nice thing is that then you have nothing like … standing in the kiosk or selling lottery tickets, sausages and New-Body [underwear]. Then you pay directly to the club instead. There are probably many who would rather pay instead of doing the "club thing".

Numerous parents indicated that a primary motive for supporting their children to participate in CSB was because they wanted them to have fun. One of the parents expressed that she was prepared to refrain from eating food in order for her children to have fun: "[1] M: Yes, I like that. So I would not eat in a week if the children would like to do something." Although the woman in question was being metaphorical, her quote demonstrates the importance of being a good parent who is deeply involved in and constantly striving for the best for their child (see Widding, 2015). Another recurring motive that was raised dealt with the social developmental aspects of commercialised youth sports. Above all, the parents pointed out that the children "grew as persons" when meeting new friends, and that such relationships might continue into the future. It was also noteworthy that the parents expressed that commercialised sport camp activities had a greater potential to create close-knit social networks compared to sport camps run by VSC:

> [9] M: The social part is absolutely fantastic too, I think. If I should compare the advantage of [commercialized] camps compared to going away with their own team, you end up with completely different people that you have never seen, and … It's like "Bang!" Half an hour later they have found each other, and then they are just hanging out together.

Another prominent motive that was raised for paying for their children's CSB dealt with children's performance enhancement, which according to Coakley (2018) may be driven by the will to live up to the image of successful parenting. Several examples were presented of how parents wanted to support their kids quest to enhance their

sporting prowess (e.g., paying for holiday sport camps, paying extra for coaching). Although the majority of parents indicated that they mainly supported their kids because of their own desire to excel in sports, some expressed hopes that their children would "go all the way" to become a professional athlete when paying extra for sport services. However, some parents expressed concern that investment in additional sport training and instruction could have unintended consequences of pressuring kids to live up to their expectations:

> [7] M1: He is one of those who go [to camps] all summer, and he has said.: "No, now I'm going this weekend again. I do not want to! I would rather be at home and do this and that." I think this is wrong.
>
> M2: Yes, it becomes an obligation instead of being fun!

That some children experience pressure is perhaps not surprising, as some parents want value for the money they invest in their children's sports. In addition, some children may experience pressure from their parents to perform better in their sport after, for example, being paid for an expensive camp or paid for extra coaching.

Another reason for financing CSB was that parents wanted their children to have something to do during school holidays instead of "just sit in front of a computer." From this point of view, CSB acted as a sort of day-care provider that gave parents relief in an increasingly hectic life. This finding can be interpreted as an indication of how parenthood has changed. Previously, it was more commonly accepted that children were at home during their free time, especially during school holidays. More recently however parents are considered to be a substandard parent if they are unable to fully occupy the entirety of their kids leisure time (Coakley 2018; Forsberg, 2009). In addition, since they pay for their child's sport involvement, several parents believed that higher demands could be placed on coaches in CSB, the latter of whom they also believed to be more competent and more serious than coaches within VSC.

Ambivalent feelings

Although most of parents conveyed positive experiences related to their children's participation in CSB, ambivalent feelings were also typically expressed. On the one hand, parents suggested that participating in CSB, allowed their children to have fun, meet new friends and develop as individuals and as athletes, which is in line with what one as a good parent are expected to give (Forsberg, 2009; Widding, 2015). On the other hand, the parents expressed concern about the negative consequences that CSB may have for some children and youths. Specifically, participants expressed concerns that parents with limited financial means would not have the resources to allow their kids to participate in sports in the short term, which would likely deny them participation in the long term:

> [2] M: Yes, I think it's the money. I know that. At least in the younger group of children. And if you, like me, have three boys playing, it will be a huge cost. And you could not opt out of a child … We could afford it so it was no problem. But there were many in the team who said: "It is definitely too expensive," so not many players participated. And the parents said it outright.

Parents also expressed ambivalence over the fact that commercial sport entities had the ability to control which kids received offers to participate in their camps:

> [2] M1: But then there are some who are not allowed to go on that …
>
> M2: Yes, it's so sad! It's exclusion! Terrible! And we did not really know about this until we signed up … and then: 'Wow! Does not everyone get this offer?'

Consequently, the children who are not selected for player invitation camps, or those who are selected but whose parents cannot afford to pay, are excluded from participation. Such exclusion is something the parents perceived as highly unfair as these children do not get the same opportunity to have fun and develop as athletes. This method of selecting children and young people can be interpreted as an example of how market forces exploit parents' need to feel like good parents. For parents, it may be very tempting to pay the relatively high fee, if parents want to give their child a fun experience, and doing so provides evidence to oneself or others of successful parenting. Further, it was mentioned that restricted possibilities to attend a camp risks impacting peer relationships negatively, since it may create jealousy when some kids have to stay at home while others are afforded the opportunity to attend a camp, make new friends and learn new skills.

When parents were asked how they viewed the commercialisation of children and youth sport in the future, it was apparent that the majority of parents believed that CSB would continue to grow. In addition to an increased risk of excluding children, most parents suggested that the expansion of CSB would also lead to a steady decline in the number of participants in VSC, as well as difficulties recruiting voluntary coaches. It was suggested that these trends could eventually threaten the existence of the VSC. Moreover, parents expressed that, if CSB continues to expand and VSC decreased in number, eventually only children whose parents could afford the high fees would be involved in organised sports. Thus, parents perceived a heightened risk that youth sports would become a salient social class issue, which could potentially lead to health problems. In addition, despite several parents praising CSB for its competent coaches and high-quality activities, they did not see participation in CSB as a prerequisite for developing into a high-performance athlete. Rather, they expressed concern that an overly dominant CSB system could inhibit athlete talent development:

> [2] M: Then it [sport participation] will become a matter of class and class inequalities. That's the way it's going to be … and then we will lose many talents in Sweden because talents will be difficult to detect, I think. Because they can't afford it and therefore they don't have the possibility to be in the team.

Further, as was indicated earlier in relation to VSC, some parents felt that it would be even more difficult in the future to live up to the standards of being a good parent since the increased demands from the clubs will make it harder to find time to be involved in their children's sport clubs. Difficulties with time commitments were in turn thought to increase the likelihood of wanting to pay others to do the job in their children's sports clubs, further nurturing the commercialisation process.

Most parents were very positive about *physical activity businesses* and *sport fusion businesses* and believed that they could be a good complement to VSC. However, they expressed concerns about what might happen if the commercialisation within the

hybrid businesses (i.e., sport development businesses) grows further. According to parents, when VSC require additional fees to hire "expert coaches," extra training, or organise expensive camps in collaboration with professional clubs, there is a risk of excluding even more children and young people from sports.

Concluding remarks

This study expands previous research by providing insight into how parents, who are one of the most important stakeholders in youth sports, reason and reflect on the consequences of the commercialisation process in children and youth sports in Sweden. As noted by several scholars (e.g., Dukes & Coakley, 2002; Kilger, 2020; Trussell & Shaw, 2012) the analysis of parents' statements in this study revealed that their involvement, as well as their children's involvement, in VSC is motivated by the aspiration to be seen as good parents. This desire to conform to good parenting norms is also seen as the underlying reason for parents' willingness to pay for their children's participation in commercialised sports. They believe that by doing so, they can meet the often overwhelming demands of voluntary sports and balance work, family, childcare, and personal time. Children's participation in commercialised sports thus enables the parents to live up to the norms and ideals, which according to Dukes and Coakley (2002) are compatible with the habitus related to middle and upper-class families, where paying for activities that are seen as enjoyable, supervised by adults (e.g. skilled coaches), improving the child's individual sport skills, and providing social connections are deemed essential for the child's personal growth. Paying thus becomes a way of upholding good parenting when faced with overwhelming demands in voluntary sports.

During the interviews, it was noted that voluntary sports are widely regarded as admirable and hold a significant place in the hearts of parents, who expressed a strong desire for these types of activities to persist. However, the participants also acknowledged the benefits of commercialised sports, yet expressed concerns over its potential to undermine the stability and existence of voluntary sports clubs in the long run. It is perhaps not so remarkable that parents exhibit conflicting emotions towards commercialised sports, considering the long tradition of a social democratic values in the Swedish context, which has gradually been replaced by more neoliberal tendencies. This shift, most evident at the end of the twentieth century, has caused a discourse change from collective and common ideals to a more individual and private approach (Widding, 2015). As one of the potential factors among others, we argue that the parents, who were raised during this transformation, can relate to both of these discourses, resulting in the emergence of ambivalent feelings. These feelings were clearly articulated during the interviews, as the ideals and values the participants grew up with now clash with the values and norms prevalent in adulthood. By the same token, parents were acutely aware that if voluntarily sports clubs continued to lose members while participation in commercial businesses further expanded, there was a risk, that access to sport could become segregated along class lines, particularly increasing exclusion of young people from families belonging to lower classes. Limited sports participation for youth could in turn lead to longer-term public health issues, as

sports at a young age has been demonstrated to be associated with improved quality of life, well-being and sustained physical activity throughout adulthood (Biddle & Asare, 2011; Eime et al., 2013). This, in turn can contribute to perpetuating inequalities among individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

One of the main concerns with increased commercialisation of children's and youth sports expressed by parents was that it was believed to lead to a drain of skilled coaches in the voluntary clubs. Some parents thought that a solution could be to also start paying these coaches a salary. However, this would inevitably mean that training and membership fees would have to be raised, which would make it even more difficult for families with limited financial means to have their children in adult-led voluntary sports. Furthermore, this could dilute the drain on leaders as it has been shown that members are not prepared to volunteer if others are paid to do equivalent work (Wicker et al., 2018). However, in line with the parents' comments, we believe that these concerns can mainly be linked to sports development and player invitation businesses, since these, with its roots in both commercial and voluntarily organisations, to a higher degree are challenging the prevailing sports-for-all ideology. In contrary, physically activity and sports fusion businesses, with their clear commercial orientation, may be a complement that does not risk potential negative consequences to the same degree. Especially since these strands of businesses only run for a limited time (usually during school holidays) and can in some cases (i.e., physically activity businesses) strengthen interest in organised sports.

Although results are based on a relatively large sample of parents, the generalisability of the results are limited. For instance, only parents with children who had current (or) previous involvement in CSB were included, which primarily consist of parents predominantly belonging to the middle and upper-middle class. Consequently parents who chose not to, or who could not afford to pay for CSB were not included. Hence, research soliciting the perspectives of parents from lower socio-economic classes or those who may be unable to pay for CSB should be included in future investigations. This is particularly important given that previous studies have demonstrated that these parents navigate diverse parenting cultures. For instance, working class parents may exhibit a more relaxed approach towards child-rearing, where children's leisure time is not considered as essential to the same extent as parents belonging to higher socio-economic classes (Stefansen et al., 2018). Moreover, despite our efforts to include all participants during our focus groups it was evident that some individuals were more apt to share their perspectives than others. Thus, is it possible that important viewpoints or perspectives may have been missed. It is also worth noting that the data for this study was collected in 2014, which suggests that the commercialisation within children and youth sports may have continued to increase since then. A proposition supported by subsequent studies as well (Karlsson et al., 2022, 2023; Wicker et al., 2018).

In conclusion, the current study adds to the existing body of literature by exploring the perspectives and understanding of parents regarding the effects of commercialisation process in children's and youth sports on participating parents and their children. Findings showed that it can be challenging for parents to keep up with their children's involvement in volunteer sports clubs. This led to some parents showing a willingness to pay for external support in fulfilling the volunteer duties. Additionally, the rising

costs within volunteer sports clubs and increased demands for parental involvement placed a significant strain on some parents. The inability to meet these expectations and the social pressure to be a good parent may lead to feelings of inadequacy. These factors appear to influence parents' decision to pay or not to pay for their children's participation in commercial sports businesses, potentially excluding children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds from participating in both commercially and voluntarily organised youth sports activities.

Notes

1. Defined as structured and competitive, playful forms of physical activity that usually take place in a sport club (McPherson et al., 1989).
2. A voluntary-based sports club is characterized by voluntary engagement, voluntary leadership, member governance, voluntary contributions, and a community orientation aiming to promote sports activities and well-being in society.
3. Commercialized youth sport businesses are in general prioritizing profit, operates with a market-driven approach, have professional management, charge participation fees, seek sponsorships, invest in marketing and focus on customer experience.

Disclosure statement

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

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Appendix 1

Focus group guide—parents' view on commercialised youth sport

Contact

Greetings, small talk, showing were to sit, etc.

Information

Present the aim/scope of discussion, repeat informed consent, inform about the conditions for the conversation: time, mobile phones, bathroom, no right or wrong answers, respectfulness, present the purpose of the moderator and the assistant.

Participation in voluntarily based sports

- Do any of you have children who are involved in traditional sports clubs?
- If you think back. How was it was like when your children started playing sports in a voluntarily based sport club.
- How come they started playing sports?
- What are the parents role? Is it the child or the parents who decide which sports the children should play?
- How do you think parents in general reason about their children playing sports?
- What do you most want out of your children's participation in sports?
- Have you been involved in some of your children's sports clubs?

General view of commercialised businesses

- Why do you think commercial alternatives have arisen?
- Do you think it has changed over the years?
- What commercial businesses/alternatives in sports are you aware of, apart from those that your children participate in or have participated in? What do you think about these?
- How much extra money are you prepared to spend on your children's' sports? Is there a limit?

Motives for children's involvement in commercialised businesses

- You have children who have been involved or are involved in an activity for which you pay extra. How did you think and reason when you decided to pay for this type of activity?
- What do/did you hope to get out of this?
- Does commercialised businesses provide something else compared to participation in voluntary sports?
- How important is performing versus having fun?

Pros and cons of commercial options?

- How are/have the children experienced the participation in commercialised activities?
- What do you feel are the main advantages of commercialised alternatives?
- Have you experienced any advantages to have let your children taken part in commercialised alternatives?
- Have you experienced any disadvantages/risk to have let your children taken part in commercialised alternatives?
- Do you see any risk with the commercialisation of sport in large?

Role of the coaches

- What should a good leader be like?
- How do you perceive the competence of the coaches in the volunteer-based sport compared to the more commercialised forms of sport?
- Do extra training sessions with a coach provide anything more? If so, what?
- Are you willing to pay, and if so why and how much in order to get the best coaches?
- What are your thoughts about coaches in voluntarily sports clubs? Should coaches be payed a salary?

Financial limits/opportunities regarding commercialised businesses

- How do you finance your children's activities? Is it worth the money?
- Have you or anyone else found yourself in financial straints to pay for extra activities?
- How much are you prepared to pay? Is there a limit? How do you view the possibility of paying for the children's participation?
- Can having children involved in activities that are not available to everyone be seen as status?

Future of commercialised sport businesses

- If we take a look into the future. How do you think it will be concerning commercialised businesses?
- In short term? Long-term?
- Increase? Reduce? Same way?
- How do you think this will affect voluntarily sports clubs, coaches, the children, the parents?

Closing

- Other thoughts that comes to your mind?
- Possible to contact us via e-mail or mobile-phone
- Explain were to find the results
- Thanking them for participating