



Received: 6.07.2025
Accepted: 11.11.2025

<http://dx.doi.org/10.16926/sit.2026.03.03>

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DESIGNING A POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR UTILIZING SPORTS CAPACITIES IN PROMOTING SOCIAL HEALTH AND ORGANIZING LEISURE TIME

How to cite [jak cytować]: Kiani, M.S., & Nazari, L. (2026). Designing a policy framework for utilizing sports capacities in promoting social health and organizing leisure time. *Sport i Turystyka. Środkowoeuropejskie Czasopismo Naukowe*, 9(3), 57–78.

Opracowanie ram polityki wykorzystania potencjału sportowego w promowaniu zdrowia społecznego i organizacji czasu wolnego

Streszczenie

Sport może przyczyniać się do rozwoju społecznego poprzez wspieranie jakości życia, uczestnictwa społecznego oraz kapitału społecznego. Celem badania było opracowanie ram polityki wykorzystania potencjału sportu w organizacji czasu wolnego i promowaniu zdrowia społecznego. Badanie miało charakter jakościowy i opierało się na półstrukturyzowanych wywiadach z 13 nauczycielami akademickimi i ekspertami w zakresie zarządzania sportem i polityki społecznej, dobranymi celowo. Dane analizowano z wykorzystaniem podejścia teorii ugruntowanej, obejmującego kodowanie otwarte, osiowe i selektywne. Wiarygodność i spójność analizy wsparto poprzez weryfikację ustaleń przez uczestników, niezależne równoległe kodowanie oraz dokumentowanie decyzji analitycznych. W wyniku analizy opracowano zintegrowane ramy polityki obejmujące uwarunkowania przyczynowe, kontekstowe i interweniujące, proponowane strategie oraz przewidywane konsekwencje. Do kluczowych elementów modelu należały pozycja kulturowa i akceptacja społeczna, uwarunkowania społeczno-kulturowe i zasobowe, czynniki środowiskowe i demograficzne, rozwój infrastruktury oraz strategie społeczne i motywacyjne. Przewidywane konsekwencje obejmowały aspekty ekonomiczne, behawioralne i społeczno-kulturowe. Zaproponowane ramy stanowią koncepcyjną podstawę rozwoju polityki czasu wolnego opartej na sporcie, ukierunkowanej na wspieranie zdrowia społecznego i uczestnictwa społecznego. Konieczne są dalsze badania nad możliwością zastosowania modelu oraz oceną jego przewidywanych efektów w praktyce.

Słowa kluczowe: dobrostan społeczny, tworzenie polityki, rekreacja, zarządzanie sportem, turystyka.

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Abstract

Sport may contribute to social development by supporting quality of life, social participation, and social capital. This study aimed to develop a policy framework for utilizing sport capacities in organizing leisure time and promoting social health. A qualitative design was used, based on semi-structured interviews with 13 faculty members and experts in sport management and social policymaking selected through purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach involving open, axial, and selective coding. The credibility and consistency of the analysis were supported through member checking, independent parallel coding, and documentation of analytical decisions. The analysis resulted in an integrated policy framework comprising causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, proposed strategies, and anticipated consequences. Key elements included cultural position and social acceptance, sociocultural and resource-related conditions, environmental and demographic factors, infrastructure development, and social and motivational strategies. The anticipated consequences concerned economic, behavioral, and sociocultural outcomes. The proposed framework provides a conceptual basis for the development of sport-based leisure policies aimed at supporting social health and participation. Further research is needed to evaluate its applicability and anticipated outcomes in practice.

Keywords: social health, policy making, leisure, sports management, tourism.

Introduction

In recent decades, increasing attention has been paid to the social dimensions of health, including social participation, social cohesion, social networks, and social capital. Contemporary conceptualizations of health recognize social health as an important dimension of overall well-being alongside physical and mental health. Social health encompasses the quality of social relationships and meaningful human connections, including experiences of belonging, social integration, and interaction within the broader social environment (Doyle & Link, 2024). Within this broader social dimension of health, social capital is closely related to physical activity, with social cohesion, social participation, social trust, reciprocity, and social networks playing important roles in facilitating participation in physical activity (Gao et al., 2025). Alongside physical activity, leisure time has increasingly attracted attention as an important context for health promotion and social interaction. The way leisure time is used can influence opportunities for physical activity, social interaction, and health-related behaviors. In this context, physical activity during leisure time can serve not only health-related purposes but also important social functions by providing opportunities for enjoyment, interpersonal connection, and interaction with peers. Research on leisure-time physical activity suggests that perceived needs related to health, enjoyment, achievement, and social connection can contribute to sustained participation (Rahimi & Asefi, 2023). Sport, as an organized and socially embedded form of physical activity, can therefore be considered an important resource for

structuring leisure time and creating opportunities for individual and social development.

At the national level, although programs in public sports, school sports, and health promotion through physical activity have been implemented, the absence of coherent, interdisciplinary, and contextually grounded policy frameworks may limit the systematic use of sports capacities for leisure management and social health promotion. This need for an integrated policy approach is particularly relevant in the Iranian context, where evidence has highlighted important associations between social capital and health-related outcomes. For example, recent evidence from a large cohort of Iranian youth indicates a substantial burden of major depressive disorder and shows that higher levels of social capital—including participation, trust, and social cohesion—are associated with a lower likelihood of depression (Savari et al., 2025). In addition, a systematic review and meta-analysis has reported a considerable prevalence of depression among Iranian children and adolescents, underscoring the importance of preventive and health-promoting interventions for younger populations (Bazargan et al., 2023). Against this background, leisure time, particularly among young people, represents an important context for preventive and health-promoting interventions. Purposefully structured leisure activities, including accessible and socially supportive sports participation, may provide opportunities for social interaction, development of interpersonal skills, and strengthening of social connections.

Leisure time provides an important context for engaging in health-promoting activities, including physical activity. However, participation in physical activity does not occur automatically and may require appropriate behavioral and social interventions. In this regard, social marketing approaches have been examined as a means of promoting physical activity by addressing behavioral factors and designing interventions that encourage voluntary participation in health-related physical activity (Rohani et al., 2021). Accordingly, effective leisure-time policy should consider not only the availability of sports opportunities but also strategies that can encourage individuals to initiate and maintain participation. In this context, sport and physical activity can be considered important components of leisure-time organization, particularly when activities are designed to be enjoyable, challenging, and engaging. Evidence from university physical education settings suggests that challenging, exploratory, and enjoyable activity experiences can increase students' situational interest and engagement in physical education (Lobo, 2025). Therefore, the organization of leisure-time sport should consider both the availability of opportunities and the attractiveness and engagement potential of activities in order to encourage sustained participation.

Beyond its role in promoting physical activity, sport can contribute to the organization of leisure time through cultural, social, and psychological dimensions. From a cultural perspective, sport as a collective phenomenon has the potential to create a sense of belonging and social cohesion and to guide individuals in groups and teams toward common goals. These interactions can strengthen individual skills such as cooperation, discipline, and respect for rules, while also reducing isolation and loneliness and strengthening social bonds. Sport can also provide a structured social environment in which interpersonal relationships and behavioral norms are developed. Recent systematic evidence indicates that prosocial and antisocial behaviors are important dimensions of the social experience of sport, highlighting the role of the sporting environment and its social dynamics in shaping behavioral outcomes (Zhu et al., 2025).

At the same time, the increasing prevalence of sedentary lifestyles, particularly among young people, has highlighted the need for accessible and attractive opportunities for physical activity during leisure time. Addressing this need requires attention not only to individual participation but also to the broader system through which sport opportunities are planned, managed, and delivered. Research on sport delivery systems indicates that sport participation should be considered across interconnected levels, ranging from sport policy and management to the provision of facilities and users' participation, as differences in the objectives and organization of sport facilities can shape the broader delivery of sport opportunities and their relationship with participation, health, well-being, and social capital (Kumar et al., 2018).

Despite the potential benefits of sport and physical activity, ensuring appropriate opportunities for participation remains an important policy concern. From this perspective, effective leisure-time sport policies should consider how sport opportunities are organized and delivered, with particular attention to the availability, organization, and accessibility of appropriate facilities. Such an approach can help align policy-level objectives with facility provision and users' opportunities to participate, thereby strengthening the overall delivery of sport as a component of leisure-time policy. However, participation opportunities are not distributed equally across population groups. Evidence from systematic reviews indicates that adolescent girls may experience multiple barriers to physical activity participation, including limited support from peers, family, and teachers, lack of time, and environmental factors. Gender-responsive approaches, supportive environments, and safe and attractive opportunities have therefore been identified as important considerations for promoting physical activity among adolescent girls (Duffey et al., 2021).

Socioeconomic conditions may also influence access to and participation in organized sport. A systematic review and meta-analysis found evidence of socioeconomic disparities in sport participation among children and adolescents,

with those from higher socioeconomic-status households being more likely to participate in sport and spending more time participating. These findings highlight the importance of considering socioeconomic inequalities when developing policies aimed at improving equitable access to organized sport (Owen et al., 2022). In addition to socioeconomic conditions, educational settings represent another important context for promoting physical activity among young people. Evidence from systematic reviews indicates that school-based physical activity interventions can produce modest short-term increases in physical activity among children and adolescents, although maintaining these effects over longer periods remains challenging. Accordingly, schools can serve as an important setting for supporting physical activity participation as part of broader, long-term strategies involving families, communities, and other stakeholders (Moeller et al., 2024).

Ensuring equitable participation also requires the creation of safe, inclusive, and accessible environments that respond to the needs of different segments of society, particularly women, girls, older adults, and persons with disabilities. The International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport recognizes participation in physical education, physical activity, and sport as a fundamental right for all and emphasizes the provision of inclusive, adapted, and safe opportunities for participation without discrimination (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2015). Accordingly, leisure-time sport policies should consider equal access and the specific needs of groups that may face barriers to participation. Beyond equitable access and participation, sport and physical activity can also contribute to local economic development when they are appropriately organized and supported. Investment in sport-related infrastructure and activities can generate employment opportunities, support local businesses, and create economic opportunities associated with sport events and related services. Evidence from the legacy of the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games illustrates how well-planned sport events can contribute to job creation, strengthen local small and medium-sized enterprises, and generate broader local development benefits (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2025). From a policy perspective, attention to local capacities and the social and economic characteristics of each region can therefore help improve the effectiveness and sustainability of sport-related programs.

Sport and leisure activities can provide structured opportunities for sustained participation and social connection. Evidence from research on leisure behavior in Iran indicates that systematic engagement in leisure activities, together with recreation specialization, is associated with place attachment, including dimensions such as social bonding and place identity (Heidari et al., 2021). These findings suggest that the organization of leisure-time sport may

contribute to creating meaningful and sustained connections between individuals and recreational environments. From this perspective, well-organized sport and leisure programs can provide a supportive context for participation and social connectedness, particularly when opportunities for regular and meaningful engagement are available. The role of sport in addressing social vulnerabilities and promoting social inclusion has also received increasing empirical attention. Recent systematic evidence suggests that sport-based interventions can provide psychological, physical, and social benefits for vulnerable youth and may support social reintegration and the prevention of delinquent behavior, particularly when programs are sustained, participatory, and supported by trained staff and inter-institutional collaboration (Irujo-Compains et al., 2026). More broadly, recent evidence indicates that organized sport participation is associated with positive social outcomes among children and adolescents, including stronger interpersonal skills, prosocial behavior, and a greater sense of belonging (Wade et al., 2026). From a broader social and cultural perspective, sport can therefore provide an important context for social interaction and the development of social cohesion. A scoping review of research examining sport and physical activity found broad support for a positive relationship between sport or physical activity participation and social cohesion, while also highlighting the importance of context and the way social cohesion is conceptualized and measured (Moustakas & Wagner, 2023). More recent evidence likewise indicates that social cohesion is associated with physical activity and that social engagement can contribute to healthier behavioral patterns, suggesting that sport and physical activity settings may provide valuable opportunities for strengthening social connections (Chan et al., 2024).

Beyond the provision of facilities and opportunities for participation, the social environment surrounding sport and physical activity can also influence the broader outcomes of leisure-time participation. Sport activities can bring individuals together in shared and structured settings, creating opportunities for social interaction, cooperation, and the development of social connections. Evidence from research in the sport and physical activity context indicates that sport can provide opportunities to support social cohesion, while dimensions such as social relationships, trust, belonging, participation, and connectedness are closely related to sport and physical activity participation (Moustakas & Wagner, 2023). In addition, empirical evidence indicates that higher levels of neighborhood social cohesion are associated with greater physical activity, highlighting the relevance of social cohesion to policies aimed at promoting physical activity (Chan et al., 2024). Therefore, leisure-time sport policies should consider the social environment surrounding participation alongside the provision of physical opportunities.

Research on sport-related socialization has also examined factors that influence the development of students' socialization through sport (Vaseq Foad & Zamani Nukaabadi, 2024). Recent research has further examined the relationship between participation in sports during leisure time and mental health, supporting the relevance of sport participation as a component of health-promoting leisure policies (Mahmoudi et al., 2025). From a rights-based perspective, access to sport, recreation, and leisure is particularly important for persons with disabilities. Existing evidence has examined the right to sport, recreation, and leisure for persons with disabilities from national and international human-rights perspectives, supporting the importance of equitable access and participation (Naderian et al., 2023). However, despite this growing body of evidence addressing socialization, mental health, social cohesion, and equitable access, the existing literature does not appear to provide a comprehensive policy framework that simultaneously considers sports capacities, leisure-time organization, and social health promotion within the Iranian context. This gap provides a rationale for developing an integrated framework based on empirical evidence from relevant stakeholders.

Given the breadth and importance of the subject, there is a need for a comprehensive and systematic study that examines the capacities of sport for organizing leisure time and develops a coherent theoretical and practical policy framework aimed at promoting social health and addressing social harms. Drawing on empirical evidence from semi-structured interviews with relevant experts and adopting a scientific and applied approach, this study seeks to address the identified gap in the literature and provide a coherent and applicable framework for policymakers, managers, and practitioners in the fields of sport and social health. Such a framework can contribute to more effective policy development and implementation and support sustainable social development and continuous improvement in quality of life.

Methods

Research design and ethical considerations

The present study used a qualitative approach to develop a policy framework in the field of sports management and social policymaking. A grounded theory approach was used to generate a conceptual framework inductively from the empirical accounts of experts. The study relied exclusively on semi-structured expert interviews; no separate corpus of policy or other documents was systematically sampled or analyzed.

Formal ethics committee approval was not obtained for this study. All the participants were adults and participation was voluntary. Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the intended use of the data, confidentiality, their right to withdraw, and audio recording. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants. No names or directly identifying information are reported.

Participants and sampling

The study population included professors, researchers, and experts in sports management and social policymaking. The participants were selected purposively based on their practical experience and specialized knowledge. Eligibility criteria included: (1) scientific and research experience related to sports management, social policymaking, or leisure planning; (2) practical experience in sports policymaking or management; and (3) the ability to provide informed strategic perspectives on the research topic.

The final sample comprised 13 participants. Recurring concepts were observed from the ninth interview, and the authors considered data saturation to have been reached by the eleventh interview. Two additional interviews were conducted to assess whether further relevant concepts emerged.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using open and flexible questions. The interview guide covered four main areas: individual experiences in sports policy and management; barriers and opportunities in sports management; perspectives on improving social health through sport; and relationships among organizations, institutions and stakeholders involved in sport and leisure. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Supplementary field notes and researcher observations were recorded alongside the interview transcripts.

Data Analysis and Methodological Rigor

Interview data were analyzed using a grounded theory framework involving open, axial, and selective coding. During open coding, transcripts were examined line by line to identify initial concepts and codes. During axial coding, codes were grouped into categories and subcategories based on conceptual relationships, conditions, and consequences. During selective coding, the main categories were integrated into the final policy framework. Analysis proceeded iteratively, with concepts progressively organized into higher-order categories and relationships.

The credibility and consistency of the analysis were supported through member checking, independent parallel coding, and documentation of analytical decisions. The preliminary findings were presented to the participants to assess whether they adequately reflected their views. Coding was reviewed independently by multiple researchers to assess consistency in the identification and categorization of concepts. The stages of transcription, coding, category development, and model construction were documented to provide an auditable record of the analytical process.

Results

Participant Characteristics

Table 1 shows the demographic and professional characteristics of the study participants. A total of 13 professors and experts in sport and social policy participated in the study. Of these, 9 were male and 4 were female. The age range of the participants was between 37 and 55 years. In terms of academic rank, the sample ranged from assistant professor to full professor. The participants represented a range of areas of expertise, including sport management, sociology of sport, sport psychology, sport marketing, and social policy. The teaching experience of the participants ranged from 8 to 27 years, and some had experience in executive management or policy consulting in national and provincial institutions. Participants also varied in reported socio-economic status and in additional professional characteristics, including membership in scientific councils and participation in international collaborative projects. Overall, the sample included individuals with diverse academic and professional backgrounds relevant to the study topic.

Table 1
Demographic and professional characteristics of the participants

Participant Code	Gender	Age (years)	Academic Rank	Area of Expertise	Teaching Experience (years)	Managerial / Policy-making Experience	Socio-economic Status	Other Relevant Characteristics
P01	Male	47	Associate Professor	Sport Management – Policy-making	18	Member of the National Sport Planning Committee	Middle	Editorial board member of a specialized journal
P02	Female	41	Assistant Professor	Sociology of Sport	12	Research consultant in the Ministry of Education	Upper-Middle	Experience in international collaborative projects

Table 1 (cont.)

Participant Code	Gender	Age (years)	Academic Rank	Area of Expertise	Teaching Experience (years)	Managerial / Policy-making Experience	Socio-economic Status	Other Relevant Characteristics
P03	Male	53	Full Professor	Physical Education Management	25	Former Dean, Faculty of Sport Sciences	High	Author of multiple policy-related publications
P04	Male	45	Associate Professor	Social Policy	15	Member of the Municipal Advisory Committee	Middle	Field experience in urban sport projects
P05	Female	39	Assistant Professor	Physical Education Pedagogy	10	Cultural advisor at university	Middle	Contribution to women's health promotion projects
P06	Male	48	Associate Professor	Sport Event Management	16	Director of national sport festivals	High	Reviewer of national sport research projects
P07	Male	50	Assistant Professor	Sport & Public Health	14	Member of the National Social Health Taskforce	Middle	Experience in health-related community projects
P08	Female	44	Associate Professor	Sport Psychology	13	Head of a sport psychology advisory unit	Lower-Middle	Professional background in athlete counseling
P09	Male	42	Assistant Professor	Sport Marketing	9	Consultant to private sport industry	Middle	Collaboration with professional sports clubs
P10	Male	55	Full Professor	Human Resource Management in Sport	27	Member of the University Promotion Committee	High	Supervisor of more than 30 PhD dissertations
P11	Female	37	Assistant Professor	Sociology of Leisure	8	Researcher at the Social Studies Center	Middle	Projects focusing on youth leisure activities
P12	Male	49	Associate Professor	Sport Policy	20	Former Provincial Director of Sport	High	National-level executive background
P13	Male	46	Assistant Professor	Physical Education & Recreation Management	15	Member of the National University Sport Council	Middle	Active member of scientific sport associations

Note: P01–P13 denote anonymized participant codes.

Overview of the Analytical Framework

The analysis resulted in an integrated framework describing the relationships among the main categories identified in the interview data. The categories were organized into causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and anticipated consequences, with sport-based leisure policy-making for social health promotion representing the central phenomenon of the framework. Table 2 summarizes the main categories, subcategories, and related concepts identified during the coding process.

Table 2
Categories and subcategories identified through the grounded theory analysis

Paradigm component	Main category	Subcategory	Illustrative codes / concepts
Causal conditions	Cultural position	Sports culture	Values and norms related to sport; belief in health through sport; interest in sport and physical activity
		Lifestyle	Mechanization of everyday life; industrialization and reduced physical activity; physical inactivity
		Attitudes	Policymakers' attitudes towards sport; attitudes towards leisure; parental attitudes
	Social acceptance	Social relations	Sports groups; sports NGOs; peer groups
		Social value	Social status; friendship; socialization through sport
Contextual conditions	Sociocultural context	Culture building	Media promotion; organizational support; recognition of sport as a component of health
		Public participation	Private-sector involvement; coordination of sports organizations
		Social persuasion	Promotion of leisure-time sport; family encouragement; motivation to participate
	Software resources	Knowledge resources	Knowledge about sport; public awareness; awareness of the social role of sport
		Human resources	Qualified coaches; supportive managers; trained physical education professionals
Intervening conditions	Architecture of sports facilities	Hardware resources	Sports facilities
		Design and construction	Facility quality; affordability; equipment in parks and sport facilities
		Operation and use	Facility location; facility design; lack of facilities in underserved areas
			Economic viability; maintenance; utilization of existing facilities

Table 2 (cont.)

Paradigm component	Main category	Subcategory	Illustrative codes / concepts
Intervening conditions	Environmental factors	Social differences	Social class; social restrictions
		Significant others	School support; family and peer influence; role modelling
	Demographic characteristics	Individual characteristics	Age; gender
		Socioeconomic characteristics	Income; education; quality of life
Strategies	Infrastructure development	Facilities	Construction and completion of facilities; provision of facilities in underserved areas
		Executive measures	Skilled workforce; interinstitutional coordination; regulation of sport-space provision
	Intrinsic and social incentives	Cultural incentives	School/university sport; media promotion; neighborhood sports initiatives
		Collective incentives	Internalization of social values; inclusion of vulnerable groups; social safety
Anticipated consequences	Economic	Job creation	Local economic development; sport-related employment; income generation
		Development	Quality of life; welfare; potential health-related economic benefits
	Behavioral	Individual	Reduced aggression; reduced depression; enthusiasm; self-confidence
		Social	Reduced delinquency; reduced substance use; reduced local/ethnic prejudice
	Sociocultural	Social capital	Social interaction; social acceptance; community dynamics
		Cultural effects	Role modelling; participation culture; promotion of sport-for-all

Causal conditions

The causal conditions identified in the analysis comprised two main categories: cultural position and social acceptance. Cultural position included sports culture, lifestyle, and attitudes towards sport and leisure, whereas social acceptance reflected social relations and the perceived social value of sport. These conditions shaped how sport was perceived and positioned within leisure-time and social-health policy.

Contextual Conditions

The contextual conditions comprised three main categories: sociocultural context, software resources, and hardware resources. The sociocultural context included culture building, public participation, and social persuasion. Software resources referred to knowledge and human resources, whereas hardware resources concerned the availability, quality, affordability, and equipment of sports facilities. Together, these conditions formed the broader context in which sport-based leisure policies could be developed and implemented.

Intervening Conditions

The intervening conditions comprised architecture of sports facilities, environmental factors, and demographic characteristics. Architecture of sports facilities included issues related to facility design, location, maintenance, and use. Environmental factors included social differences and the influence of significant others, while demographic characteristics included individual and socioeconomic characteristics such as age, gender, income, and education. These factors were identified as potentially influencing the implementation of the proposed policy framework.

Proposed Strategies

Two main groups of strategies were identified: infrastructure development and intrinsic and social incentives. Infrastructure development included the construction and completion of sports facilities, provision of facilities in underserved areas, development of a skilled workforce, interinstitutional coordination, and appropriate regulation. Intrinsic and social incentives included school and university sport, media promotion, neighborhood sports initiatives, internalization of social values, inclusion of vulnerable groups, and strengthening social safety.

Anticipated Consequences

The anticipated consequences were organized into economic, behavioral, and sociocultural outcomes. Economic consequences included potential local development, employment, income generation, and broader welfare-related benefits. Behavioral consequences included potential changes in aggression, depression, delinquency, substance use, and other individual or social behaviors. Sociocultural consequences included social interaction, social acceptance, social capital, role modelling, and the promotion of a culture of participation and sport-for-all. These consequences should be interpreted as anticipated out-

comes identified through the qualitative analysis rather than as effects demonstrated in the present study.

Integrated Policy Framework

In line with the aim of this research, the categories identified in the analysis were organized within a paradigmatic model describing the relationships among the main components of the proposed policy framework (Figure 1). “Sport-based leisure policymaking for social health promotion” was considered the central phenomenon. Other categories were classified as causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and anticipated consequences.

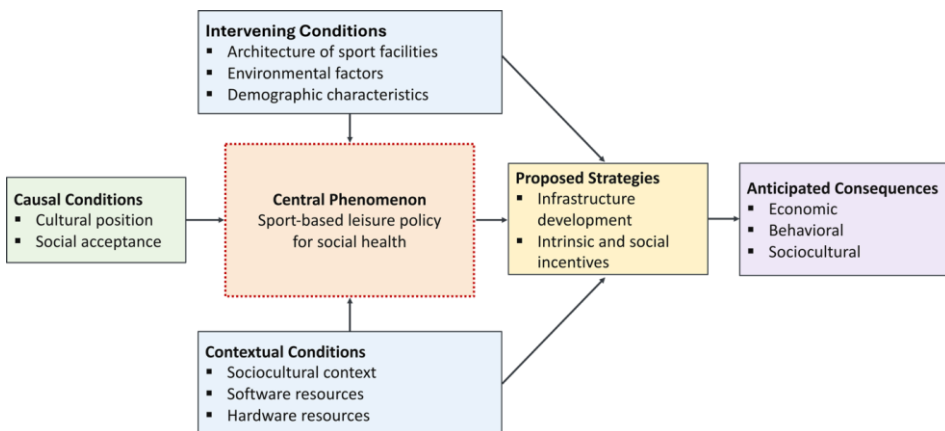


Figure 1

Integrated policy framework derived from the axial coding analysis

Based on the extracted concepts and the analysis performed, the final framework for the policy-oriented use of sports capacities in organizing leisure time was developed as a conceptual model. The model integrates causal, contextual, and intervening conditions with proposed strategies and anticipated consequences, illustrating the relationships among policy, structural, and social factors identified in the analysis.

Discussion

Interpretation of the Integrated Policy Framework

In line with the overall goal of this research, which was to design a policy-based framework for utilizing the potential of sport in promoting social health

and regulating leisure processes, the findings showed that sport, regardless of its physical function, as a social institution can play a mediating role in psychological, cultural, and institutional dimensions. Qualitative analyses indicated that the formation of effective policies requires accurate identification of cultural, structural, and motivational drivers in the target society (Rohani et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the role of sport in supporting social development, particularly among younger generations, was highlighted. Recent systematic evidence indicates that sports participation among children and adolescents is associated with positive social outcomes, including stronger interpersonal skills, prosocial behavior, and a greater sense of belonging (Wade et al., 2026).

Contextual and Structural Barriers to Sport-Based Leisure

One of the key results of the research is that the lack of attention to targeted planning in the field of leisure not only creates the ground for deviant and harmful behaviors, but also causes a breakdown in communication between sports, educational, and cultural institutions. This gap, in a contemporary society that is struggling with physical poverty and the decline of social participation, can lead to the formation of an inefficient and unhealthy leisure lifestyle. Accordingly, the formulation of comprehensive policies in the field of leisure requires a multidimensional approach that simultaneously addresses the reform of cultural attitudes, the improvement of infrastructure, and the creation of social motivation. The results also show that in the absence of a coherent and systematic framework, the potential capacities of sports in social management are ignored. Therefore, the development of policy frameworks should be based on active interaction between relevant institutions (such as education, municipalities, the Ministry of Sports, and cultural institutions) and strengthened through the participation of elites in the fields of sports and social health. If implemented coherently, such policies may contribute to reducing social harms, improving equity in access to sport, and supporting quality of life. In examining the policy-making capacities for utilizing sport as an effective tool in leisure management and promoting social health, one of the key elements is the role of the attitudes of decision-making institutions and families towards sport. In this framework, the formation of a supportive and strategic view at macro-management levels towards the multiple functions of sport can provide a platform for the development of preventive policies in the field of social harms. At the micro level, the attitude of parents and families towards sport, especially in the form of leisure time for adolescents and young people, has a significant impact on behavioral modeling, socialization, and prevention of deviations.

These attitudes, along with the facilitating role of grassroots institutions and informal sports groups, can contribute to social motivation, a sense of belong-

ing, and the development of social capital through sports participation. Recent qualitative evidence suggests that informal sports can provide young people with opportunities to develop social networks, trust, and a sense of community, while also illustrating the challenges that some young people may experience within organized sports settings (Nesse et al., 2024). These considerations should therefore be incorporated into the proposed policy model. However, the realization of these goals also faces obstacles that are rooted not only in the physical level of infrastructure, but also in deeper layers of the social and economic structure of society. The imbalance in the geographical distribution of sports venues, suboptimal design of recreational spaces, poor maintenance of equipment, and the lack of principled utilization of existing capacities, especially in underserved areas, are considered to be the main challenges. These shortcomings are reinforced by social constraints such as gender discrimination, class inequality, and cultural barriers to the free participation of all segments of society, especially women. As a result, achieving policy goals in this area requires a multidimensional view of leisure-time sports that simultaneously considers infrastructural, cultural, gender, and class issues.

During adolescence, educational institutions, and especially schools, can provide an important setting for encouraging and supporting participation in sport and physical activity. From a policy perspective, the effective use of schools requires appropriate facilities, accessible opportunities, and programs that are integrated into the broader organization of leisure time. Kumar et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of considering the links among sport policy, facilities, participation, and users' health, well-being, and social capital. In addition, the social environment surrounding adolescents, including family and peers, can influence their opportunities and motivation to participate in physical activity. Therefore, sport-based leisure policies should consider not only the availability of facilities and programs but also the supportive social environments in which young people make decisions about their leisure-time activities.

On the other hand, personal and social factors such as age, gender, economic status, and cultural status play an important role in limiting individuals' access to sports opportunities. For example, women may face cultural constraints and lack of appropriate sports spaces that limit their participation in sport. Also, more vulnerable populations, such as the elderly or low-income groups, benefit less from the benefits of sports in their leisure time due to lack of facilities and economic constraints. These multiple and intersecting barriers require in-depth examination and careful policy-making to reduce inequalities in access to and utilization of sports capacities.

Policy and Implementation Strategies

The findings indicate two broad areas of implementation: infrastructure development and social and motivational incentives. Infrastructure-related strategies include building and maintaining sports facilities, improving access in underserved and deprived areas, completing unfinished projects, providing appropriate equipment, employing specialized and motivated personnel, and strengthening coordination among relevant institutions. These measures should be supported by appropriate planning and regulations to improve the availability and effective use of sports facilities.

The second area concerns cultural, software, and social implementation mechanisms. Cultural strategies include promoting positive attitudes towards sport, educating families about its social and health-related value, incorporating sport into extracurricular programs in schools and universities, and using the media to encourage participation. Software-related strategies include specialized training for coaches and sports managers and stronger cooperation between social and sports institutions. In addition, family and community-based incentives, support for sports NGOs, internalization of the social values of sport, and measures aimed at improving participation among vulnerable groups may strengthen engagement in sport-based leisure activities. Together, these strategies require coordinated participation by families, schools, public and private institutions, and sports organizations to improve access and reduce inequalities in participation.

Anticipated Social, Health, and Economic Implications

The proposed framework suggests that sport-based leisure activities may contribute to a range of social, behavioral, and health-related outcomes. The participants associated sport participation with stronger social interaction, social acceptance, community engagement, and a greater sense of belonging. Local sports activities were perceived as providing opportunities to build relationships, strengthen social connectedness, and support the development of social capital. The participants also identified potential reductions in selected social and behavioral problems, including violence and aggression, problematic technology use, depressive symptoms, delinquent behavior, tobacco and alcohol use, and local or ethnic prejudice. In addition, role modelling by prominent athletes and the promotion of a culture of participation and sport-for-all were identified as potential cultural consequences of sport-based leisure.

The framework also points to possible economic and health-related implications. The development of sports infrastructure and related activities may support local economic activity, employment, and access to recreational services. At the same time, improved opportunities for regular participation in sport and

physical activity may contribute to better physical and mental health and, in the longer term, may have implications for healthcare use and economic productivity. These potential effects should, however, be interpreted as anticipated consequences of the proposed framework rather than as outcomes demonstrated in the present study.

Leisure time can provide an important context for creativity, skill development, and physical, psychological, and social well-being when appropriate opportunities and supportive conditions are available. Conversely, insufficient access to constructive and accessible leisure opportunities may limit the potential benefits of leisure-time activities. Evidence from a scoping review indicates that physical activity and exercise interventions show promising effects for youth mental health, including reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety (Pascoe et al., 2020). Accordingly, sport-based leisure policies may be considered as one component of broader strategies for promoting health and well-being among young people.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings should be interpreted in the light of the qualitative design and purposive sample of 13 experts. The proposed framework reflects the participants' perspectives and has not yet been empirically validated or evaluated in implementation settings. Future studies should examine the applicability of the framework in different populations and regions and assess whether the proposed strategies are associated with the anticipated social and health outcomes.

Conclusions

The findings indicate that the effective use of sport in leisure-time policy requires coordinated attention to infrastructural, cultural, social, and motivational factors. Based on the perspectives of the participating experts, the study proposes an integrated policy framework linking causal, contextual, and intervening conditions with implementation strategies and anticipated economic, behavioral, and sociocultural consequences. Key policy priorities include equitable access to sport facilities, appropriate human resources, educational and community-based initiatives, social and motivational incentives, and stronger coordination among public institutions, sports organizations, schools, families, and other relevant stakeholders.

The proposed framework provides a conceptual basis for the development of sport-based leisure policies aimed at supporting social health and participation. However, its anticipated consequences should be regarded as propositions derived from the qualitative analysis rather than as empirically demonstrated

effects. Further research should therefore evaluate the applicability of the framework in different populations and settings and examine whether its proposed strategies are associated with improvements in participation, social connectedness, and health-related outcomes.

STATEMENT OF ETHICS

Formal ethics committee approval was not obtained. The authors report that, under the institutional procedures in place at the time, formal ethics review was not sought for this type of non-interventional qualitative study. All participants provided informed consent.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of the article *Designing a policy framework for utilizing sports capacities in promoting social health and organizing leisure time*.

FUNDING

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of the article *Designing a policy framework for utilizing sports capacities in promoting social health and organizing leisure time*.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Mohammad Saeid Kiani: Conceptualization; Methodology; Software; Validation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Resources; Data Curation; Writing – Original Draft; Writing – Review and Editing; Visualization; Supervision; Project administration; Funding acquisition.

Leila Nazari: Conceptualization; Methodology; Software; Validation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Resources; Data Curation; Writing – Original Draft; Writing – Review and Editing; Visualization; Supervision; Project administration; Funding acquisition.

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