



## European Cities of Sport as a Strategic Policy for Local Development of Sports: A Perspective from Sports Management in the Last Decade

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- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
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### Abstract

European sports policies have focused on the implementation of public instruments and policy measures, aiming to encourage EU member states to promote and improve sports habits, while simultaneously tackling high levels of sedentary lifestyle among Europeans. Despite these efforts, data concerning the various measures is quite limited, making it impossible to assess the real impact on the population, particularly in the case of the European Cities of Sport. This award has been held since 2007 and has already distinguished 193 cities; however, current knowledge does not allow researchers to theorise about its multiple impacts as a strategic policy instrument for the local development of sport in Europe, thus constituting a gap within sports management research. In order to further this knowledge, we explored European reality over a decade (2013–2022), analysing nine awards of Portuguese cities. We employed qualitative methods for documentary analysis of public information and descriptive statistics for data analysis. The results show that over 2 600 multidisciplinary events were organised, among which 402 had an international character (15%), an average of 50 sports disciplines per edition, 359 events related to culture and education, and involved over 1 000 000 participants, with an overall investment of over €39 million. This research now allows a theoretical-scientific and operational referential pattern of key indicators to be established for future European ECS applications, while demonstrating an encouraging relationship, from a sports perspective and economically, between public investment made and estimated return, thus contributing to better political decisions and to the positive implications of increasing public investment in sport.

**Keywords:** Europe, sports management, physical activity participation, development through sport, sports participation

### Introduction

The influence of sport on modern societies continues to be a topic of high interest and multidisciplinary understanding for science, with its value and importance recognised at various levels worldwide (Puig, 2016; Warburton & Bredin, 2017; Biernat et al., 2020; Koronios et al., 2021a; Glebova et al., 2022; Teixeira et al., 2022). The research produced

in recent decades makes it possible to identify with greater clarity the organisation and structure of sport in a wide range of geographical contexts (Teixeira & Ribeiro, 2016; Skinner & Engelberg, 2017; Glebova et al., 2022; Hammerschmidt et al., 2023), while at the same time understanding and deepening knowledge about the different economic, social, cultural, health and well-being benefits of sport (Parra-Rizo & Sanchez-Soler, 2020; Annesi et al., 2023; Lenka & Behura, 2023).

In the field of health and well-being, scientific developments in the last two decades have made it possible to identify the various benefits of regular sports practice for human beings, regardless of gender, age, physical condition, disease and/or pathology (Falck et al., 2019; Biernat & Piatkowska, 2020b; Arriaga et al., 2022), in terms of improving physical condition, rehabilitation and combating serious diseases such as diabetes, obesity and heart problems (Herrera & Vargas, 2019; Chan et al., 2019).

Based on the existing scientific knowledge, as well as through the mass dissemination of information concerning the various health benefits of sport, we can affirm that people today are better informed about the importance of sport in the adoption of healthier habits and behaviours (Román-Mata et al., 2020), which is reflected in the progressive growth, still at worrying low levels, of the global population that dedicates part of its time to leisure and recreational sport (Pogrmilovic et al., 2020; Stenling & Fahlén, 2022). However, this scenario still represents one of the great paradoxes of the twenty-first century in the field of public sport policies, since while scientific evidence is peremptory in demonstrating the enormous benefits of sport, we continue to have high rates of sedentary lifestyle affecting different age groups of the global population (Arriaga et al., 2022).

The last two decades in Europe in particular have been ambitious from a political and governmental point of view in the field of sports promotion, where several initiatives and instruments have taken shape and continue to be applied in the development of sport, with significant merit and political success (Sesinando et al., 2022; Moradi et al., 2023). However, there is a clear lack of in-depth evaluations of the instruments and measures adopted in recent years in practical terms, i.e., a technical-scientific reflection on the programmes developed, the results obtained and the possibility of assessing any sporting legacies resulting from specific initiatives (Bańbuła, 2021; Mestre et al., 2023).

This is the crux of the problem around understanding the political instrument called “European Cities of Sport”. Despite being one of the most historic and important awards for merit and local recognition in the development of sport, there is not enough information about its various impacts and actual results in each of the EU countries that have received the award since 2007 (ACES Europe, 2023).

This observation is common to the whole of Europe in terms of (almost non-existent) scientific publication, making it impossible to consistently and rigorously assess its efficiency and full effectiveness as a public policy instrument for promoting and boosting sport, as well as its possible legacy among the population in terms of adopting healthier habits and behaviours (Matusíková et al., 2022).

ACES Europe awards several prizes in the field of sport every year, but it is the “European Cities of Sport”

that most represent the ideal and true essence of public sports development policies based on the European premise of “Sport for All” without exception. However, we believe that the real value of this policy measure has not been recognised, and the lack of research interest demonstrates this reality.

Although the Eurobarometer for sport and physical activity monitors and observes the evolution of sporting activity and sedentary lifestyles in Europe, the same has not been verified in the evaluation of the main instruments and measures of public sports policy (Gelius et al., 2020). In other words, the characterisation and dissemination of some information is clearly insufficient and rigorous, making it impossible to affirm and validate the efficiency of the action and purpose of this award. This means that while the evaluation criteria for awarding this prize to European municipalities are well known, little information is actually made known about the impact and effects of the initiatives promoted that lead to this distinction.

The purpose of this research was to study and find answers in order to evaluate the Portuguese experience throughout its history of awards since 2013 ( $n=9$ ), as well as to explore and establish its practical results in promoting local sporting activity and public engagement. Several indicators have been identified to reflect the final results of each edition according to sporting, economic and socio-cultural parameters. The research intends to contribute to the theoretical framework of sports management and public sports policies, while at the same time establishing a theoretical-scientific reference framework for future European applications, allowing political decision-makers to have a reference base for better political decisions in the field of sport.

## Literature Review

### **Sport, Society, and Active Life: A European Perspective**

In the European context, we can currently affirm that sport has, without doubt, become one of the pillars of the cohesion and development policies of all European countries (Breitbarth et al., 2019; Parrish, 2022; Moustakas, 2023).

The European Charter of Sport defines sport as “all forms of physical activity which, through occasional or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or achieving results in competitions at all levels” (Hartmann-Tews, 2006; Teixeira et al., 2023b). With the signing of the Lisbon Treaty in 2007, the European Union became politically responsible for creating public policy measures and instruments that aim to develop physical activity and sport, by delegating and

making each member state responsible for these actions (Parrish, 2022).

On the other hand, developments in science and academic research have contributed to and promoted a worldwide understanding of the many multidisciplinary benefits of sport (Pietrzak & Tokarz, 2019; Biernat & Piatkowska, 2020a), sustaining many of the policy measures implemented over the last few years. Sport and its importance cover several dimensions, influencing the way of life in modern societies through its ability to cause profound changes in human habits and behaviours (Jeong et al., 2019; Antunes et al., 2020; De Bock et al., 2021).

Sport is, in fact, a unique tool in the adoption of healthier behaviours and habits, which not only translate into physical and motor improvements (Silva et al., 2020), but also in the improvement and stimulation of cognitive and psychological skills at any age and in any context (Malm et al., 2019). There are currently hundreds of scientific studies that demonstrate and enable us to understand the value of sport at the most diverse levels of society, making people more aware of themselves and their well-being (Piatkowska & Biernat, 2023), while practicing sport makes them more resilient and persistent, more positive and less pessimistic, as well as more active in society (Amado-Alonso et al., 2019; Koronios et al., 2020a).

From a European political action perspective, sport should and must be seen as an essential and irreplaceable aspect of human development (Lindsey & Darby, 2018). Therefore, it must be accessible to all and promoted,

above all, by active, innovative and stimulating public policies (Christiansen et al., 2014; Volf et al., 2022), as recommended in the European Charter for Sport (1992, revised in 2001).

Despite the vast knowledge and scientific evidence, we continue to observe a paradox in European political action, as, to some extent, sport has been used as a way of obtaining international political recognition and notoriety (Teixeira et al., 2023c); on the other hand, however, we continue to witness a very clear public disinvestment reflected in an intermittency between levels of regular sports practice, and sedentary lifestyles and inactivity (Eime et al., 2019; Pogrmilovic et al., 2020; OECD/WHO 2023).

The aggregate data from the Eurobarometer 2022 for physical activity and sport shows sedentary lifestyles of 45.0% among the European population. However (Eurobarometer, 2022), this figure does not correctly express the different European realities, and requires a range of different policies and intervention measures to really promote positive changes in the population (Antunes et al., 2020).

In the particular case of Portugal (Table 1), and according to the most recent national data from the National Statistical Institute (INE, 2020), we can see that the levels of sedentary lifestyle are much higher, pointing out that in 2019 two-thirds of the population aged 15 or over did not practice any type of physical activity or sport (65.5%), with insignificant differences between 2014 and 2019 (Bento et al., 2014).

**Table 1.** Sporting habits of the Portuguese population (evolution and by gender from 2014 to 2019)

Sporting Habits	Males (15+)		Female (15+)		Total		Variance (2014 -2019)	
	2014	2019	2014	2019	2014	2019	Males	Females
<b>Sports practice:</b>								
Practitioners	40.4%	36.2%	30.0%	29.5%	35.0%	32.6%	-4.2%	-0.5%
Non-practitioners	59.3%	61.7%	69.38%	69.0%	64.9%	65.6%	+2.4%	-0.8%
No answer	0.3%	2.1%	0.2%	1.5%	0.1%	1.8%	+1.8%	+1.3%
<b>Sport practice/week:</b>								
None	59.3%	61.7%	69.8%	69.0%	64.9%	65.6%	+2.4%	-0.8%
1-2 days	15.9%	13.4%	14.9%	13.8%	15.4%	13.6%	-2.5%	-1.1%
3-4 days	11.8%	11.4%	7.1%	8.7%	9.3%	9.9%	-0.4%	+1.6%
5-6 days	7.0%	6.8%	4.1%	4.1%	5.5%	5.4%	-0.2%	0.0%
7 days	5.7%	4.6%	3.9%	2.9%	4.8%	3.7%	-1.1%	-1.0%

Source: Sport in numbers [*Desporto em números*], National Institute of Statistics (INE), 2020.

This scenario clearly demonstrates the need to continue studying and developing different policies to develop sport and increase its regular practice in accordance with every European reality (Batista et al., 2012; Grix et al., 2021), not only aligned with the European ideal, but also

widely recognised by the political establishment. Sport is highly susceptible to public disinvestment (Sesinando & Teixeira 2022; Ferguson et al., 2023), especially in periods of greater socio-economic difficulty (Figueira & Teixeira, 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to use innovative

instruments that encourage member states themselves to look for alternatives that guarantee the satisfaction of their populations (Moradi et al., 2023), whilst promoting more active and healthier European cities (Hafner et al., 2020).

### **European Cities of Sport: A Strategic Instrument for the Local Development of Sports**

The historical and cultural context of sport in Europe has evolved gradually, especially in recent decades, and it is now politically and structurally recognised as one of the fundamental pillars of European society, despite the various asymmetries between member states (Christiansen et al., 2012; Teixeira, 2019).

From an early stage in its long history, the European community recognised the capacity and importance of sport in the well-being of European citizens (Gelius et al., 2020), as well as the need for it to be accessible to all without exception (Teixeira et al., 2023a). To achieve this, the EU assumed the political responsibility of promoting and encouraging sport through the creation of instruments and political action measures, as well as the definition of what would be the basic foundations of European sport, reflected in the European Charter of Sport (1992) and, subsequently, in the Treaty of Lisbon (2007) (Teixeira, 2009).

The definition of this inclusive and aggregating vision, which sought to include the entire population, enabled one of the greatest phases of local development in terms of promoting and boosting sport (Radicchi, 2013; Maguire, 2019), and the construction and/or renovation of sports venues and facilities using EU funds and support (García-Unanue et al., 2021; Seginando et al., 2023). Countries that have historically been less developed, such as Portugal, have benefited greatly from access to funding and various forms of support that enabled new public sports policies to be established (Santos et al., 2021). At the same time, existing policies in line with European guidelines and standards have been strengthened (Fernandes et al., 2011; Parrish, 2022).

The European vision is based on the promotion and guarantee of public access to sport as a vehicle for improving both physical and mental living conditions in its various geographical regions (Teixeira et al., 2023d) as an aspect of collective well-being and social cohesion (Malm et al., 2019). In other words, national and European public investment must ensure that, as part of a modern society and through sport (Ramchandani et al., 2018), all citizens have access to the conditions necessary for regular physical activity and sport (Mutz et al., 2021; Magalhães et al., 2023).

In Portugal, over the years, we have progressed from public policies based mainly on supporting the federated practice of young people by helping the associative movement (Teixeira et al., 2023d), Olympic athletes and their preparation, as well as by offering a variety of public

sports services, especially in athletics and swimming, to more extensive multidisciplinary intervention programmes (Fernandes et al., 2011).

These adjustments were due predominantly to the increased recognition of the importance of sport as an indicator of local development (González-García et al., 2023; Teixeira et al., 2023b; Ferguson et al., 2023), but mainly to scientific advances that have contributed greatly to widespread awareness of the long-term benefits of regular sports activity (Hosker et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2021). In this sense, and with greater citizen awareness, local authorities have expanded their intervention considerably to include programmes for different audiences and specific contexts, ranging from pre-school children to the elderly (Picamilho et al., 2021).

As previously mentioned, the several member states have different asymmetries, which are reflected in the specific needs of each population. Even within each country, we are faced with specific requirements and the need to act and intervene differently (Falck et al., 2019). However, in recent years, sport has become more popular in everyday life and lifestyles – as a competitive activity, as a preventative health activity, or as a leisure, recreational or educational activity (Blanco-García et al., 2021; Magalhães et al., 2023).

This vision and understanding of the need for innovation and adaptation in national and European policies to the emerging contexts and opportunities for intervention as a means of encouraging the growth of active population levels (Cunningham et al., 2020; Parrish, 2022), while recognising the merit of the political activity of local leaders has encouraged the creation of new local development policy instruments, such as the “European Cities of Sport” award and distinction (Matušíková et al., 2020).

First awarded in 2007, the “European Cities of Sport” award aims to recognise the commitment and merits of local sports development, in terms of the range of annual actions and activities for different groups, both nationally and internationally, as well as the quality and quantity of sports venues, among other characteristics (ACES Europe, 2023), which are reflected objectively in the sports offered and the encouragement to practice unique and distinctive sports disciplines (ACES Portugal, 2023).

Scientific research in the field of sport clearly shows the importance of developing sport associated with sporting events (Seguí-Urbaneja et al., 2022; Koronios et al., 2022; Teixeira et al., 2023a; Zourgani & Ait-Bihi, 2023), not only because of the growing interest and high participation rates (Dubinsky, 2019; Reis et al., 2023), but also because of their ability to capture the interest and curiosity of both active citizens and those who associate themselves only with specific causes, using sport as a form of social expression (Parra-Rizo & Sanchis-Soler, 2020; Reis et al., 2023; Bodin & Taks, 2023). This has, indeed,

become a focus for the local authorities, not only as organisers of a range of sporting events and activities, but also in supporting the organisation of events promoted by different groups (Sesinando et al., 2022).

However, in the context of the “European Cities of Sport”, scientific evidence does not confirm the efficiency and effectiveness of this public policy instrument (López-Carril et al., 2019; Teixeira et al., 2022). The lack of conclusive indicators, as well as the poor transparency of political actions, makes it necessary to study in depth and on a regular basis one of the most important political instruments for recognizing local political activity in the field of sport (Silva et al., 2020).

## Methods

### Research Design and Participants

The Association of European Capitals and Cities of Sport (ACES Europe) is a non-profit organization that aims to reward, first and foremost, the work carried out by the EU member states in the field of sport (ACES Europe, 2023). The main premise of this distinction is to promote and stimulate good practices and active public policy measures for the development of regular physical activity and multidisciplinary sports practice at various levels, recognizing the particular and unique character of the role and intervention of local authorities in society.

The distinction began in 2007, and the merit and recognition prize has been awarded to 193 European cities (including the 2023 distinctions, among which is the Portuguese city of Viana do Castelo) in a total of 30 countries. Portugal, which received its first distinction in 2013, is an example of exceptional regularity, receiving nine European Cities of Sport awards, as well as being a European Capital of Sport (Lisbon 2021).

Despite the acknowledgement of these distinctions, researchers are unable to assess their impact, mainly due to the scarcity of scientific knowledge on this topic, making it impossible to build a suitable theoretical framework. This a knowledge gap in the field of sports management that urgently needs to be developed and researched.

Having identified this problem, we undertook an exploratory analysis of several indicators (sports, economic and social) that would allow us to better understand this reality, while assessing its possible impacts and/or practical effects on the population, both in terms of their participation and involvement, as well as in terms of municipal public investment. In order to amplify the research and identify the main characteristics of a given reality in the European context, all Portuguese awards between 2013 and 2022 were considered – Guimarães 2013, Maia 2014, Loulé 2015, Setúbal 2016, Gondomar 2017, Braga 2018, Portimão 2019, Odivelas 2020 and Leiria 2022.

### Data Collection

In the absence of scientific studies and/or technical-scientific reports in the context of the European Cities of Sport in Portugal, in order to make a rigorous analysis, it was necessary to explore the existing information on each particular edition, consulting official documents in the public domain concerning the applications and final reports on the respective awards, as well as information collected directly from the municipal sports services and official websites promoting the programme.

It was necessary to establish which types of documents would contain information at this level and, after an in-depth analysis based on the information available online and on direct contact with three municipal technicians, we identified five types of official documents that could be used: a) evaluation reports on specific activities; b) application files; c) final evaluation reports on activity programmes; d) institutional websites promoting the application, and e) municipal accounts reports.

After identifying these sources of information, it was necessary to confirm the existence of these documents, as well as their accessibility and detail. In general, the existing information was disaggregated, confirming not only the effective absence of public information available online, but also that some municipalities had not produced detailed information on their final results (e.g. Maia 2014).

Therefore, in accordance with the information available, we defined indicators that allowed an in-depth analysis and evaluation of the impact of the European Cities of Sport from different perspectives. Once the indicators were defined, we opted to first search for the different documents on the institutional websites of the municipalities themselves and the official websites of the applications. Then, with necessary information missing and/or in an incomplete form, we contacted ACES Portugal and ACES Europe in order to obtain more information. The main objective of these last two contacts was to discover more information, especially in terms of the number of participants, number of events and public investment.

Overall, we analysed seven final activity reports, nine application dossiers, 11 institutional and five application websites, 16 evaluation reports of specific activities and nine municipal accounts reports, as well as information obtained through direct contact with the sport services of the municipalities involved. The analysis was carried out in person and remotely, and was subsequently validated by the chief author, a specialist in public sports management. The information was collected between September 2022 and February 2023. No exclusion criteria were defined, as this was an exploratory approach and we wanted to gather as much information as possible. However, we decided that the documentary research should be previously validated or not dependent on the reliability of the data and its origin, i.e. institutional and non-institutional.

### Data Analysis

Following the definition of the study sample, as well as the mapping of the available sources of information containing the necessary data to identify the main characteristics of the Portuguese applications and respective awards as European Cities of Sport, it was necessary to organize and analyse the data collected. Having previously defined the type of documentation to be consulted in the study design, we collected and processed the data using mixed methods. We used a qualitative and interpretative approach in the initial phase, based on technical documentary research, which identified relevant information on each specific issue.

After this analysis and identification, the data were organised into categories in order to distinguish the different dimensions of the study. The following study variables were defined: a) number of sports events held; b) character of the events (national/international); c) number of cultural and training events; d) number of sport disciplines involved; e) number of participants involved; f) number of volunteers involved; g) number of ambassadors of the applications; h) public investment per municipality, resident, participant and event; i) estimated financial investment/return ratio per municipality; and, j) digital reach and engagement.

In other words, this research aimed to distinguish the information collected into four dimensions: a component related to the entire organizational environment (participation and involvement characteristics); a second component related to the municipal public investment made in each edition; a third component related to the comparison between investment made and estimated

return; and a component related to the interaction and dissemination of information online about each particular edition.

In the quantitative approach, once the data had been grouped, we used descriptive statistics techniques. Considering the purpose of the study, as well as the origin and specificity of the information collected, measures of central tendency were used – mean, median, range, standard deviation, minimum and maximum, as well as simple and accumulated absolute frequencies. The statistical analysis was carried out using Microsoft Excel 365 16.0 version, which was also used to construct the tables and distribute the data.

## Results

In Portugal, since its creation in 2007, the distinction of European City of Sport has been awarded to nine municipalities. It should be noted that the Lisbon edition of the European Capital of Sport was celebrated in 2021, which is why no other Portuguese city has been distinguished with the European Cities of Sport award. The analysis carried out allowed the identification of several indicators to assess the socio-economic and sporting impact of the ECS in the Portuguese context.

### Events, Sports, Participants, Volunteers and ECS Ambassadors in Portugal

Table 2 identifies the number of sporting events held in each of the applications for the European Cities of Sport, as well as the number of sports disciplines, number of

**Table 2.** Number of ECS events, sports, participants, volunteers and ambassadors in Portugal

<b>Editions</b>	<b>Events</b>	<b>Sports</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Volunteers</b>	<b>Ambassadors</b>
2013 Guimarães	101 (3.8%)	50 (12.3%)	37 000 (3.4%)	1 425 (8.5%)	13 (6.8%)
2014 Maia	250 (9.4%)	24 (5.9%)	120 000 (11.0%)	- (0.0%)	- (0.0%)
2015 Loulé	86 (3.2%)	48 (11.8%)	21 594 (2.0%)	467 (2.8%)	24 (12.5%)
2016 Setúbal	127 (4.8%)	52 (12.8%)	300 000 (27.4%)	1 493 (8.9%)	26 (13.5%)
2017 Gondomar	391 (14.7%)	53 (13.0%)	78 404 (7.2%)	2 931 (17.4%)	42 (21.9%)
2018 Braga	612 (23.0%)	80 (19.7%)	131 313 (12.0%)	261 (1.5%)	3 (1.6%)
2019 Portimão	706 (26.6%)	60 (14.7%)	131 860 (12.0%)	2 183 (13.0%)	15 (7.8%)
2020 Odivelas	85 (3.2%)	- (0.0%)	56 895 (5.2%)	173 (1.0%)	64 (33.3%)
2022 Leiria	300 (11.3%)	40 (9.8%)	217 502 (19.9%)	7 294 (47.0%)	5 (2.6%)
<b>Total (n=9)</b>	<b>2 658 (100.0%)</b>	<b>[- (0,0%)]</b>	<b>1 094 568 (100.0%)</b>	<b>16 857 (100.0%)</b>	<b>192 (100.0%)</b>
Mean	295	50	121 618	2 107	24
Median	250	51	120 000	1 459	19
Standard deviation	233.0	15,9	89 747.5	2 541.1	20.4
Range	621	56	278 406	7 751	20
Minimum	85	24	21 594	173	3
Maximum	706	80	300 000	7 924	64

participants in the various activities, number of volunteers involved and the number of ambassadors who acted in the promotion and dissemination of each application.

In relation to the distribution by region, we can see that of the nine awards obtained up until 2022, four cities are located in the north (Guimarães, Maia, Gondomar and Braga), corresponding to 44.4%, two in the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon (Setúbal and Odivelas) and two in the Algarve region (Loulé and Portimão), corresponding to 22.2% each. These data help us to understand that there have been more applications and respective awards to European Cities of Sport in the north of the country.

With regard to the sporting events held (Table 2), it was possible to observe some variation between programmes. The Gondomar 2017 (n=391), Braga 2018 (n=612) and Portimão 2019 (n=706) editions stand out with the highest number of events. The Odivelas 2020 programme was greatly influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic and was subject to the rules imposed by the national health authorities. This had a significant impact on aspects such as the cancellation of various activities and the reduced number of participants. The results show that, on average, 295 sport events were developed, out of a total of 2 658 organized by the nine candidate programmes.

Although the majority of events had a national/regional dimension (84.98%), we highlight the fact that there were also international activities (15.1%) – a total 402 out of 2 256. On the other hand, the organization of cultural and training side events should also be highlighted, including congresses and/or themed seminars, among others, with a total of 359 events, most notably in Loulé 2015, Braga 2018 and Portimão 2019, with 28, 102 and 141, respectively.

Concerning the number of sports (Table 2) involved in the activities programmes, it was possible to see that there were a considerable number of different sports, particularly in the Braga 2018 edition, which included 80 different sports, and Portimão 2019, which included 60, for an average of 50 sports per edition. The results obtained demonstrate the multidisciplinary dynamic that each city wanted to achieve.

Regarding the participants involved, there is considerable variation between editions, especially in the first editions, where Guimarães 2013, Maia 2014 and Loulé 2015 had 37 000, 120 000 and 21 594 participants, respectively. Despite the pandemic constraints in 2020 due to Covid-19, Odivelas achieved a significant number of 56 895 participants. On the other hand, the Setúbal 2016 and Leiria 2022 editions stand out as having attracted an extremely significant number of participants, with the first involving 300 000 participants and the second more than 200 000 (n=217 502).

Considering the reality of sport in Portugal, as well as the chronic habits of low physical activity, the results

show a positive level of participation in all editions. In total, more than 1 000 000 (n=1 094 568) participants were involved in the nine European Cities of Sport programmes, equal to more than 1 million people involved in sporting activities over 10 years, with an average participation rate of more than 120 000 (n= 121 618) per edition.

In terms of volunteers involved in preparing and developing the programmes (Table 2), it was possible to see a high number of volunteers involved in the individual case of each edition, with an average of more than

2 000 (n= 2 107). In total, around 17 000 volunteers (n=16 857) were registered for the events held, with more than 1 000 volunteers involved in four of the award-winning editions. The Leiria 2022 award stands out, with more than 7 000 volunteers mobilized (n=7 924).

Finally, the number of ambassadors for the winning applications was also analyzed, as they play an important role in the credibility, dissemination and reach of an event. In this respect, we can see that nearly 200 ambassadors (n=192) were involved in all eight winning applications. We highlight Gondomar 2017 and Odivelas 2020, with 42 and 64 ambassadors, respectively. The case of Odivelas is paradigmatic, since it was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the involvement of a large number of ambassadors shows that they not only backed a very strong candidate, but aimed to break all records achieved thus far.

### **Public Investment: ECS Sports Facilities and Equipment in Portugal**

Of the various factors involved in the candidature for the European Cities of Sport, the existence of municipal sports facilities and venues is very important in order to offer greater sports diversity and quality to the population.

Over the last few decades, Portugal has invested heavily in building and/or upgrading sports facilities and equipment for various purposes, with municipalities offering a wide range of conditions and high levels of sports practice. Despite this, Table 3 shows that there has been considerable public investment in this area, particularly as a result of the promotion of the application and the commitment made to winning the prize.

Considering the existing data on the applications for European Cities of Sport, we observed that there was a considerable total investment of more than €39 million (n=€39 613 000). The figure was certainly higher, but as we were only able to access the final data for six editions, it is not possible to determine the overall actual amount. The cities with the greatest investment were Braga 2018 and Odivelas 2020, which, in addition to all the programming and promotion of activities, also proceeded with the requalification and construction of large-scale sports venues and equipment.

The Odivelas 2020 edition shows very high figures in terms of investment per participant and per event.

**Table 3.** Municipal public investment by ECS in Portugal

Editions	Municipal investment (%)	Average investment per participant (€/participant)	Average investment per event (€/event)	Average investment per sport (€/sport)	Average investment per per resident (€/resident)
2013 Guimarães	-	-	-	-	-
2014 Maia	€700 000 (1.8%)	€5.83 (€120 000)	€2 800 (€250)	€29 166 (€24)	€5.17 (€135 306)*
2015 Loulé	€607 000 (1.5%)	€28.11 (€21 594)	€7 058 (€86)	€12 645 (€48)	€8.59 (€70 622)*
2016 Setúbal	€1 300 000 (3.3%)	€4.33 (€300 000)	€10 236 (€127)	€25 000 (€52)	€10.75 (€120 864)*
2017 Gondomar	-	-	-	-	-
2018 Braga	€14 220 000 (35.9%)	€108.30 (€131 313)	€23 235 (€612)	€177 750 (€80)	€78.35 (€181 494)*
2019 Portimão	€3 800 000 (9.6%)	€28.89 (€131 860)	€5 382 (€706)	€63 333 (€60)	€68.33 (€55 614)*
2020 Odivelas	€18 986 000 (47.9%)	€333.70 (€56 895)	€223 364 (€85)	-	-
2022 Leiria	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Total (n=9)</b>	<b>€39 613 000 (100.0%)</b>	<b>€36,19 (€1 094 568)</b>	<b>€14 904 (€2 658)</b>	<b>€97 329 (€407)</b>	<b>€70,25 (€563 900)</b>
Mean	€6 602 167	€84.86	€45 346	€61 579	€34.23
Median	€2 550 000	€28.50	€8 647	€29 166	€10.80
Standard deviation	€7 976 633.50	€127.70	€87 504.50	€67 605.30	€35.90
Range	€18 379 000	€329.37	€220 564	€165 105	€73.18
Minimum	€607 000	€4.33	€2 800	€12 645	€5.17
Maximum	€18 986 000	€333.70	€223 364	€177 750	€78.35

\*Resident population according to census in Portugal

However, it should again be noted that, due to the restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in Portugal, the programme suffered several unforeseen changes and cancellations. Based on the results, we can observe that, in total and over 10 years, around €36 per participant and €14 904 per event were invested in six applications. The amounts would certainly have been higher if we had been able to collect information about the remaining three awards.

The Braga 2018 application upgraded the Parque da Rodovia with an investment of approximately €3 million, as well as the Altice Fórum Braga with a total value of €9 million. On the other hand, Odivelas 2020 justifies a greater investment due to the construction of two sports complexes with a total value of €12 million and the requalification of the Casa da Ginástica de Portugal with a total cost of €3 million.

The other award-winning cities invested smaller amounts, with Portimão 2019 investing considerably in the construction of the Boavista Municipal Pavilion, at a cost of €1.38 million out of a total investment of €3.8 million. The Setúbal 2016 application made a total investment of €1.3 million, having decided to upgrade the existing sports facilities and equipment, such as the

municipal athletics complex and the municipal swimming pools. Finally, the Loulé 2015 candidature decided on a similar path, since the city already had modern sports venues and facilities that were properly equipped to host national and international events. The investment made was essentially for the construction of the Loulé Skate Park and the upgrading of some sports centres.

The overall amount in terms of public investment (> €39 million) illustrates the strong commitment that Portuguese applications have been making over the last decade, not only in encouraging individual applications to achieve the distinction of European Cities of Sport, but also in supporting, promoting and developing local and regional sport as one of the essential pillars of contemporary societies.

#### Investment vs. Estimated Financial Return of ECS in Portugal

In Table 4, we compare the investment made and the estimated financial return of the European Cities of Sport candidate programmes. Concerning the final reports consulted, it should be mentioned that the final data was only available for Setúbal 2016 and Portimão 2019 editions, although both presented a very positive result in terms



**Table 4.** Investment vs. estimated financial return of ECS in Portugal

<b>Editions</b>	<b>Municipal Investment</b>	<b>Financial return (estimate)</b>	<b>Economic and financial added value</b>
2016 Setúbal	€1 300 000	€3 000 000	€1 700 000
2019 Portimão	€3 800 000	€5 000 000	€1 200 000
<b>Total</b>	<b>€5 100 000</b>	<b>€8 000 000</b>	<b>€2 900 000</b>
Mean	€2 500 000	€4 000 000	€1 450 000
Median	€2 550 000	€4 000 000	€1 450 000
Standard deviation	€1 767 766.90	€1 414 213.50	€353 553.30
Range	€2 500 000	€2 000 000	€500 000

of financial return through the implementation of their respective activity programmes.

The Portimão 2019 candidature had an estimated return of €5 million after an investment of €3.8 million, which suggests an approximate impact on the local economy of more than €1million, while Setúbal 2019 had an estimated return of €3 million on a total of €1.3 invested, with an estimated impact on the local economy of €1.7 million.

The absence of data on the other applications does not allow for a more rigorous analysis. However, the ratio of investment versus financial return for both applications was extremely positive, justifying economically and sportingly the investment made in the applications and programmes developed as part of the European Cities of Sport award.

### **Digital Outreach and Engagement of ECS in Portugal**

The information obtained shows a substantial impact at different levels, particularly in terms of the capacity to engage with thousands of people. The importance of social networks and digital media has grown substantially, making them the main vehicle for promotion and dissemination in the most diverse situations. This is why we also intended to analyse the reach and digital involvement of the winning applications, two indicators closely related to the impact and promotion of the candidate programmes.

As shown in Table 5 and despite the fact that not all the final reports enabled an evaluation of all the award-winning editions, there were different interactions on digital platforms per application. The existing data show more than 758 858 visits to the institutional online pages and

**Table 5.** Digital reach and engagement of ECS in Portugal

<b>Editions</b>	<b>Visits (official website)</b>	<b>Likes (Facebook)</b>	<b>Reach (people)</b>
2013 Guimarães	-	-	-
2014 Maia	370 055 (48.8%)	13 900 (21.4%)	-
2015 Loulé	53 388 (7.0%)	2 050 (3.2%)	-
2016 Setúbal	43 524 (5.7%)	8 827 (13.6%)	3 500 000 (43.8%)
2017 Gondomar	147 345 (19.4%)	6 832 (10.5%)	1 600 000 (32.5%)
2018 Braga	-	13 020 (20.1%)	-
2019 Portimão	144 546 (19.1%)	7 447 (11.5%)	1 900 000 (23.7%)
2020 Odivelas	-	12 829 (19.7%)	-
2022 Leiria	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>758 858 (100.0%)</b>	<b>64 905 (100.0%)</b>	<b>8 000 000 (100.0%)</b>
Mean	151 771	9 272	2 666 666
Median	144 546	8 827	2 600 000
Standard deviation	131 450	4 277	802 081
Range	326 531	11 850	1 600 000
Minimum	43 524	2 050	1 900 000
Maximum	370 055	13 900	3 500 00

more than 64 000 “likes” on the Facebook social network, with a reach of an estimated 8 000 000 people.

## Discussion

The main purpose of this research was to analyse the European Cities of Sport and to contribute to a better understanding of their effects and practical implications as a policy instrument for the public development of sport at a local level. The results we have obtained now allow us to build a better understanding of this reality and its impacts in the Portuguese context over the course of a decade (2013–2022), as well as to establish a theoretical-scientific body for future studies that intend to build more in-depth knowledge on this subject.

Considering the nine Portuguese distinctions, the results showed a total of 2 658 sporting events, of which 402 were international. Not only did we observe a high number of events associated with these awards, but there was, in our opinion, a clear intention by the organizing cities to internationalize their events, making their cities known to participants from diverse countries and also benefiting from the different associated impacts (economic, tourist and cultural, among others). In this context, studies of sport events, regardless of their size, have made it possible to understand the different impacts and benefits that sport has on local development (Koronios et al., 2020a; Matušiková et al., 2020; Reis et al., 2023; Teixeira et al., 2023b).

The high number of disciplines involved in these events also demonstrates the multidisciplinary capacity of sport to attract participants with different vocations and/or interests, in an average of 50 disciplines per edition. Not only has sport been used as an instrument for adopting healthier habits and combating sedentary lifestyles, but also as a form of social inclusion (Biernat et al., 2020; Hafner et al., 2020). The participation of more than 1 000 000 people over 10 years demonstrates unequivocally the aggregating role of sport, not only in terms of active participation, but also in terms of interest in supporting (volunteers  $N=16\ 857$ ) and promoting (ambassadors  $N=192$ ) sport and the importance of regular physical activity for all.

Regarding municipal public investment, although it was not possible to obtain data for all of the editions, it was possible to establish an overall investment very close to €40 million. Although there have been economic constraints on public management in Portugal in recent years (Santos et al., 2021; Sesinando et al., 2023), the volume and allocation of spending clearly demonstrate the intention to invest in sport and provide better conditions in terms of sports services and facilities for the population. The level of investment in each edition was different, being closely linked to the inherent needs that

each candidate city identified as relevant and essential, as well as previous investments already made within the local sports programme.

As mentioned above, the European Cities of Sport award began in 2007 and is, first and foremost, an award that highlights the distinctive role of local promotion and commitment in encouraging the practice of sport (ACES Europe, 2023). However, it is also a way for each city to showcase itself to the international community and to promote itself as a destination at the most diverse levels (Matušiková et al., 2020).

The growth and importance of sport has become a significant indicator in the development of the local economy (Zourgani & Ait-Bihi, 2023; Mestre et al., 2023), which is why there is a growing focus on sports events as a means of attracting participants and visitors (Reis et al., 2023), in an attempt to obtain added value for cities as a result of the investment made (Maguire, 2019; Parent & Jurbala, 2023). Although derived from only two editions, the data obtained within this field indicates a significant economic return on the investment made, which contributes to an overall positive analysis of the sporting dimension of these editions.

Finally, and regarding the digital dissemination and interaction, the data obtained allow us to see that the respective award-winning cities were relatively active, both in terms of views on their institutional pages and on social networks. With more than 750 000 views and almost 65 000 likes (Facebook), it is estimated that a total of 8 000 000 people were reached, although this figure may be higher as we did not obtain complete data for all of the applications. The digitalization of sport is having an increasing impact at all levels (Koronios, & Dimitropoulos, 2020b), so digital interaction will be the future tool of reference for reaching and disseminating information to as many people as possible, leading to more participants, visitors and/or interested parties becoming involved in this type of initiative (Teixeira et al., 2023c).

In the European context, sport has the particular attribute of being politically recognized as a fundamental pillar in building a healthier and more modern society (Szczeplaniak, 2020; Parrish, 2022). To achieve this, several strategies have been developed in recent decades to promote the importance of physical activity and sport at all levels that is accessible to all citizens without exception (Teixeira & Ribeiro, 2016; Volf et al., 2022; Sesinando et al., 2022).

The adoption of the European ideal of “Sport for All” has clearly established the political responsibility to intervene and guarantee widespread access to the necessary conditions for the population to progressively adopt healthier habits and behaviours (Fernandes et al., 2011; Ferguson et al., 2023), while at the same time combating and addressing the growing concern about sedentary lifestyles and the associated risk of various chronic diseases

or serious pathologies (Hosker et al., 2019; Jeong et al., 2019). To combat this problem, different instruments and programmes have been created over the last few decades to encourage EU member states not only to implement public policies to support and promote sport, but also to act effectively as the main agents of change (Malm et al., 2019; Magalhães et al., 2023).

This almost perfect symbiosis between the practice of sport and the promotion of different European regions has greatly enhanced both the cities and the way in which the importance of sport as a socio-economic catalyst is effectively viewed (Parrish, 2022; Moradi et al., 2023). It is in this context that the European Cities of Sport award gains even greater prominence by becoming a distinctive instrument for encouraging the development of local sports (Matušíková et al., 2020). The application to become a European City of Sport is clearly a political decision to confirm the municipality's ability to differentiate itself in promoting and boosting sport, especially since it is an assessment that is not governed by the organization of a particular event, but by a set of initiatives and activities of various types and with different objectives.

Furthermore, sport is increasingly an indicator of economic development (Maguire, 2019; Koronios et al., 2021b; Segui-Urbaneja et al., 2022), both at a local and national level, but also as a form of inter-generational socialization, sharing, social cohesion, spiritual healing and combating various diseases, providing countless reasons and motivations for practising it (Blanco-García et al., 2021).

It is within this framework that political decision-makers must focus their actions, especially when there is a clear public disinvestment in sport in the European context (Teixeira et al., 2023a), in exchange for a capitalist model of sport that has been accentuated in recent years (Gammelsaeter, 2021). Today, more than ever, sports policies must be geared towards benefiting populations, not only by improving health conditions throughout life, but most importantly by the direct impact it has on our lives and well-being (Nery et al., 2023).

Bringing politics and science closer together is an urgent necessity (De Bock et al., 2021), as this is the only way to achieve comprehensive results and implement efficient and effective strategies that guarantee the minimum conditions of access to sport, under the burden of returning to the past, where only a small elite had the necessary conditions to practise sport. Political decisions should not be held hostage to ideologies (Sesinando & Teixeira, 2022), but rather to the clear recognition that sport is an immeasurable benefit for society (Biernat & Piatkowska, 2020b) and that it should be encouraged more than ever.

These results clearly demonstrate the mobilizing capacity of strategically planned political action to promote and boost sport in a diversified way for all ages and contexts. The ECS award demonstrates to policymakers that

it is only possible to develop sporting activity at a local level, from a long-term perspective and with high rates of participation and citizen involvement, through the effective implementation of public sports policies that benefit society at all levels.

The limitations of this study were essentially the lack of a body of theory on this topic, as well as the difficulty in obtaining comprehensive and standardized information. Although this distinction has existed since 2007, we found that this topic has aroused little interest from researchers and no answers were found to justify this current state of affairs. Scientific knowledge in the field of sports management has made significant progress in the last decade, so we would anticipate more knowledge on this particular topic.

In addition, public documents about the different awards are difficult to access and sometimes incomplete, which may be one of the main reasons for the continued low level of knowledge about this matter. The lack of greater knowledge and transparency hinders European political action, which could serve as an international benchmark for other countries, as political decision-makers would benefit even more from widespread knowledge about their decisions and their role in investment in local sports development and in building legacies associated with the adoption of healthier behaviours and habits by their populations.

In the context of the European Cities of Sport, there is plenty of scope for new studies to improve the understanding of their multiple impacts at a sporting, political, economic, social, cultural and touristic level, among other dimensions. Following on from the research carried out here, we believe it is essential to deepen knowledge on the various effects and practical implications of the award-winning programmes, in order to rigorously assess them as a differentiated policy instrument and their real capacity to stimulate and promote the sustained development of sport at local level, as well as the adoption of regular sports habits.

Countries such as Italy, Spain or the UK have also received several awards in recent years. Therefore, an in-depth study of different geographical realities would make it possible to build a robust body of theory on the importance and potential of the ECS as a flagship policy instrument, while a greater knowledge base would enable future policymakers to make more informed decisions based on science and multidisciplinary knowledge about sport.

## Conclusions

Scientific research in sports management has made great advances in the last decade, allowing for a deeper understanding of the public organisation of sport, as well as the role of the main stakeholders and political deci-

sion-makers in the development of local sport, answering the key questions of how, who, where, when and why. However, there is still a considerable gap in our knowledge. Addressing this issue must be seen as essential for a better understanding of European and national sports policies, while also analysing the political orientations and instruments available to act on sport and their reflection in each of the member states.

The case of the European Cities of Sport is therefore paradigmatic, since it is the largest local political recognition of the development of sport in Europe and involves a demanding process of multidisciplinary organization with direct impacts on the population. However, the evidence and scientific study on this subject is practically non-existent, making it impossible to assess its real effects and impacts on citizens, not only throughout the process, but especially on its possible legacy throughout Europe.

In this sense, the research undertaken provides us with a better understanding of a European reality that has been awarded with nine distinctions, while the data confirms that, from a conceptual point of view, this is a strategic resource not only for the development of local sport and raising interest in the importance of regular exercise, but also for the economic, social and cultural development of cities.

The provision of public sport services alone is no longer sufficient, and it is therefore necessary to continue efforts to promote diversified sport programmes and activities, supported by the political action of national and local governments and strategically planned as permanent policy measures for the modernization of societies and the physical and emotional well-being of their populations.

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#### Competing interests

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