

# THE FUTURE OF SPORT

## NEEDS AND IDEAS OF INTERNATIONAL YOUTH

### FOR USE BY POLICYMAKERS

#### Executive Summary – First Part

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# SKEMA PUBLIKA

SKEMA PUBLIKA is an independent international think tank aiming to anticipate tomorrow's societal and geopolitical transformations. It fuels public debate and issues recommendations for national and international policymakers.

Affiliated with SKEMA Business School, the think tank addresses political and societal issues connected with public policy. It tackles them from the angle of early signs, anticipates and formulates recommendations for 'after'. It uses a multidisciplinary and hybrid approach to information processing, combining human and digital intelligence. It draws on the international and transcultural dimensions of SKEMA, a school present on five continents with thousands of students and hundreds of researchers.

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## INTRODUCTION

### WHY THIS STUDY?

In February 2022, SKEMA Publika published a report entitled *Emergy Youth Early Signs (EYES)*<sup>1</sup>, identifying the opinions and feelings of young people from five different countries about five major political themes: work, new technologies, traditional media and the press, social media, and security.

As the list of themes was deliberately kept short, sport was not included. However, its considerable importance had not escaped us. This study is intended to fill that gap.

Sport is indeed omnipresent. Globally, in 2022 half of the top trending Google searches were related to the sporting world<sup>2</sup>, and more specifically, to cricket and football matches. Sporting events succeed one another, as do the controversies<sup>3</sup>. With the Rugby World Cup 2023 and the Paris 2024 Olympic Games just around the corner, sport is a daily feature in the media, in political and economic columns, and in conversations with family and friends. The importance of promoting sport for all, and the benefits of sport for young people, is recognised by all, particularly in terms of health, empowerment, employability and the acquisition of values.

But we still need to know what the people primarily concerned think, the young people who will – or won't – be discovering and practising it. Sport is a complex, multi-dimensional and multifaceted subject.

Within this context, and in keeping with the general aims of SKEMA PUBLIKA, we wish to conduct a comprehensive study focusing on sport, so as to identify, based on the expectations expressed by the young people of a number of countries, the major evolutions which are likely but also necessary over a ten-year timeline, while taking into account the national and international policies currently in place, then put forward recommendations for national and international policymakers.

This study will be in two parts:

- **The first part, outlined in this document, presents the results of the quantitative and qualitative surveys conducted among thousands of young people from various countries. A summary and some initial recommendations are provided.**

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<sup>1</sup> SKEMA Publika, *EYES REPORT: Thoughts of International Youths*, 2021 : <https://publika.skema.edu/eyes-2021-report/>

<sup>2</sup> 1) Wordle, 2) **India vs England**, 3) Ukraine, 4) Queen Elizabeth, 5) **Ind vs SA**, 6) **World Cup**, 7) **India vs West Indies**, 8) iPhone 14, 9) Jeffrey Dahmer, 10) **Indian Premier League** <https://trends.google.com/trends/vis/2022/GLOBAL/>

<sup>3</sup> Simon Chadwick, Qatar's Hosting of the FIFA Men's World Cup: the Issues and Challenges Ahead, November 2022, SKEMA Publika: <https://publika.skema.edu/qatar-hosting-fifa-men-world-cup-issues-and-challenges-ahead/>

- The second part, schedule for the end of 2023, will present the various public policy models in sport around the world, as well as the existing foundations of international rules, to attempt to identify the elements among them that could best fulfil the expectations of international youths. Bolstered by sports governance, at the national and international levels, and of sport as the glue of our societies, or of sport as a vector of peace, development and sustainability.

In this first part, we found that young people shared many common interests and concerns. A multidimensional object that touches education, health, work, entertainment and leisure, and the social sphere among other areas, sport is also very much linked to personal development and to enjoyment. Geopolitical aspects, issues of soft power, nationalism and identity have not escaped them either.

## OUR METHODOLOGY

To gather the opinions of young people, we performed a digital scan of the social media platform, Twitter. **Approximately 7.6 million tweets were analysed across seven geographical areas:** five countries, corresponding to the five SKEMA Business School campus locations (Brazil, China, France, South Africa, the United States), and two zones in Africa (French-speaking Africa and English-speaking Africa). The posts studied were published by more than **670,000 youths between the ages of 18 and 24**. The analysis covers two study periods, each spanning one year: a first phase took place from 24 October 2021 to 24 October 2022, and a second from 16 January 2022 to 16 January 2023.

**We also conducted qualitative interviews with 95 students** from SKEMA Business School and from EFAP (international school of communication), representing 18 different nationalities. These students took part in a wide variety of sports: volleyball, running, squash, swimming, tennis, athletics, horse riding, football, futsal, badminton, Basque pelota, cycling, skiing, basketball, dance (modern jazz and hip hop), body building, triathlon, chess, fencing, table tennis, boxing, windsurfing, surfing, wakeboarding, walking, paddle tennis, climbing. To avoid a profile bias, 41 of them were interviewed precisely because they do not do any sport.

The following pages present what was gleaned from the physical and virtual conversations of the youths.

## OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

1. **Why sport? What are the individual motivations for engaging in sports?**
  - i. For mental health first, for physical health second
  - ii. A personal development tool
  - iii. For the social benefits: building relationships and handling adversity
  - iv. For the enjoyment and emotions
  - v. As a career?
  - vi. There are also reasons for non-participation
2. **Why sport? Sport as a social and collective pursuit**
  - i. Sport for community building: 'The extraordinary social power of sport'
  - ii. Does sport promote universal values?
  - iii. Is sport political?
  - iv. Sport for the nation? A vector of national pride?
  - v. Sport and inclusion: women's sports and handisports
  - vi. In public discussion: sport, traditional media, social media
  - vii. The attitude toward major sporting events
3. **Sport how? What hinders or encourages participation in sports?**
  - i. The family
  - ii. Actors in the sports movement
  - iii. Self-organisation and unorganised sport participation

- iv. Companies
- v. School: sport for all and elite sport
- vi. Government bodies

#### 4. Summary: What does the future hold? Which common demands and recommendations?

- i. The future of sport according to young people
- ii. The most common requests and recommendations of young people

Our conclusions (part 4 of the outline) are presented below.

## KEY POINTS

### THE FUTURE OF SPORT ACCORDING TO YOUNG PEOPLE

**On Twitter, in the 117,356 tweets mentioning the word ‘future’** in relation to sport, and across the seven geographical areas studied, the only topic that seems to stand out is that of women’s sport, which is particularly discussed by young people from France, South Africa, and French-speaking Africa.

Other topics appeared in the groups of students we interviewed: the emergence of new sports, the digitalisation of sport, the obsession with performance, political sport, and the development of sport in companies.

**With regard to the emergence of new sports**, the students mentioned **five-a-side football, rugby sevens, paddle and bouldering, among others**. According to them, the popularity of these sports is growing due to their fun aspects. A resurgence of **outdoor sports** was also mentioned, perhaps as a reaction to the movement restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many students also mentioned **esports**, particularly via competitive multiplayer video gaming. This type of gaming is increasingly common, with the rise in popularity of streaming platforms. Several countries have or are putting in place national strategies in this field. This is the case for Saudi Arabia for example, via its Vision 2030 programme, but also for France since 2019. In Brazil, the discipline is extremely developed. The popularity of gamers rivals that of football players. Yet, a debate remains: do esports fulfil the criteria needed to be classified as a traditional sport and be considered an actual physical sport discipline? Finally, given the colossal sums of money involved, another issue emerges: that of the promotion of the esports sector and industry by governments, in the same way as other sports.

**The digitalisation of sport** is a trend that young people foresee for the future of sport. They predict that technology will play an increasingly important role in this area. Several point out the development of **‘virtual’ sport**, in immersion or in the metaverse. As an example, they cited the Zwift platform, which allows users to cycle through different virtual landscapes on an indoor, stationary bike. The success of the Virtual Regatta sailing simulation game was also mentioned. However, some of the students expressed some apprehension about these developments. For instance, they mentioned the loss of the socialisation and of the ‘people side’ of sport and the benefits of outdoor sport as a shared activity in nature.

Another facet of the growing digitalisation is **the use of data to improve sporting performance**. A young high-level cyclist we interviewed felt that his sport is one of the most innovative in this regard. He explained that data collection (cyclist’s heart rate, etc.) has existed in this sport since the 1980s and has only begun to appear in football over the past five or six years. These data are analysed by software and used to tweak racing strategies. He mentioned the risk of losing ‘race watching, instinct, feeling or tactical sense’.

Several students mentioned the **development of sport in companies** as one of the trends of the future. According to them, incorporating sport into professional life is a key solution to lack of time. The topic of **professional sport represented around 2 million results** over the period studied<sup>4</sup>. It was the most prolific theme by far.

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<sup>4</sup> Keywords: future, career, opportunity, federation, professional, sports-study, high level, club, coach, family.

Proportionally, the young people who expressed themselves on this topic in the greatest numbers were Brazilians. They represented 17.9% of all expressions across all ages, compared with an average of 13.5% across all geographic areas). Young people from France and the United States were proportionally the most numerous to mention the word ‘career’ (11.9% and 9.8% for an average of 7.3%).

**For some, this quest for performance could lead to more dystopian futures.** Sport is about surpassing oneself, even if it means pushing back the limits of human performance. Taken to the extreme, this reasoning could lead to reaching and altering the limit separating human from superhuman, and to dabbling with body augmentation, whether through the use of performance-enhancing drugs or of robotics, or even human-machine hybridisation.

It is worth noting one weak signal: a small number of students felt that organising international sport around regular major events is no longer a viable model given the climate and environmental challenges the world faces. They provided as examples the next football World Cup (2026), which will be held in three separate countries (Canada, the United States and Mexico), and the 2029 Asian Winter Games in Saudi Arabia, which will be organised without truly considering their carbon footprint and their environmental impact.

**The politicisation of sport is another phenomenon identified by young people.** While sport is defined by international sporting organisations (IOC, federations) as apolitical, the contemporary debates regarding major sporting events have shown the opposite to be true. More than ever, sport is essentially a political and geopolitical tool.

## THE MOST COMMON REQUESTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

### 1. Most frequently, it is personal benefit that motivates young people to engage in sport

Through our study we identified the below list of the most common ‘motivators’ pushing young people, independent of their origin and culture, to engage in sport, and there seems to be a consensus about these.

#### Health and personal development

Above all, young people seem to be especially interested in sport for its health benefits, **particularly mental health**. Many of the young people spoke about what sport has afforded them, especially in terms of **self-confidence**. Approximately 40% of the most engaging tweets from each country or zone mention the positive role of sport. French-speaking Africa shows the greatest mobilisation of/greatest activity from young people on this theme with 25.8%, followed by China (18.6%), Brazil (16.2%), and English-speaking Africa (15.3%). With 11%, South Africa is the country where young people make up the smallest proportion of the results relating to the sport and exercise for health theme.

#### Enjoyment

A second important aspect of sport is **its fun side**. Most of the students interviewed told us that to them **sport was above all a recreational activity, a passion, a source of enjoyment and of great motivation**. Many consider it a game and/or a fun activity above all. Excitement and fun seem to be essential factors in sport participation. In his definition of sport, one student made the distinction between ‘working out’ – which he saw more as a chore – and ‘engaging in sport’ – which he associated with enjoyment.

#### Social sport and the collective experience

Sport helps to create lasting friendships and is an agent of socialisation. In this context, the most recurring motivations among the students interviewed were its educational virtues, the ability to make friends, the need to compete against others, and the fun of playing. To them, the group element is an essential part of sporting activities. It was, of course, mentioned by those who play team sports, but also those in individual sports who never train, play or fight alone. Teammates and opponents are an integral part of the sporting experience.

#### Competition and skill acquisition

**The importance of the competitive aspect was mentioned by several other young sport participants.** Competing against others enabled them to better evaluate their level and their value, but also to learn to deal



with failure and to self-reflect. More generally, the students interviewed recognised that sport had allowed them to acquire skills that were complementary to those acquired in school and transferable to the professional world. On Twitter, the keywords 'determination' and 'willpower' (used in nearly 11,000 tweets across the seven geographical areas studied) enabled the identification of many tweets posted by young Americans, Chinese and Africans expressing their admiration for internationally renowned sportspeople to whom they attribute these qualities.

Remember, finally, that a little less than half of the young people we surveyed do not naturally participate in sport. Aversion to sport remains a minority sentiment and **those who do not participate in sport stated that it is mainly due to a lack of time, money or support and these thus seem like real obstacles that need to be addressed.** When asked, 'What could potentially lead you to take up exercise or a sport one day?', 29% of respondents asked for improved accessibility to sport and listed prices, transport and a lack of time as factors limiting their participation in sport. Twenty percent felt that the solution lies in better support from coaches, friends, the university, etc.; 15% felt they needed to work on their motivation and discipline; 12% stated that they would take up sport or exercise if their health deteriorated; and 7% would do so to improve their physical appearance. Finally, 10% stated that nothing could induce them to take up exercise or a sport.

## 2. The opinions of young people: sport is social and political

### The social role of sport

Young people perceive sport as an important element in our societies. It is a topic of conversation among friends and family, especially when highly publicised major events and competitions are being held. The latter and widely followed, even by young people who do not participate in any sport. The advent of sport as show business, or, in other words, sport as a consumer good and as entertainment, is a source of debate: is this a positive phenomenon that encourages participation in sport or rather does it change the very essence of sport?

In any case, sport plays an important role in society and is perceived by the 18-24 age group as **a tool for social integration, cohesion and mixing.** According to them, whether as a participant or a spectator, sport makes it possible to become involved in a common pursuit that of building a community. It is a key factor in identity construction and in instilling **national pride.**

Sport is also conducive to social emancipation. The **development of women's sport** is also a topic that is dear to young people, as is more generally, the increasing inclusion in sport.

### The political role of sport

Young people make the somewhat fatalistic and unequivocal observation that **sport is a political instrument,** even though opinions on the subject seem normative, epitomised by the plea to 'keep politics out of sport'. The way in which sport and geopolitics intermingle is also a source of debate. It reflects the perception young people have of sport. They consider it a group of activities in which states exert their influence and build strategies for using and exploiting it. According to the young people interviewed, sport has the power to unify the people (nation building), particularly through supporting the national teams. It can also be **a marker of national and cultural identity. It is certainly a geopolitical instrument.**

### Values

On the question of values, our hearings led us to ask a question: does sport in itself convey or instigate values? Or do societies choose it as a vehicle to promote the values and virtues they hold dear?

For many young people, **sport promotes universal values** and one of the roles of sports personalities is to be a model and an inspiration to all and particularly to the younger generation. These expectations place a heavy responsibility on actors in the sport system. One might also wonder **if it is not because these values are already present in these young people that governments are given the responsibility** of them being imparted and upheld through sport.

During our second phase of social listening, we searched for **tweets relating to Olympism and its values**. Over the year 2022, we identified **30,800 tweets** on this topic<sup>5</sup>. The word 'Olympism' was barely mentioned. Perhaps too specific, it does not seem to be part of the 18 to 24 age group's lexicon, even though its values seem to be recognised as those of sport.

### 3. What expectations are there of sport-related public policy?

A first, simple question which is no doubt radical today: **should there be public policies on sport?** Based on the answers to our surveys, one could say that at least three of the topics raised by the young respondents would point to a yes answer: on the one hand, the links between sport, health and education, two subjects that came up constantly, and on the other hand, the links between foreign policy and sport used as an instrument of pride (nation building), of visibility, of credibility, and of national expansion (nation branding, soft power). The first two themes fall into the realm of personal development. The last is linked to the country's national development. In fact, this differentiation ties in more or less with that separating sport for the masses and competitive or high-level sport.

This does raise a question, however: when it comes to health and education, to what extent should public policies be proactive? It is worth remembering that the most proactive states in terms of sport have often been the most authoritarian. According to our young people, the role of public policies is to introduce people to sport, in the same way as the other disciplines taught in our education systems. None of the respondents mentioned proactive state intervention from the angle of sport and exercise for health.

**There remains one blind spot not addressed in public policies: the importance young people attach to sport as a source of enjoyment and personal development.** How can enjoyment and the desire to engage in sport be taken into account in public policy? That is the other question that is raised.

When young people complain that they are unable to do as much sport as they would like, **they are always seeking an activity the state could encourage but never impose.** When asked, **'What could potentially lead you to take up exercise or a sport one day?'**, 29% of respondents asked for improved accessibility to sport and listed prices, transport and a lack of time as factors limiting their participation in sport. 20% felt that the solution lies in better support from coaches, friends, the university, etc.; 15% felt they needed to work on their motivation and discipline; 12% stated that they would take up sport or exercise if their health deteriorated; and 7% would do so to improve their physical appearance. Finally, 10% stated that nothing could induce them to take up exercise or a sport.

### 4. What concrete solutions could address these expectations?

We might ask ourselves what initially pushes young people to engage in sport. Among the young French and European sport participants interviewed, **family often emerged as the primary source of support and encouragement.** For many of them, engaging in a sporting activity was encouraged or even 'imposed' by their parents during childhood.

**During our interviews, the young people who do not receive support from their family, or those requiring extra support, often voiced a desire for sport participation to be developed in schools. Despite the differences in models, for young people the role of schools seems essential.** To this is associated the often mentioned view of sport as an educational discipline. Sport appears to be an essential component in **the education of children** and young people. Interschool and inter-university events should be organised to encourage participation, the history and philosophy of sport should be taught, etc.

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<sup>5</sup> Keywords and expressions: Olympism, values, IOC and International Olympic Committee.

Many students often find it difficult to juggle sport and higher studies, whether it's a question of organisation or of the emphasis placed on the hyper-competitiveness of sport, whether it's supported by the state or developed as a business, including at university.

Next, the answer about local public facilities is undoubtedly less isolated than it appears. The young people spoke of **the need to develop and improve sporting facilities**. They must be more inclusive and afford everyone easier access to free and – why not – self-organised sport.

The cost of sport is also an important issue. The cost of taking part in sport, but also that of events, emerged as a concern shared by our sample: 29% of students who do not do sport listed prices, transport and a lack of time as limiting factors. On Twitter, close to 30% of all tweets mentioning the cost of sport are negative (compared with 19% of positive tweets). Finally, the young people of all nationalities bemoaned that public funding is channelled to the most popular sports rather than being invested in developing the others.

We have identified **two broad directions for appropriate public policies**: those linked to the social aspect, to health and to education – to be effective, we feel these should incorporate an element of enjoyment. And those linked to international influence through sport. On this point, while they do not embrace the idea of national identity and nationalist sentiment themselves, our young people seem to be aware of the possible influences and the failings of these policies.

Part 2 of our study will discuss the different models of sport-related public policy current in place around the world, as well as the rules of international governance in sport. It will attempt to identify the elements among them that could best fulfil the expectations of today's younger generation around the world.

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This working group is an advisory group. It helped to establish the working guidelines for this project and participated in the interviews of personalities from the sporting world. They bear no responsibility for the content of this report.

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