

University sports clubs: culture, belonging and adapting to change during COVID-19

Maria Moxey^a, Hazel Brown^a, Keith Parry^b

a. University of Winchester

b. University of Bournemouth

Abstract

It is commonly accepted that there are many physical, social and psychological benefits to participating in extracurricular activities at university. While there is a growing body of literature that considers the role of extracurricular activities in enhancing the student experience and fostering better university outcomes, the role that sports clubs play specifically is largely missing from the literature. What is more, the value of sport was highlighted when it was removed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this paper draws on doctoral research into the experiences of university sports club members during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly surrounding the recreation of the social practices that make up sports club culture, via online communities. Through adopting a Bourdieusian perspective, this paper explores the impact of university sports clubs on students' identity formation and sense of belonging.

Introduction

It is commonly accepted that involvement in extracurricular sport is positive for the student experience, not just for the physical health benefits, but for psychological and social wellbeing (Brunton & Mayne, 2020). For many, joining a sports club is a primary means of building friendships and connections with peers, which has a huge impact on their university experience (Quinton & Brunton, 2018). This social aspect, and the impact of university sport on mental wellbeing, is under researched in the UK and therefore not fully understood (McKenna & Dunstan-Lewis, 2004). Yet, the issue of students' social and mental wellbeing has never been more pressing than amidst the COVID-19 pandemic where concerns for student transition, retention, and overall wellbeing were of high priority when all university activity was rapidly moved online (Tice *et al.*, 2021). As part of PhD research exploring the role of sports clubs at university, the findings presented here consider the impact membership to a university sports club has on students' identity formation and belonging. Moreover, this article discusses the ways in which sports club members demonstrated resilience, creativity and a sense of community, which contributed to student success during the pandemic.

University sports clubs, student success, and a sense of belonging

Student success is multifaceted and has been defined in terms of 'academic achievement; engagement in educationally purposeful activities; satisfaction; acquisition of desired knowledge; skills; and competencies; persistence and attainment of educational objectives' (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, *et al.*, 2000, p.10). Success means many things to different stakeholders (Lowe & Moxey, 2018) and social and emotional factors are important for

Research articles

student success as well as academic factors (Kuh *et al.*, 2007). Early scholarship into student success such as Astin's (1999) student involvement theory, and Tinto's theory of student departure and interactionalist model (Tinto, 1993) indicated that extracurricular engagement at university is necessary to become fully integrated into the campus community, and also enhances persistence. Wolf-Wendel, Ward and Kinzie (2009) and Hunter, Tobolowsky and Gardoner (2010) have added to this debate by highlighting the importance of ensuring campuses are rich with activities for students to engage with in order to become embedded within the university lifestyle.

Social relations help to develop emotional ties between people as well as the institution, and this in turn brings about many benefits relating to student success (Kuh *et al.*, 2007; Felten & Lambert, 2020). Extracurricular activities are central to this given they provide rich opportunities for social interaction which enhances belonging (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). There is a growing body of literature exploring the interrelation between extracurricular activities and student success in relation to retention, attainment, as well as other university goals such as employability, student satisfaction and belonging, to name a few. However, the role of sport at university is often missing from this debate.

Despite the growing appreciation for sociocultural factors, student success is often defined in the literature in terms of quantitative measures such as earnings after graduation and final degree classification (Attridge, 2021). Despite this, students tend to define success in terms of skills gained, such as leadership, or ability to access career networks, and therefore there is a call for a re-examination of the way in which student success is defined (Weatherton & Schussler, 2021). While research into university sport in the UK is still growing, research that does exist suggests that involvement in sport directly relates to improving skills such as leadership and greater embeddedness within social networks for career development (Allen *et al.*, 2013; Tchibozo, 2007), something which is further supported by findings in the present study. This demonstrates the value of university sport specifically in relation to factors which students deem are important for success. What is more, student success continues to be a high priority for Higher Education (HE) institutions and policy makers (Kahu & Nelson, 2018), and the role that sport plays in this is largely absent from the discourse. This demonstrates the need for a deeper understanding of the value of sport at university.

University sports clubs in the UK are predominantly recreational, student led, and are intended to supplement studies for the betterment of the student experience (Clayton & Humberstone, 2006). While it is commonly accepted that sport has many physical health benefits, this research is focused on the social practices that make up the culture of university sports clubs, particularly in relation to identity formation and a sense of belonging. Updating McMillan and Chavis's (1986) early definition of belonging, Strayhorn (2019) refers to students' sense of belonging in relation to perceived support, feelings of connectedness, mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community. This article explores how university sports clubs play a central role in students' feelings of connectedness, belonging, and significantly, the impact of this during COVID-19.

University sports clubs are made up of unique traditions, and membership often becomes a dominant part of one's identity at university since it is closely intertwined with the university lifestyle. A subculture is defined as a subgroup who share beliefs, values and habits, making them distinguishable from wider society, and which often become a dominant aspect of

one's identity (Donnelly, 1981; Green, 2001; Atkinson & Young, 2008). Therefore, this research positions university sport as a subculture, and explores the behaviours, traditions, and social practices that members adopt to demonstrate membership to the university sport subculture.

University sport, identity formation, and virtual engagement during COVID-19

HE institutions in the UK offer varied sporting opportunities ranging from recreational physical activity and intramural sport, to competitive varsity level sport (McKenna & Dunstan-Lewis, 2004; Harris & Clayton, 2008). Sport in UK universities is primarily non-elite and organised as inter-university competition by British University and College Sport (BUCS). Typically, matches take place on a Wednesday afternoon and universities across the country aim to timetable Wednesday afternoons free from lectures to enable students to take part. For many students, BUCS competition is the highest sporting level they will reach and there is a lot of pride and esteem associated with being selected to represent one's university as a BUCS player.

University campuses are filled with customs and traditions which can be alienating when they are unfamiliar to new students (Mann, 2001). University sport can be considered as a subculture of the campus community, and thus, becoming integrated into the university sport subculture can help students become integrated into university life. As teammates train multiple times per week, socialise together, study together, and often live together, they develop tight-knit bonds and feel valued as members of their university sports clubs. This plays a significant role in developing an identity at university since the social relations individuals are a part of inform their self-concept; that is, a sense of who and what they are, and what characterises them (Slotter, Winger, & Soto, 2015). Threats to this, such as being removed from the social groups that help define us, can cause reduced clarity of self-concept, and reduced self-esteem (Slotter *et al.*, 2015).

While there are distinctions to be drawn between predominantly recreational sports club members in the UK and elite level college athletes in the United States, the amount of time spent together, and the connections developed between teammates are comparable. Graupensperger, Benson, Kilmer *et al.* (2020) compared data among student athletes before, during and after the pandemic and found that those who maintained supportive social connections with teammates maintained their athletic identity to a greater extent and reported better mental health. Furthermore, LeClaire (2021) conducted research into student athletes' experiences during COVID-19 and found the following themes: feelings of uncertainty due to lack of structure they were accustomed to, limited social interaction causing feelings of isolation, and maintenance of a physical lifestyle through assigned home workouts. Life events that interrupt people's social interactions such as COVID-19 can cause identity loss (Slotter *et al.*, 2015). Given the amount of time sports club members spend together during a usual week at university, it is likely students in the UK were at risk of experiencing similar changes to their identity to those in Graupensperger *et al.*'s (2020) and LeClaire's (2021) studies. Therefore, the present study considers the experiences of sports club members and the potential value of such membership during this time.

Vandenberg, Berghman and Schaap (2021) explored the ritualistic nature of live music, and how this was replicated online through livestreaming during the pandemic. Although much

sociological work on collective effervescence and ritual theory is inspired by religious ceremonies, Vandenberg *et al.* (2021) applied this to live music. Given the similarities between live music and sports events in terms of ritualistic behaviours, collective identity, and a sense of escapism through transcendence of identity (Chaney & Goulding, 2016), this approach could also be extended to sports clubs. Live music and dance culture provide a connectedness, as the ritualistic activity provides significant feelings of connection and communality (Olaveson, 2004). While Vandenberg *et al.* (2021) found that rituals and behaviours were replicated online, they highlight the need for physical presence to achieve feelings of collectivity and argue that further research should consider whether online alternatives can bring about the same sense of collectivity in other groups. Therefore, this paper explores how university sports clubs replicated their membership via virtual communities throughout the pandemic, and how this influenced members' feelings of connectedness and belonging.

Theorising university sport in terms of Bourdieu

Bourdieu's social theory has been applied to both sport subcultures and HE and is therefore appropriate to help make sense of the university sport subculture. Bourdieu conceptualises belonging to a group in terms of habitus and suggests that behaviours and norms that characterise a group are embodied by its members (Bourdieu, 2010). Bourdieu identifies that members need different forms of capital to succeed or progress within a particular social group, which are understood in terms of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu's theory is useful for making sense of how one group is distinct from another, and how members within a group accrue capital, and may feel a sense of distinctiveness as a result of belonging to a particular group. This article draws on habitus and social capital to help make sense of behaviours that make up the university sport culture, and the role this plays on in students' sense of belonging.

The research process

The research set out to explore and gain new insight into students' experiences of membership of university sports clubs, and what this means for identity formation and sense of belonging. Data was collected among a range of sports clubs including traditional and non-traditional, as well as team and individual sports.

The importance placed on social media channels as a means of constructing identity, as well as practicing and engaging with university sports club membership was enhanced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection began when the national lockdown meant students turned to virtual channels to meet, socialise and maintain connection with their university sports clubs. Online platforms such as social media allow for expression of identity and enables individuals or groups to present themselves in a ways that they would like to be perceived (Davis, 2012). Advances in technology and the shift towards social media as a space for community have led to a new form of ethnographic data collection termed netnography (Kozinets, 2019). Therefore, the combination of interviews conducted virtually via zoom, and netnography, were effective methods to observe and understand what it meant to be a member of a sports club during the pandemic.

Netnography is complex and has many ethical implications to consider since it involved the researcher using social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to observe behaviour (Kozinets, 2019). Ethical considerations outlined by Bruckman (2002) were followed; preserving confidentiality of participants was paramount in the research, as well as ensuring all participants were aware of the researcher's role and presence in online groups. For example, by asking permission from the group admins to post in the group, the researcher was able to be transparent about their purpose for being in the group, as well as seeking to recruit volunteers to interview.

Semi-standardised interviews lasting approximately an hour were conducted with 23 participants. Participants ranged from first year undergraduates through to master's students, as well as members of staff from the university's sports department. The inductive approach enabled flexibility, allowing the interviews to move into new and unexpected areas relevant and valuable to the research, and themes emerged from the perspective of the participants, rather than led by the researcher (Jones, 2015). Data analysis consisted of following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide to thematic analysis. Themes drawn from interviews were triangulated with themes that emerged through netnography, and interviews with staff helped to provide an additional perspective with which to triangulate data, which enhanced the credibility of findings (Polit & Beck, 2012; Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, *et al.*, 2014).

While many themes around sport, culture and identity emerged, the findings discussed in this article provide a brief insight into how students become socialised into university sports clubs and subsequently become integrated into a valuable support network. The findings presented here also discuss how students adapted to the sudden move online, and how this influenced their behaviour, sense of community, and overall wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Adapting their behaviour to these changes was not only crucial to the success of students during the pandemic but the way that some clubs turned adversity into an opportunity, and demonstrated altruism in the process, also deserves recognition.

Discussion of findings

Theme 1: The socialisation process

University sports clubs are made up of unique behaviours, traditions and characteristics, and consist of both sport specific and social related practices. The socialisation process starts with participating in trials, attending club socials, and then eventually signifying membership through various displays of identity. Longstanding members integrating with newer members is an important part of the socialisation process and helps students to transition into university life:

"When I was a fresher and I used to see the older girls around uni and they'd say hi and speak to me, I think that really made me feel a lot more confident. And I really appreciated that... especially in your first few months, you're still scared and nervous and a bit lost. I think having older girls they really helped me and went out their way to invite me to things... because I enjoyed that so much that's something I try to do whenever I see a fresher at uni, I always stop and chat. I always try to invite them to things and encourage them to come social. Because you just need to feel wanted."
(Participant 5, 3rd year).

Research articles

The concept of older students helping to integrate new students is not new. This occurs in peer assisted learning schemes across different universities, and enhances a sense of belonging for both older students who act as mentors, and newer members whose transition into university life is made easier (Keenan, 2014; Felten & Lambert, 2020). In the context of sport however, this is an informal, unplanned and student-led example of this process, which is a longstanding tradition among sports clubs. Findings demonstrate that older members act as mentors to younger members, which is commonly referred to as ‘taking someone under their wing’. This serves not only to help integrate new members and aid the transition into university life, but also preserves club culture as new members learn to repeat the cycle of traditions, which in the example above helps to preserve an inclusive and welcoming club culture.

As members become more familiar with the cultures and practices embedded within a subculture, they begin to adopt traits, language, and behaviours which demonstrate belonging, and there are many ways in which affiliation and membership of a group can be displayed. Branding is a means of displaying membership to the university sport subculture, as well as varied rituals, traditions and behaviours which have symbolic meaning. When discussing how important the branding is to members, one participant identified why it is commonplace to see people around campus wearing branded leisurewear:

“You know you’re part of something... it gives a sense of purpose... [the boys] love to rinse it... I think they sleep and shower in it because they always have it on. I know with one of our mates, I always like to take the piss and say ‘do you wear anything else?’ because he’s always got his quarter-zip and shorts on. But they feel proud.”
(Participant 18, 3rd year)

Participants expressed a sense of pride and affiliation in symbolising their sporting identity through playing kit and leisurewear, which resonates with findings from Holt and Sparkes (2001) who researched team cohesion in a men’s university football club in the UK and found that wearing the team emblem brought about feelings of pride and esteem. Wearing team kit around campus signifies team membership while simultaneously separating individuals from non-sports members of the wider university, bringing about feelings of distinction. Furthermore, social integration requires commitment beyond sport specific practices and is facilitated through social traditions such as attending Wednesday night post-match socials, engaging in alcohol consumption, and themed fancy dress:

“We’re big on fancy dress, everyone loves fancy dress. Socials aren’t like club nights where you dress up and go out... We actually encourage girls to look more ridiculous... It makes it more about us. It’s more about the team and friends rather than dressing to impress...” (Participant 5, 3rd Year)

“It’s to highlight who we are as a team... Because it is such a norm and a stereotype for all sports teams to dress up all around the country... it gives a sense of belonging it shows that you are a part of a sports team.” (Participant 6, 2nd Year)

Themed fancy dress attire worn at post-match socials is a celebration of the subculture and serves as a controlled decontrolling of emotions, provides a sense of escapism and transcendence of identity (Chaney & Goulding, 2016), and contributes to a sense of camaraderie (Crocket, 2016). This is comparable to displays of team identity through

wearing playing kit at a match, or indeed leisurewear around campus. Behaviours of consumption, particularly around dress help to signify belonging to a subculture and emphasise collective identity (Wheaton & Beal, 2003). Club leisurewear and themed fancy dress both have symbolic meaning and this cultivates pride in identifying with one's team, as well as the university sport subculture, and this helps set people apart from wider culture. According to Bourdieu (1984), dress is an indicator of possessing capital. Habitus predisposes members of a social group to dress and behave a certain way as dress is a symbol of cultural location and marks the boundary between the individual and the group to which they belong (Entwisle, 2000; Warde, 2006).

Theme 2: Support network

Once members have become integrated into the university sports subculture, there are many benefits to membership, most notable of which amongst the participants in this research was the support network. This was a dominant theme that emerged from interviews where participants frequently referred to the family-like bond, as well as the benefits this support network had on their mental wellbeing and decisions to persist through university:

"It wasn't just people that you would play a couple of training sessions with and then don't speak, it was the constant check up on everyone and you just grow to be like one big family... I definitely didn't feel so alone, that's why I considered dropping out after my first course... It's bad to say but they were just my course mates, and you don't really have a lot in common... Whereas with your team... It literally got me through uni. The amount of times I got really down... then it's just like right forget everything I've got a training session now I'm going to enjoy it. There's been times when I've been feeling down the coaches have noticed, and they pulled me up on it and just checked that I was okay. It does feel like you have that support as well..."
(Participant 2, 4th Year).

The notion that being a member of a sports club prevented dropout was common among interviewees. This is further highlighted by one participant who advised that he considered interrupting his studies and returning to university post-COVID because he missed playing sport and having the social outlet so much that university was no longer enjoyable. This shows that membership facilitates persistence through university due to the break from the stresses of academic study that sporting activity provides, as well as the support network that is developed through meaningful relationships. This is especially significant since Kuh *et al.* (2007) recognise emotional engagement in university life to be essential for student success, which the meaningful relationships developed among sports clubs cultivate. It was also clear from this research that being a member of a university sports club facilitates a sense of importance and feeling valued, not just among teammates but to the institution, which Strayhorn (2019) recognises as significant for gaining a sense of belonging.

The significance and distinctiveness of the friendships developed through sport is evident in the way that participants frequently compared their teammates to family members. For Bourdieu (1986), social capital comprises a network of relationships which individuals can mobilise as a resource. The findings suggest the network built through being involved in sport not only enhances members' sense of belonging to the wider community but also provides a network of emotional and social support through their degree and beyond.

Research articles

It is commonplace for members of sports clubs to live together during university. It is possible that this is a contributing factor to the family-like relationships which are formed, as well as connection to sport becoming such a dominant aspect of the university lifestyle. Participants reported that their sports team became like their replacement family who they turned to for support in many areas of life beyond their sports club. When students returned to university after the first national lockdown when many restrictions were still in place, they felt a sense of nostalgia for their old routine but found solace in maintaining some sense of connection to their sporting identity through their housemates who were also their teammates. Conversely, first year students placed in halls reported feeling very isolated from the wider university community and had limited affiliation to a sporting identity since they had minimal face-to-face interactions outside of their halls of residence.

First year students seemingly lacked a sense of belonging to their clubs compared to their senior peers who had developed meaningful social connections in previous years. One Master's student stated:

"I still feel a part of the team because I've still got my friends from before, it's the 1st years' who are going to be most hit by it... I know some of them but it's hard to get to know someone when you can't see them face-to-face." (P12, Master's)

This was reinforced by interviewing a first-year student who stated:

"I think I went to four training sessions. So I started to get to know people and then it all of a sudden stopped, so I haven't really had the social side." (P21, 1st Year)

This student felt isolated and considered leaving university and returning only when sport and socials could take place again and emphasised "it's not just playing sport but the social side as well". They also reported feeling less affiliation to the branding aspect of university sports culture, which is unsurprising since they had not accrued the symbolic capital from wearing the kit around campus, or succeeded in representing their club in competition. This, combined with the lack of social opportunities, significantly affected the ability for first year students to interact with and become better integrated into sports clubs, and therefore many had not accrued the social capital to mobilise as a resource for support compared to more long-standing members.

The notion that sports clubs provide a support network became more prominent in the pandemic, particularly during lockdown. On returning home for lockdown, Participant 5 noted that she felt closer to her sports team during lockdown than her family and friends from home, due to the frequent contact maintained by replicating their weekly structure using virtual platforms. This will be discussed further in the next section.

Theme 3: COVID-19 and adapting to change

Tice *et al.* (2021) found that there was a sharp decline in students' sense of belonging throughout 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic; 'to learn about x, observe what happens to the system when x is removed' (Tice *et al.*, 2021 p.1). The shift of all face-to-face activities online meant a drastic reduction of opportunities to build relationships with fellow students. The removal of sport and other in-person activities from student life resulted in their true meaning, value and impact becoming more apparent. Students who were members of sports clubs prior to the pandemic relied on these connections for social

Research articles

support, which helped them to maintain a sense of connection to their club and university. For first year students who had not yet built relations, this drastically impacted their transition into university life.

Combining interviews and netnography during the pandemic made it possible to observe and understand the resulting behavioural changes among sports clubs, and also how members sought to maintain engagement. Sports clubs utilised social networking platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Zoom to replicate their weekly routine with online alternatives, including training, competitions and socials. From setting weekly activity challenges, to holding Wednesday evening socials which incorporated their usual traditions such as themed fancy dress and games involving alcohol consumption, clubs attempted to recreate what it means to be a member of a university sports club via virtual platforms. Clubs also utilised group chats and reported that regular 'check-ins' were essential for maintaining a sense of connection, feelings of support, and preventing loneliness during lockdown. Netography made it possible to see first-hand supportive posts such as 'here if you want to chat' or "let's look out for each other in these times", which demonstrates the level of support that was common among sports clubs during the pandemic.

In line with Vandenberg *et al.*'s (2021) study which explored the re-creation of live music events via online platforms during the pandemic, although the online alternatives may not have provided the same sense of connection that would be achieved in person they certainly helped to provide a valuable sense of community during lockdown. As with Graupensperger *et al.*'s (2020) research with college athletes, students in the present study were able to maintain a sense of connection to their sports teams. Members became so immersed within the sport university lifestyle that this became a dominant part of their identity, so the virtual alternatives helped provide a sense of normality and consistency when returning home during lockdown. This is especially important for sports people for whom the lack of structure and connection with teammates could cause feelings of uncertainty and anxiety (LeClaire, 2020).

There were some clear benefits to virtual engagement, for example, it allowed clubs to expand their community by holding regular joint training sessions and socials with other university clubs, since travel was no longer a barrier. Nevertheless, committee members raised concerns over preserving club culture since COVID-19 meant traditional activities did not take place for significant parts of the academic year, and the newer members did not become as familiar with the norms, traditions, and ways of running the club. As a result some members did not seem very confident and engaged when activities took place face-to-face prior to the pandemic. However, committee members were surprised to see the level of engagement in the online activities was high among first year students. For example, they contributed to the group challenges by recording activities, adding photos, and overall contributing to helping the club to raise money and meet their targets.

During interviews participants emphasised that their clubs were inclusive, and through the process of netnography it was possible to corroborate this theme. Posts and comments were indeed very supportive and encouraging. In virtual communities, social trust is facilitated when members place trust in individuals via virtual interaction (Mathwick, Wiertz, & Ruyter, 2008). When discussing how members of virtual communities behave, Mathwick *et al.* (2007) draw on the work of Onyx and Bullen and state that despite a lack of direct previous interaction or subsequent relationships, members exhibit 'a willingness to take risks, based

on confidence that others will respond as expected, will act in mutually supportive ways, or at least will not intend harm' (Onyx & Bullen, 2000 p.24). This explains why some first-year students who seemed shy or less engaged in person became more engaged online after seeing supportive responses to posts in keeping with the group's inclusive habitus, which was presented consistently on their social media platform. Shared affiliation and mutual support fosters trust in a community, and thus, socialisation into communities, both virtually and in person, has the potential to develop supportive relationships, emotional bonds, and eventually a sense of belonging (Mathwick *et al.*, 2007).

One other significant adaptation to change during the COVID-19 pandemic was an increase in fundraising activities, many of which were self-initiated by sports club members; some clubs even introduced new committee positions to organise and oversee fundraising activities and dedicated new Facebook groups to fundraising challenges. In their attempts to maintain purpose and structure, there was a remarkable shift in behaviour towards more altruistic activities for the common good. In March 2020, sport, at all levels from grass roots through to professional level, came to an abrupt halt. Sharpe, Montifield and Filo (2020) explored the response from athletes and sports organisations on social media, and found that high-profile sports organisations and individuals connected with their fans through financial donations as well as promoting ways in which members of society could help in the pandemic and prevent the spread of COVID-19. Other examples included fundraising and physical activity challenges utilising platforms such as Twitter and 'GoFundMe' pages, with people videoing themselves doing as many 'keepy-ups' as possible, as well as sharing videos of 'at home' training ideas.

While not as high profile, this response is synonymous with university sports clubs who utilised online platforms in a similar way to engage in fundraising and imitating similar physical activity challenges, as well as awareness raising for key charities such as Mind, among others. The loss of sporting identity meant students engaged more with charity work and community engagement. While many clubs engaged with fundraising activities prior to the pandemic, the amount of engagement, and types of activities changed, as well as the underlying motivations. This engagement had a dual purpose; to maintain a sense of connection and feeling valued in their club, as well as to contribute positively to society during a difficult time. Considering facets of student success outlined by Kuh *et al.* (2007), development in areas such as humanitarianism, interpersonal competence, and civic engagement are certainly evident in this behaviour change in response to the pandemic. The missions and identities of universities across the UK tend to combine academic excellence and community service (Goddard & Vallance, 2011). These findings not only show the influential role sport can have in society in promoting civic responsibility but also highlight the role that university sports clubs can play in contributing to this effort.

Conclusion

Sport is more than an activity that happens outside of studies. For many students, it forms part of their identity and is central to their university life. Through engaging with various social practices that have symbolic meaning such as taking new members 'under their wing', wearing branded kit with pride to demonstrate membership, and joining in with social traditions such as themed fancy dress, members become integrated into their sports clubs and subsequently, the campus community. What is more, they become part of a tight-knit

support network that fosters meaningful and lasting relationships, and which influences students' belonging and attachment to each other and the institution. While sports clubs' usual membership and traditions were disrupted during COVID-19, they demonstrated adaptability and resilience, and thought innovatively and creatively to maintain a sense of connection and purpose throughout the pandemic. What is more, the value this had on students' mental wellbeing as well as the altruism they demonstrated in the process should be commended.

A cautionary note

For a group to be deemed a subculture, distinction exists between insiders and outsiders and gaining access can be difficult (Thornton, 2004). Indeed, difficulty in gaining access can make membership more desirable and often involves demonstrating commitment to the subculture's norms and values (Donnelly & Young, 1988; Wheaton, 2007). Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of distinction and capital, Thornton (1995) coined the term cultural capital to discuss how division not only exists between insiders and outsiders, but those within the subculture are vying for power, and through displays of commitment demonstrate authentic membership. While conforming to club norms can bring about feelings of belonging and connectedness, it is important to note that overconformity (Coakley, 2015) and integration into university sport club culture can be exclusionary and involve problematic and risk-taking behaviour, particularly due to alcohol consumption and hazing or initiation practices which are commonplace in university sports clubs (Harris & Clayton, 2008; Clayton, 2012; Grove, Griggs, & Leflay, 2012). This is especially problematic for those who may want to be involved in sport but do not buy into the sociocultural practices that make up the university sport subculture. Thus, subcultural membership is complex and while the findings discussed here focus primarily on the positive role of sports clubs during the pandemic, see Moxey (in press) for a more critical discussion of the social practices that make up the university sport subculture.

Considerations for the future

Practitioners and policy makers should carefully consider the reintegration of students into university campuses and ensure that clubs are well supported in helping second year students transition, given the effect their disrupted first year will have had on their integration into university (Tice *et al.*, 2021). Since the findings point to the role of sports clubs in enhancing mental wellbeing, practitioners and policy makers should also consider what additional training could be made available to sports club members, so that they are well equipped to support their peers in this area.

Staff and students working together in partnership is now recognised as excellent practice which offers many benefits and has the potential to foster authentic student engagement (Bryson & Callghan, 2020). Partnership has been defined as 'a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the ability to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways' (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2015 pp.6-7). More recent and radical literature on partnership considers an institutional culture in which education is democratised and students are active citizens and brought together by a sense of common purpose (Neary, 2020). The behaviour change of sports club members during the pandemic

Research articles

has helped to shed light on the ways in which students can support each other to transition into university and continue their journey, as well as demonstrating altruistic behaviour towards their teammates and wider society, especially in times of struggle. With a growing body of literature pointing towards the notion of students as active participants in the university community and beyond, student-led sports clubs provide a field in which to analyse authentic examples of this. What is more, students and staff should work together in partnership to ensure that sports clubs are inclusive, progressive and bring about benefits that can be wide reaching for as many students as possible; therefore, more research is needed in this area.

Finally, this research demonstrates that sports club membership plays a significant role in cultivating feelings of connectedness, mattering, and being valued, which Strayhorn (2019) identifies as significant for developing a sense of belonging at university. Therefore, the role that sports club membership plays in enhancing the student experience and bringing about meaningful relationships that foster student success should not be underestimated.

Reference list

Allen, K., Bullough, S., Cole, D., Shibli, S., & Wilson, J. 2013. 'The impact of engagement in sport on graduate employability: implications for higher education policy and practice.' *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 9(3), 431-451. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2017.1359648> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Astin, A. 1999. 'Involvement in learning revisited: Lessons we have learned.' *Journal of College Student Development*, 37(2), 123-133.

Atkinson, M. and Young, K., 2008. *Deviance and social control in sport*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics. ISBN: 9780736060424

Attridge, E., 2021. 'Understanding and managing identity: working-class students at the University of Oxford.' *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(10), 1438-1453. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1985979> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Bourdieu, P., 1984. *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Reprint 2010). Oxon: Routledge. ISBN: 8601300260914

Bourdieu, P., 1986. 'The forms of capital.' In: G. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*. New York: Greenwood. ISBN: 9780313235290

Braun, V., & Clarke, V., 2006. 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology.' *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Bruckman, A., 2002. 'Studying the amateur artist: A perspective on disguising data collected in human subjects research on the Internet'. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 4(3), 217-231. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021316409277> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Brunton, J., & Mayne, V., 2020. *The value of university sport and physical activity: British Universities & Colleges Sport (BUCS) position statement and evidence*. British University and College Sport. Available at: <https://www.bucs.org.uk/static/c42d7259-5679-4c3a->

Research articles

[aa44c439044a15ff/The-value-of-university-sport-and-physical-activity.pdf](#) (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Bryson, C., & Callghan, L., 2020. 'A whole cohort approach to working in partnership between students and staff: problematising the issues and evaluating the outcomes.' *Journal of Student Engagement in Higher Education*, 3(2), 176-196. Available at: <https://sehej.raise-network.com/raise/article/view/1023/776> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Carter, N., Bryant-Lukosius, D., DiCenso, A., Blythe, J., & Neville, A., 2014. 'The Use of Triangulation in Qualitative Research.' *Methods & Meanings Oncology Nursing Forum*, 41(5), 545-547. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1188/14.onf.545-547> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Chaney, D., & Goulding, C., 2016. 'Dress, transformation, and conformity in the heavy rock subculture.' *Journal of Business Research*, 69, 155-165. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.07.029> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Clayton, B., 2012. 'Initiate: Constructing the 'reality' of male team sport initiation rituals.' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 48(2), 204-221. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690211432659> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Clayton, B., & Humberstone, B., 2006. 'Men's Talk: A (Pro)feminist Analysis of Male University Football Players' Discourse.' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 41(3-4), 295-331. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690207078380> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Coakley, J., 2015. 'Drug use and deviant overconformity: a sociological approach.' In J. Hoberman, I. Waddington, & V. Moller, *The Routledge handbook of drugs and sport*. London: Routledge. ISBN: 9781138294820

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P., 2015. *Engaging students as partners in teaching and learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. ISBN: 9781118434581

Crocket, H., 2016. 'Tie-dye shirts and compression leggings: an examination of cultural tensions within Ultimate Frisbee via dress.' *Annals of Leisure Research*, 19(2), 194-211. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2015.1106326> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Davis, K., 2012. 'Tensions of identity in a Networked Era: Young people's perspectives on the risks and rewards of online self-expression.' *New Media & Society*, 14(4), 634-651. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811422430> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Donnelly, P., 1981. Toward a definition of sport subcultures. In: M. Hart, & S. Birrell (eds.), *Sport in the sociocultural process*. Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown. ISBN: 9780697071347

Donnelly, P., & Young, K., 1988. 'The construction and confirmation of identity in sport subcultures.' *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 5, 197-211. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.5.3.223> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Entwisle, J. (2000). 'Fashion and the Fleshy Body: Dress as Embodied Practice'. *Fashion Theory*, 4(3), 323-347. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2752/136270400778995471> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Research articles

Felten, P., & Lambert, L., 2020. *Relationship Rich Education: How Human connections Drive Success in College*. Baltimore MA: John Hopkins University Press. ISBN: 9781421439365

Goddard, J., & Vallance, P., 2011. *The civic university and the leadership of place*. Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS). Available at: <http://www.talloires201.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Civic-University-and-Leadership-of-Place-John-Goddard.pdf> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Graupensperger, S., Benson, A., Kilmer, J., & Evans, M., 2020. 'Social (un)distancing: teammate interactions, athletic identity, and mental health of student-athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic.' *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 67(5), 662-670. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.08.001>

Green, B., 2001. 'Leveraging Subculture and Identity to Promote Sport Events.' *Sport Management Review*, 4(1), 1-19. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1441-3523\(01\)70067-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1441-3523(01)70067-8) (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Grove, M., Griggs, G., & Leflay, K., 2012. 'Hazing and initiation ceremonies in university sport: Setting the scene for further research in the United Kingdom.' *Sport in Society*, 15(1), 117-131. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03031853.2011.625287> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Harris, J., & Clayton, B., 2008. 'Tales from the Pitch: Some Observations on the Gendered Dynamics of English Collegiate Soccer.' *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education*, 2(2), 239-262. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1179/ssa.2008.2.2.239> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Holt, N., & Sparkes, A., 2001. 'An Ethnographic Study of Cohesiveness in a College Soccer Team Over a Season.' *The Sports Psychologist*, 15(3), 237-259. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.15.3.237> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Hunter, M., Tobolowsky, B., & Gardoner, J., 2010. *Helping Sophomores Succeed: understanding and improving the second year experience*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons. ISBN: 978-0-470-19275-7

Jones, I., 2015. *Research Methods for Sports Studies* (3rd Edition). Abingdon: Routledge. ISBN: 9781315796222

Kahu, E., & Nelson, K., 2018. Student engagement in the educational interface: understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(1), 58-71. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Kozinets, R., 2019. *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research* (3rd edition). London: Sage. ISBN: 9781526444691

Kuh, G., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J., Bridges, B., & Hayek, J., 2007. 'Piecing Together the Student Success Puzzle: Research, Propositions, and Recommendations.' *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 32(5), 1-182. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/aehe.3205> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Research articles

LeClaire, M., 2021. *How Has the COVID-19 Pandemic Changed the Well-Being and Athletic Identity of Collegiate Student-Athletes?* Winona State University: Thesis. Available at: <https://openriver.winona.edu/leadershipeducationcapstones/49> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Lowe, T., & Moxey, M., 2018. '21 indicators of Student Success: Exploring a new sector priority in an age of student outcomes.' *The Magazine of the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA)*, 18(4), 25-27. Available at: https://www.seda.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/publications_241_Educational_Developments_Issue_19.4_FINAL_Option2_Proof.pdf (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Mann, S., 2001. 'Alternative Perspectives on the Student Experience: Alienation and engagement.' *Studies in Higher Education*, 26(1), 7-19. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070020030689> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Mathwick, C., Wiertz, C., & Ruyter, K., 2008. 'Social Capital Production in a Virtual P3 Community.' *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34(6), 832-849. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1086/523291> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

McKenna, J., & Dunstan-Lewis, M., 2004. 'An action research approach to supporting elite student-athletes in higher education.' *European Physical Education Review*, 10(2), 179-198. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X04044070> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

McMillan, D., & Chavis, D., 1986. 'Sense of community: A definition and theory.' *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14(1), 6-23. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629\(198601\)14:1<6::AID-JCOP2290140103>3.0.CO;2-I](https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629(198601)14:1<6::AID-JCOP2290140103>3.0.CO;2-I) (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Moxey, M., In print. Placing Sport at the Heart of the University Community: a critical reflection on sports club membership and what it means for student engagement. In T. Lowe, *Advancing Student Engagement in Higher Education: Reflection, critique and challenge*. London: Routledge.

Neary, M., 2020. *Student as Producer: How do revolutionary teachers teach?* Alresford: John Hunt Publishing. ISBN: 9781789042382

Olaveson, T., 2004. 'Connectedness' and the rave experience: rave as new religious movement?. In: G. S. John (ed.), *Rave Culture and Religion*, London: Routledge, 83-104. ISBN: 9780415314497

Onyx, J., & Bullen, P., 2000. 'Measuring Social Capital in Five Communities.' *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, 36(1), 23-42. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886300361002> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Pascarella, E., & Terenzini, P., 2005. *How College Affects Students, Volume 2, A Third Decade of Research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. ISBN: 978-0-787-91044-0

Polit, D., & Beck, C., 2012. *Nursing research: Generating and assessing evidence for nursing practice*. Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams and Wilkins. ISBN: 978-1605477084

Quinton, T. S., & Brunton, J. A., 2018. 'The identification of salient beliefs concerning university students' decisions to participate in sport.' *Recreational Sports Journal*, 42(1), 48-63. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1123/rsj.2016-0037> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Research articles

Sharpe, S., Montifield, C., & Filo, K., 2020. 'The Social Media Response From Athletes and Sports Organisation to COVID-19: An Altruistic Tone.' *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 13(3), 474–483. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.2020-0220> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Slotter, E., Winger, L., & Soto, N., 2015. 'Lost without each other: The influence of group identity loss on the self-concept.' *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 19(1), 15-30. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1037/gdn0000020> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Strayhorn, T., 2019. *College Students' Sense of Belonging* (2nd edition). New York: Routledge.

Tchibozo., 2007. 'Extra-Curricular Activity and the Transition from Higher Education to Work: A Survey of Graduates in the United Kingdom.' *Higher Education Quarterly*, 6(1), 37-56. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2006.00337.x> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Thornton, A., 2004. 'Anyone can play this game'. In: B. Wheaton (ed.), *Understanding Lifestyle Sports: Consumption, Identity, and Difference*. London: Routledge. ISBN: 9780415259545

Thornton, S., 1995. *Club cultures: Music, media and subcultural capital*. Cambridge: Polity Press. ISBN: 9780745614427

Tice, D., Baumeister, R., Crawford, J., Allen, K.-A., & Percy, A., 2021. 'Student belongingness in higher education: Lessons for Professors from the COVID-19 pandemic.' *Journal of university teaching learning practice*, 18(4). Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol18/iss4/2> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Tinto, V., 1993. *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd edition). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. ISBN: 9780226804491

Vandenberg, F., Berghman, M., & Schaap, J., 2021. 'The 'lonely raver': music livestreams during COVID-19 as a hotline to collective consciousness?' *European Societies*, 23(1), 141-152. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1818271> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Warde, A., 2006. 'Cultural Capital and the Place of Sport.' *Cultural Trends*, 15(2/3), 107 – 122. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548960600712827> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Wheaton, B., 2007. 'After Sport Culture: Rethinking Sport and Post-Subcultural Theory.' *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 31(3), 283-307. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723507301049> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Wheaton, B., & Beal, B., 2003. "Keeping it real": Subcultural Media and the Discourses of Authenticity in Alternative Sport.' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 38(2), 155–176. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690203038002002> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

Wolf-Wendel, L., Ward, K., & Kinzie, J., 2009. 'A Tangled Web of Terms: The Overlap and Unique Contribution of Involvement, Engagement, and Integration to Understanding College Student Success.' *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(4), 407-428. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0077> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).