

From Sidelines to Comebacks: How Youth Sports Transformed Before and After the Pandemic

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Abstract

The study examines the impact of COVID-19 on youth sports participation and whether these changes could correspond to personal change, perceived support, or demographic information. Moreover, participants under the age of 15-24 were selected from schools, colleges, and other community-based organizations on the bases of stratified sampling i.e.500. The before-and-after pandemic effect of youth sports (cricket and football) participation was compared through Mixed-Design ANOVA. The findings reveal that the COVID-19 pandemic caused huge disruptions and negatively influenced sports activities and participation rates. The demographic analysis revealed that lower socioeconomic status groups had the largest losses. From this aspect, there is no doubt that such status groups are highly vulnerable to external situations. In addition, regression analysis showed that Impact of Pandemic significantly and negatively related to youth sports participation. While personal development and perceived support is positive and significantly associated to youth sports participation. Thus, the present research highlights the importance of planning for future outcomes and impacts of an ongoing pandemic with regard to contemplation of enhancing subjective well-being of young persons through sporting exercise.

Keywords: Youth Sports Participation, COVID-19 Pandemic, Personal Development, Perceived Support, Demographic Factors, Mixed-Design ANOVA, Regression Analysis

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented disruptions across various sectors, including youth sports, which were traditionally characterized by increasing participation rates and competitive dynamics (Smith & Jones, 2022). Before the pandemic, youth sports were not only a means of physical activity but also a vital platform for social interaction and personal development among young athletes. However, the global health crisis prompted widespread cancellations of leagues and tournaments, effectively sidelining millions of youth athletes. The sudden closing of youth sports raised many alarms on the overall health (physical, mental and emotional) of young

sport participants, since participation in sports is linked to basic developmental benefits such as better social skills, teamwork skills, and health benefits (Taylor et al., 2021). For organizations, coaches and athletes involved in youth sports, it has meant responding to unprecedented challenges by pivoting and adapting, sometimes at startling speed through a turbulent landscape. The present study pursued to analyze such changes within youth sports, highlighting the adaptations both pre- and post-COVID-19. Discussion also touches on changing participation patterns, new coaching approaches, remote training delivery and the effects of COVID-19 on children's mental well-being in sports. Making sense of the changes described is central to how we develop future policy and practice to build resilience and facilitate continued participation in sport for young people (Brown & Green, 2023). There has been a growing amount of research on the impact of the pandemic on sports in general, yet fewer studies have focused directly on youth sports. The majority of current literature has focused on the sports industry as a whole, neglecting to address the specific needs and opportunities that lie within youth sports organizations (Miller & Davis, 2022).

People are quite worried about the well-being of young athletes in general as sports-related activities for kids and teens have abruptly ended. These worries have surfaced because of the sudden dismissal. Major developmental benefits, including improved health, social skills, and collaboration, are directly associated with athletic participation. For this reason, this remains true. This is the justification for the current state of affairs. The physical, emotional, and mental well-being of young athletes has generated concerns globally. The athletes are the targets of these concerns. There has been unprecedented pressure on youth sports groups, coaches, and athletes to adjust quickly to new challenges. This is because they operate in a very disorderly setting. The major goal of the research that was carried out for this study was to examine the shifts that have happened in the field of youth sports, particularly the changes that have happened before and during the pandemic.

The evaluation of the psychological impact of the epidemic on young athletes, the development of coaching strategies, the implementation of remote training, and the adjustment of participation patterns are all important issues that are now being studied. Brown and Green (2023) argue that in order to build policies and practices that promote resilience and keep adolescents involved in sports, a thorough understanding of these changes is needed. The rationale for this is the paramount need of fully grasping these recent innovations. Research on the effects of the pandemic on sports is on the rise, but research examining the activities popular among youths is severely understudied. Researchers have mostly taken a broad view of the sports business in their studies thus far. Consequently, it fails to account for the unique challenges and possibilities faced by programs designed for youth athletes (Miller & Davis, 2022).

Literature Review

There is a possibility that young people and their families may experience improvements in their physical, social, and emotional development as a result of their participation in youth sports. Over the course of many years, members of the Swat Pakistani community have been able to fulfill their need for social interaction by participating in sports like as cricket and football. Consequently, this has resulted in the promotion of individual growth at the district level throughout the course of the years. When individuals are going through periods of exceptional change, such as the one that was brought about by the COVID-19 outbreak, it is vital to do research on the behaviours that people participate in during these times.

According to Khan and Iqbal 2021, there is evidence that youngsters in District Swat engaged in sports to a significant extent before to the outbreak of the pandemic. This evidence comes from the significant concentration on cricket and football. Sporting activities of this kind are strongly ingrained in the culture of the area, providing young people with opportunity to participate in physical activity, connect with others, and enhance their competence. A sustained involvement was strongly tied to tournaments that were hosted in a particular context with strong community support that fostered young engagement in sports activities (Rasool et al., 2021). This was the case prior to the pandemic. This continued to be the case even when the outbreak was no longer present. On the other hand, when the Covid-19 epidemic appeared at the beginning of the year 2020 and a widespread lockdown was implemented all across the world, all sports activities in Pakistan were put on hold. According to Taylor et al., this disturbance resulted in a considerable decrease in the number of young people participating in sports. Based on the findings of a research conducted in 2021 by Norring et al., the authors came to the conclusion that the pandemic and health concerns significantly restricted gatherings, which resulted in a reduction in the number of individuals who participated in this activity. Young football players in District Swat have been unable to participate in major events as a result of the shutdown of schools and regular clubs in the district. In addition to this, they have not been given the opportunity to effectively practice with players from the surrounding area.

One study that investigated the effects of the pandemic on social capital and health care experience was one that Ahmed et al. carried out in China and Nigeria. Most ambitious young people have been engaged and angedanfagtized, according to research by ymridagger luhnick (2022). More than only stunting their physical development, these sports were also having a negative impact on young people's mental health by denying them the opportunity to participate in activities that brought them joy and a sense of community. The significance of sports as a foundation for adolescent self-reliance and discipline was highlighted in this context.

The findings of the study indicate that when it comes to assisting young people in establishing regular routines and structures in their lives, sports play a vital role. When restrictions were lifted, preliminary research indicated that there was resurgence in the number of young people participating in sports; however, the findings were not consistent across regions. According to the findings of study conducted by Brown and Green (2023), concerns about the health and safety of young athletes continued to exist in the post-pandemic setting, despite the fact that many of these athletes were eager to resume their competitive activities. The number of athletes participating in sports in District Swat has been gradually increasing as a consequence of clubs implementing new safety standards and modifying training sessions to accommodate the concerns of athletes.

Factors Influencing Changes in Participation Rates

In the aftermath of a pandemic, there are a lot of factors that influence how active youth are in sports. In order to encourage engagement among young people, it is essential to make these resources and sports facilities easily accessible. According to a research conducted in 2020 by Timpka et al., there is a correlation between increased participation rates in youth sports and better community investments in facilities and resources. On the other side, the lack of easily accessible, high-quality sports facilities is a big deterrent for people to play in District Swat. According to Khan and Iqbal (2021), if local clubs do not get sufficient assistance, adolescent athletes may feel discouraged from returning to sports. There is a strong correlation between the level of support a

kid receives from their parents and the community and the possibility that the youngster would engage in sports activities. Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2006) performed longitudinal study that found that parental encouragement and community support were significant factors in maintaining and increasing adolescent sports participation. After the epidemic, a great number of parents in District Swat were concerned about the safety of their children while they engaged in sporting activities (Miller & Davis, 2022). This adjustment may have an impact on the manner in which young athletes are assisted when they return to their athletic pursuits.

There is still a great deal of significance in considering the emotional impact that the pandemic will have on individuals. Upon returning to a competitive environment, a significant number of young athletes, as shown by the study conducted by Rasool et al. in 2021, suffer a rise in their levels of anxiety. According to the findings of a study conducted by Smith and Jones (2022), it is essential to identify and treat issues related to mental health in order to increase involvement among adolescents. Programs that reassure participants of their safety and provide emotional support may be very helpful in getting them back into sports. In the post-epidemic period, the flexibility of athletic programs is also playing a bigger role. Organizations that are innovative and provide flexible training alternatives are more likely to retain participants.

Programs that used hybrid models, integrating online and in-person training, were more dedicated to by young athletes, according to Brown et al. (2023). Local clubs in District Swat are contemplating these innovative strategies to meet the diverse needs of young athletes as they develop. Stakeholders and youth sports organizations must recognize the pandemic's long-term effects if they want to increase participation rates. Child sports programs should think about ways to boost participation in the long run, not only in the short term, as shown in the research by Weiss and Chaumeton (2020). Part of this is ensuring that underserved youth sports programs are accessible to all participants and meet the unique requirements of marginalized youth. Due to a complex interaction of social, physiological, and psychological elements, the sluggish recovery of youth sports in Pakistan after the epidemic is explained. Hassan and Qureshi (2021) found that, especially in rural regions, parents' fears had a major influence on their children's choice to start playing sports again. Because medical treatment is scarce in Swat, families there place a premium on safety measures, particularly when it comes to physically demanding activities like football. Ali and Khan (2022) found that parents are worried about the potential risks to their children's physical and mental health when they allow them to fully engage in team-based sports.

Financial limitations were also important. Khan et al. (2021) noted that funding constraints prevented certain sports bodies from fully restoring their programmes. Rural regions, which rely on community support or limited government subsidies, struggled to restore pre-pandemic services. Weiss and Bradley (2022) highlight that this trend is also seen in other rising countries, making it difficult for clubs that gave kids cheap and accessible sports to keep them. Another important issue is the epidemic's psychological impact. Rasool et al. (2022) found that suddenly ending sports caused District Swat youth fear and anxiety, which continues to affect their motivation to return. This study indicated that protracted isolation and disturbed routines harmed young people's mental health and decreased their sports participation, consistent with rural studies (Nambiar & Prasad, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic caused widespread disruptions to the world's sports infrastructure and led to heavy losses in participation and organisational structure in youth sports. Côté, Hancock,

and Martin want to research how these disruptions affect the development of young athletes in 2020. According to their research, limiting access to sports facilities and competition significantly reduced teenage engagement, which in turn affected their physical and emotional health. This ground-breaking study mainly focused on acute problems; however, it does not adequately address the long-term adaptation and recovery of juvenile sports after a pandemic. Clark and Marsh (2021) build on this information by studying the psychological challenges faced by young athletes who returned to sports. Researchers discovered that although some sportsmen made a full physical recovery, others struggled mightily to regain their pre-pandemic mental and athletic abilities. While this study helps broaden our understanding by suggesting that young athletes may overcome psychological obstacles, it fails to address the systemic problems that youth sports organizations face as it focuses primarily on the effects on the people involved. By using an organisational perspective, Dorsch, Smith, and Blazo (2021) illuminated the strategies used by sports organizations in their adaptation to the pandemic. Their research demonstrates a shift towards more flexible sports programming, which includes virtual training, modified competition forms, and health recommendations, all of which become vital. While this study broadens the focus by looking at organisational changes, it doesn't go into detail on how these changes can affect the structural changes in youth sports in the long run.

Research by Bowling and Sirard (2022) examines participation patterns before to, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, providing evidence of the pandemic's impact on involvement levels. Demographic disparities in recovery were shown by their finding that engagement decreased severely and only partly recovered after the epidemic. This study explains why rehabilitation for child sports is not uniform. It fails to address the question of why these differences endure as its focus is only on quantitative patterns. In their 2023 study, Petersen and Robertson analyses how resilient families and young athletes are in the face of pandemics. They discovered that traditional youth sports organizations are feeling the effects of family-hosted events and internet training techniques. Research like this sheds light on resilience in a way that conventional wisdom can't, even when established organizations reject such creative approaches. In light of the stress caused by the pandemic, Hughes and DePalma (2021) investigate how institutions pertaining to youth sports have prioritized mental health.

Wellness check-ins and stress management programs should be part of a more complete approach for kid sports during the pandemic, their research found. This study adds to what is already known by acknowledging the pandemic's effect on elevating mental health priority, but it does not assess the long-term feasibility of these organisational improvements. Finally, Aguilar and Silva (2022) examine the role of coaches and mentors in keeping children engaged throughout the pandemic. They found that coaches adapted their approaches to prioritize athletes' well-being over performance, fostering a sense of resilience and connection. While this study emphasizes the adaptability of coaching practices, it lacks an analysis of how these changes might influence coaching philosophies and practices over time.

Research Methodology

Population and sampling procedure

The target population for this study consists of youth athletes aged 12 to 18 years who participated in organized football and cricket programs in District Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This age group is selected as it represents a

critical stage in physical, emotional, and social development, significantly impacted by changes in sports participation due to the pandemic. We conducted a study with 500 young athletes, focused on those who play football and cricket, which are the two most popular sports in the region. This survey was conducted using a stratified sample technique. People from a broad variety of District Swat institutions, including as schools and clubs, are included in the sample in order to present a comprehensive view of the ways in which the pandemic impacted these sports. A strategy known as stratified random selection was used in order to ensure that there was variety in terms of gender, age, and socioeconomic position. The following is a list of the steps during which the procedure will be carried out:

Mathematical Model

- SPSPSP = Youth Sports Participation, TBT_BTBTB = Time Before the Pandemic
- TAT_ATA = Time After the Pandemic, IPIPIP = Impact of the Pandemic on Youth Sports
- PDPDPD = Personal Development through Sports, PSPSPS = Perceived Support for Youth Sports

Model Equation

We understand the association between these variables in the following example of a basic linear regression model:

$$SP = \beta_0 + \beta_1 TB + \beta_2 TA + \beta_3 IP + \beta_4 PD + \beta_5 PS + e_i$$

3.1 Table: Sports Participation Before and After the Pandemic

Category	Before the Pandemic	After the Pandemic	Change (%)
Total Participants	500	300	-40%
Regular Participation in Colleges/Universities	75% (375)	45% (135)	-30%
Participation in Local Sports Clubs	50% (250)	30% (90)	-40%
Informal Play in Communities	30% (150)	35% (105)	+5%
Access to Sports Facilities	High (80% reported access)	Moderate (60% reported access)	-20%
Health Concerns (Deterrent)	Low (15% cited concerns)	High (60% cited concerns)	+45%
Adaptation to Online/Virtual Sports	None	20% (60)	-
Overall Satisfaction with Sports Opportunities	70% satisfied	50% satisfied	-20%

Key Changes:

1. **Total Participants:** A decrease of **40%** in total participants, dropping from **500** to **300** after the pandemic.
2. **Regular Participation:** A notable **decline in regular participation** in universities/colleges (-30%) and local sports clubs (-40%).
3. **Informal Play:** Informal play **increased slightly** (+5%), indicating some players still engaged in sports in their communities.

4. **Access to Sports Facilities:** Moderate access to sports facilities after the pandemic, down from **high** access levels.
5. **Health Concerns:** Health concerns increased significantly, with a **45%** rise in deterrence from playing.
6. **Adaptation to Online Sports:** Adaptation to online/virtual sports occurred for 20% of the sample, showing a shift in how people are engaging with sports.
7. **Satisfaction:** A **decline in satisfaction** with sports opportunities, down by 20%.

Table 3.2 : Sports Participation Levels Before and After the Pandemic

Group	Participation Level Before Pandemic (Mean \pm SD)	Participation Level After Pandemic (Mean \pm SD)	Change in Participation Level
Clubs	4.5 \pm 1.2	3.0 \pm 1.5	-1.5
Universities	5.0 \pm 1.0	3.8 \pm 1.4	-1.2
Community	3.5 \pm 1.3	2.0 \pm 1.0	-1.5

Key Findings:

1. Clubs: The mean participation level decreased by 1.5 from 4.5 before the pandemic to 3.0 after the pandemic.
2. Universities: There was a decrease of 1.2 in participation from 5.0 before the pandemic to 3.8 after the pandemic.
3. Community: Participation level decreased by 1.5, from 3.5 to 2.0 after the pandemic.

This data reflects the general trend of decline in participation across all groups, with the clubs and community groups showing the highest decrease (1.5 units), and universities showing a slightly smaller decrease of 1.2. The standard deviation (SD) values also suggest greater variability in participation levels after the pandemic, especially in clubs and universities. This highlights how the pandemic has impacted not just participation numbers but also the consistency of engagement in these activities.

4.3 Table: Regression Analysis Results

Variable	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t-Statistic	p-value
Intercept	1.20	0.30	4.00	0.0001
Impact of Pandemic	-0.40	0.10	-4.00	0.0001
Personal Development	0.50	0.12	4.17	0.00005
Perceived Support	0.45	0.11	4.09	0.0001
R ² (Model Fit)	0.42			
Adjusted R ²	0.39			
F-statistic	14.56			0.0001

Intercept:

- Coefficient: 1.20
- Interpretation: The intercept suggests that when all independent variables are held constant, the baseline level of youth sports participation is 1.20 units.

Impact of Pandemic:

- Coefficient: -0.40
- Interpretation: This coefficient indicates a significant negative impact of the pandemic on sports participation. For every one-unit increase in the impact of the pandemic, sports participation decreases by 0.40 units. This aligns with literature that discusses the detrimental effects of crises on engagement levels in sports (Smith et al., 2020).

Personal Development:

- Coefficient: 0.50
- Interpretation: A positive coefficient implies that personal development through sports significantly enhances participation. Specifically, a one-unit increase in personal development is associated with a 0.50 unit increase in sports participation. This finding supports the theory that personal growth experiences in sports can enhance overall engagement (Jones & Brown, 2019).

Perceived Support:

- Coefficient: 0.45

Interpretation: One unit increase in perceived support is associated with a 0.45 unit increase in participation levels, suggesting that perceived support positively affects sports participation. The results of this study corroborate those of other research that have shown the importance of social support in encouraging adolescent athletic involvement (Taylor, 2018).

Conclusion

Several demographic groups' levels of sports activity varied significantly before and during the pandemic, based to the Mixed-Design ANOVA. Community, collegiate, and club levels of participation all saw precipitous drops after the outbreak, proving that it had far-reaching effects on young athletes' involvement in sports. Consistent with earlier research, this study found that fewer people are watching sporting events and spending less time doing so on a global scale as a consequence of the epidemic. There was a significant fall in physical activity levels among younger generations and those from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds, according to demographic research. By highlighting the significance of focused measures to mitigate these inequities and the increased susceptibility of particular groups to external shocks like as the pandemic, this trend highlights the importance of tailored interventions. The results of the demographic research were accompanied by the findings of the regression analysis, which shed light on the linkages between the impacts of the pandemic, personal development via sports, perceived support, and the subsequent effects on involvement in sports. The negative impact of the pandemic demonstrates a considerable adverse effect on engagement in sports, consistent with prior research highlighting the detrimental consequences of crises on participation levels. Conversely, personal development through sports emerged as a significant positive factor, suggesting that enhancements in personal development are closely linked to increases in sports participation. This finding supports the theoretical framework positing that experiences of personal growth derived from sports can substantially enhance overall engagement.

Recommendations

Based on the key findings from the study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance youth sports participation and address the negative impacts identified:

1. **Targeted Interventions for Vulnerable Populations:** Given the significant decline in sports participation among younger individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, it is crucial to develop targeted intervention programs that focus on accessibility and inclusivity. These programs could include subsidized sports memberships, transportation support, and community outreach initiatives aimed at encouraging participation from these demographic groups.
2. **Promotion of Personal Development through Sports:** Since personal development was identified as a key factor in enhancing sports participation, sports organizations and educational institutions should emphasize the personal growth aspects of sports. Workshops, mentorship programs, and training that highlight the benefits of teamwork, resilience, and leadership skills can motivate youth to engage more actively in sports activities.
3. **Strengthening Perceived Support Systems:** The positive correlation between perceived support and sports participation suggests that enhancing support networks can foster greater involvement. Communities should work to create environments that encourage parental and community support for youth sports. Initiatives could include parent workshops, community sports events, and the establishment of peer mentoring programs that help youth feel more connected and supported in their sports endeavors.
4. **Leveraging Technology and Social Media:** In light of the pandemic's impact, utilizing technology and social media platforms can be effective in re-engaging youth in sports. Virtual training sessions, online competitions, and social media campaigns can create excitement and provide accessible opportunities for participation. Engaging local influencers or athletes to promote these initiatives may further encourage youth to join.
5. **Monitoring and Evaluation of Programs:** Continuous monitoring and evaluation of sports participation programs should be implemented to assess their effectiveness. Feedback mechanisms can be established to gather input from participants, coaches, and parents, allowing for adaptive changes to programs based on their needs and preferences.
6. **Advocacy for Policy Support:** Advocating for supportive policies at the local, regional, and national levels can ensure that youth sports receive the necessary funding and resources. Engaging policymakers in discussions around the importance of youth sports for physical and mental well-being can drive legislative support for initiatives aimed at increasing participation.

Practical Implications

The implementation of these suggestions is likely to be of tremendous value to a variety of stakeholders, including lawmakers, sports organizations, educators, and community leaders. By reducing barriers that prevent young people from participating in athletics and paying attention to the good benefits that participation has on self-improvement and a sense of belonging, stakeholders have the potential to create environments that are more inviting and exciting for young people. An all-encompassing plan that increases kid's sports involvement while simultaneously enhancing their general health and personal development will ultimately result in a healthier community and generations who are more resilient. This will be the final consequence of the strategy.

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