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# The Global Security Field of Sports and How the World Health Organization Shapes Mega-Events in a (Post-) Pandemic World

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## Abstract

In a (post-)pandemic age, it is important to explore which actors and institutions that shape global sport. Sport can be viewed as made up by interrelationships between different social actors, including international organizations. By utilizing existing theoretical insights related to the notion of social fields, this article explores how what is approached as a “global security field of sport” was shaped by the World Health Organization (WHO) during the staging of sport mega-events during the pandemic time, where public health, security, and safety concerns were unprecedented. Adopting a digital qualitative research approach, this article frame analyses discourses in official communications and media interview statements to examine how the WHO is situated within global sport. It is argued that the WHO—following Covid-19—has been catapulted into football’s security-related discourses and consolidated its power in the “global security field of sport.” More broadly, this is significant because it reflects wider trends and power struggles that emerge when international organizations become entangled in sport.

## Keywords

football, security, mega-events, pandemic, globalization

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Which actors or institutions shape sport in a global and (post-)pandemic era? To explore this further, this article examines the relations between international organizations in global sport's context. The coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic represented a generational and truly global challenge to public health and security. As positioned in the broader globalization discourses and visible throughout 2020 and 2021: an interconnected world composed of constant flows of "goods, services and money and seamless people-to-people connectivity, is exceptionally vulnerable to pandemics" (Basrur & Kliem, 2021, p. 2). Considering sport and especially football's position as a reflector of global trends (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012), the need to respond and adapt to Covid-19 instantly impacted sport mega-events, these events' security and safety, and their webs of administrators and stakeholders (Lee Ludvigsen, 2022a).

Importantly, as Giulianotti and Robertson's (2012, p. 217) sociological model of the "*global football field*" shows, elite football is made up of "interrelations of the game's growing diversity of stakeholders" or actors. In an international context, these stakeholders include, *inter alia*, national bodies, international governmental organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and transnational corporations (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012). By borrowing and advancing this model and cross-pollinating it with the concept of a "security field" (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010), and stretching this analysis beyond football, to cover sport more widely, this article will illuminate the increasingly solidified stakeholder role of the World Health Organization (WHO) in the governance of mega-events throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, in the pandemic's context, this article explores the research question of: how the WHO may be situated within a global security field of sport?

Researchers have posited that Covid-19, since it spread worldwide in January 2020, has impacted, and will continue to impact the governance of sport (Sugden & Sugden, 2020). Crucially, this also encompasses the governance of security at sport mega-events which, in distinct ways, was reconfigured by the threat of Covid-19 (Duckworth et al., 2020; Lee Ludvigsen, 2022a). Significantly, this implies that the mentioned socially relational field of sport, whose existence was alluded to by Bourdieu (1988) himself, has not remained unaffected by the pandemic's ripple effects and legacies. However, although it is clear that the WHO was initially framed by sport's governing bodies as a guiding and externally positioned "expert system" in the pandemic's starting phase—informing the postponement of sport mega-events (Lee Ludvigsen, 2022b)—minimal research, both pre- and "post-pandemic," examines how the WHO may be approached and situated as a central (security) actor in the governance of mega-events.

Against this background, and drawing from media sources and public communications, this article's key argument holds that the WHO's framed influence in the governance of football mega-events in the "(post-)pandemic moment" powerfully illustrates how international organizations have become more fully engaged with football (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009, 2012) and sports more widely.

Specifically, this article attaches the WHO to the Bourdieu-inspired “security field” (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010) of sport, and it demonstrates how the WHO, its authority, concerns, and benchmarks have been catapulted into sporting safety-related discourses. While such argument remains important in itself, the wider political and sociological relevance of this relates to how it illustrates that global health governance has become increasingly embedded into the global field of football (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012) and sport, specifically, as this study’s cases demonstrate, the wider global security field of sport. Importantly, this encapsulates how sport mega-events’ international governance connects with the elite networks of the world society (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012) in a time where “health security” features prominently on international security agendas and has “facilitate[d] changes to *who* can practise security” (Elbe, 2011, p. 853).

With its analysis, this article introduces a new case study to our understanding of global sport mega-events. It also contributes to the literature on interactions and relations between international organizations such as the WHO and sport’s governing bodies, which is crucial because scant research explores these exact interactions. Finally, it extends the body of literature on security and safety at sport mega-events. In the earlier literature, the actors working toward security at events are often synonymous with law enforcements or (private) security agencies. Yet as this article contends, in light of Covid-19, the WHO should be considered a central actor in sports’ global security field. This position has become increasingly crystallized because of the reaffirmed overlaps between “security” and “health,” meaning that health issues can represent threats to nation-states’ and individuals’ security (Elbe, 2011).

Structurally, this paper begins by outlining globalization and health security as a contextual backdrop. Then, it turns toward Bourdieu’s field theory, which has implications for Giulianotti and Robertson’s (2012) “global football field” and the notion of a “security field” (see Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010). These emphasize how social relations and interactions shape security and sport, both separately and collectively.

## **Context: Globalization, Mega-Events, and Health Security**

As this article seeks to situate the WHO within the global field of sport, it is necessary to contextualize “globalization.” For decades, the study of “globalization” has been central to Sociology and International Relations (Beck, 1999; Robertson, 1992). While its meanings are contested, it is possible to understand globalization as the compression of the world and enhanced consciousness of the world as a whole (Robertson, 1992). Yet, forces of globalization have also escalated the transnational nature of insecurity and risk (Beck, 1999) as the global Covid-19 pandemic vividly demonstrated (Domingues, 2022).

In the context of sport mega-events, the management of security and risk gained increased importance following the attacks at the 1972 Munich and 1996 Atlanta Olympics (Fussey & Coaffee, 2012) and the stadium disasters in the 1980s. Consequently, researchers have increasingly examined security and safety governance in sport and football (Boyle, 2011; Boyle & Haggerty, 2012; Klauser, 2011).

Notwithstanding, the threat posed by infectious diseases has not, until Covid-19, featured prominently in this literature (Duckworth et al., 2020). This, despite the fact that global health security features prominently on the international security agenda (Elbe, 2011) and infectious diseases and health issues can be understood as security threats (Elbe, 2011; Hanrieder & Kreuder-Sonnen, 2014). The inclusion of pandemics on the security agenda has, consequently, reshaped contemporary security practices (Elbe, 2011).

An important scholarly task is, therefore, to explore how the concept of health security (re-)emerged in sport during Covid-19, and how it reconfigured the securitization of sport mega-events (Lee Ludvigsen, 2022a). Central here is the changing nature of sport governance (Sugden & Sugden, 2020) and which actors that, ultimately, were able to define “security” in the context of Covid-19, and its management in sport.

Significantly, Hayes (2022) notes that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and WHO strengthened their ties during the pandemic. And, as I argued elsewhere, in the postponement of Euro 2020 and the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, “sport governing bodies seemingly were influenced by the analysis, directives and assessments produced by actors on the *outside* of sports,” most notably the WHO (Lee Ludvigsen, 2022b, p. 508). Importantly, as lessons from the 2008 Beijing Olympics demonstrate (Dapeng et al., 2008), interactions between the WHO and sports bodies are not exclusive to the era of Covid-19. Yet whereas the WHO, in the early phases of the pandemic (February–May 2020), was framed in IOC and Union of European Football Association (UEFA)’s discourses as a guiding actor, whose health guidance would inform the preplanning for the rescheduled events (Lee Ludvigsen, 2022b), these events have since taken place which is a crucial rationale for this paper. Both events were staged between June and August 2021, amid concerns around these sporting spectacles’ “super-spreader” potential and Covid-19 transmissions making it imperative to build upon earlier analyses.

The literature therefore affirms that, in a globalized era, the WHO’s role as a crisis manager has extended into the sphere of sport. One important research gap that remains, however, relates to this organization’s authority and power within the field of sport speaking to the definition of security and the designation of practices to ensure safety and security. Meanwhile, little is also known about the interactions between the WHO and other actors in the context of sport during the Covid-19 pandemic and in the wider mega-event/public health nexus. While this article sets out to examine this, the next section provides a theoretical foundation for such an examination to rest upon.

## **Theoretical Framework: Bourdieu and Global Security Fields in Sport**

Following Bourdieu’s social theory of fields, it is possible to understand how social relations and interactions between individuals and organizations make up social fields that, in turn, make up social life and practice (Bourdieu, 1977). Fields can be

defined as “a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). Fields must therefore be seen as essentially social spaces, in which what Crossley (2002) called “social games” over different stakes take place. As Bourdieu noted, such fields are located across different spheres of society: they could relate to artistic, educational, or social movement fields. Within these fields, an actor’s social position is ordered hierarchically and reliant upon the possession and distribution of different types of “capital”—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic—which define the field (Bourdieu, 1977, 1993). In social fields, therefore, struggle composes a central feature because social actors are competing for resources and capital and, in turn, influence, status, and power within a certain field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Bourdieu’s field therefore emphasizes the social importance of relations and interactions between diverse actors. Sport, accordingly, has become an illuminating site for extensions of the field notion or has been imagined as a field. Building on Robertson’s (1992) “global field”—made up of four quadrants including *nation-states*, *selves*, *international relations*, and *humankind*—Giulianotti and Robertson (2012) introduce the “global football field” which represents a model for understanding the interactions and exchanges between the multiple actors in football. As they note, the model also “provides an intriguing case study of the global field *per se*, with particular reference to the identities and interrelations of diverse ideological and institutional stakeholders” (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012, p. 233). Essentially, the model’s four quadrants include: neoliberalism (associated with individuals and elite clubs); neo-mercantilism (nation-states and national football systems); international relations (international governing bodies), and, finally, global civil society (institutions seeking human development and/or social justice) (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012).

Drawing upon these mentioned quadrants, it is especially the one concerned with *international relations* as its reference point (located under the *gesellschaft* (“society”)/universal quadrant) that I seek to unpack in-depth here. Within this, the emergence of international organizations and global governance—especially the rise of supranational organizations—lies central. Ultimately, these developments have penetrated the sporting sphere. More generally, they have rescaled the power of nation-states within the international system, as international institutions and other nonstate actors have acquired greater influence (Beck, 1999; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009, 2012). Indeed, whereas the nation-state is one of the most authoritative governors in the international system, “its monopoly is no longer viable, as it must take into consideration interests, values, modes of operation and, above all, the power potential of multiple new actors” (Wloch, 2012, p. 298).

As Rowe (2012, p. 290) writes, the framework offered by Giulianotti and Robertson “work[s] with elements of Bourdieusian analytics in mapping its proliferating, diversifying networks of ‘stakeholders’” (Rowe, 2012, p. 290). This analytical relation is important and if seeking to extend this beyond football, we may understand sport more broadly as a site for the competition for power (de Oliveira, 2022), among social actors possessing different levels of authority, expertise, and resources (Bourdieu, 1988; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Importantly, these broader shifts are

visible in sport, where global governing bodies such as *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA) and the IOC, for example, set the formal rules of the game within nation-states and administer key mega-events.

However, as noted, within the global football field, the above shift not only relates to the structures, practices, and interactions between governing bodies such as FIFA, UEFA, and nation-states on diverse matters. Fundamentally, the international governance of sport is also characterized by both adaptive and transformative policies and strategies (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012). Here, the adaptive policies “facilitate the gradual modification and stabilization of the international system to accommodate shifts in power within football and partnerships with emerging stakeholders” (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012, p. 227). Meanwhile, the transformative version:

[P]oints to a set of policies that would restructure the international system in root-and-branch ways, and which may enable football’s governance to engage a much broader range of groups, movements and institutions according to normative principles that look beyond *realpolitik* (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012)

The adaptive and transformative elements inside the global field’s international governance quadrant mean that football’s governors (e.g., UEFA or FIFA) are increasingly engaged in relationships with “wider” organizations—*externally* positioned to football—who themselves possess distinct roles within the wider world of international relations (Bar-On, 2017; Włoch, 2012). However—and beyond football—the same may be said about the IOC and other governing bodies of sport, who are not operating in isolation from wider governance structures dictating or shaping the global order (see de Oliveira, 2022). Therefore, processes typically attributed to globalization have intensified the interrelationships between clubs, leagues, nation-states, supranational institutions, and sport governing bodies (Velema et al., 2020) who make up, dictate, and shape a wider global field of sport.

Thus, by drawing upon the work of Bourdieu (1977) and more recent iterations utilizing the notion of a field (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012), it is visible that the field of global sport is not occupied solely by “traditional” sporting actors (e.g., clubs, athletes, sport governing bodies, or fans). Importantly, the competition for power and authority in global sport extends to involve international organizations with a stake in sport or its mega-events. Examples of this include the EU, Council of Europe, NATO (Tsoukala, 2009), and the United Nations who are “among the most prominent in organizing international interdependencies” (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012, p. 226) in the global field.

Having established international organizations’ positioning in sport, it is possible to return to the WHO’s aforementioned role in the resumption of mega-events and situate this within what Giulianotti & Klauser (2010), more specifically, call a “security field.” Building upon Bourdieu’s work, and as concerned with the competition for the *definition of security*, this refers to a security-defined social space “which contains objective, game-like relationships that are played out between “players”” possessing different types of power in the field (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010, p. 57).

Within the global field of sport, we may thus locate fields of security that, again, are crucial to analyze in order to understand security practices at contemporary sport mega-events. In this paper, this is approached as *sport's global security field*. Against this backdrop, this article therefore engages with the following questions:

1. How did the WHO emerge as a key actor in the context of sport mega-events following Covid-19?
2. What were the framed roles, responsibilities, and actions of the WHO in the global security field of sports?

## Research Approach and Method

To answer the above questions, this study adopted a digital qualitative research strategy and set itself up mainly around the two cases of UEFA Euro 2020 and Tokyo's 2020 Summer Olympics: both staged in the summer of 2021 *during* the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> The data this article draws from originates from an analysis of interview material within media sources, official statements and public communications that were collected via online newspapers and/or key organizations' official websites.

The approach adopted here is methodologically inspired by the approaches of Millward (2017) and Hayton et al. (2017) insofar as I was also concerned with the discourses and key quotes from key actors/organizations that were available within media sources (i.e., quotes provided in newspaper articles) and the public communications of the relevant organizations, WHO, UEFA (who administered Euro 2020), and IOC (administering the 2020 Olympics). Notwithstanding, it remains crucial to highlight, concerning the media sources, that this concurrently means that my unit of analysis were those statements and public communications made by stakeholders, key stakeholders, and organizations, hence not the journalistic coverage or descriptions in themselves (Millward, 2017, p. 762).

This approach and type of data source was considered extremely relevant and methodologically suitable for four principal reasons. First, they provided an opportunity to build on and extend the author's (Lee Ludvigsen, 2022b) earlier findings, speaking to emerging interactions between sport's governing bodies and the WHO in the *early phases* of Covid-19. Second, the relevant organizations here can generally be hard to access for research purposes. This renders their official and public discourses and articulations extremely valuable sources as indicators of their position on issues such as Covid-19 and/or major events. Third, considering the public interest in sport worldwide, it receives enormous media coverage. This has implications for researchers who, consequently, must be responsive to the fact that "the media, television and the press in particular, are playing a crucial role in producing, reproducing and amplifying many of the discourses associated with sport in the modern world" (Boyle & Haynes, 2000, p. 8). Finally, it can be argued that a turn toward digital media sources was methodologically suitable in an age of online research methods, which have opened new ways of analyzing key stakeholders across sport (Cleland et al., 2020).

To collect data, I performed targeted searches (using combinations of the terms: "Covid-19," "football," "Euro 2020," "World Health Organization," "IOC,"

“Olympics,” “UEFA”) for media articles and public communications discussing/mentioning the WHO in context of Euro 2020 or the 2020 Olympics published between April 1, 2021, and March 1, 2022.<sup>2</sup> Targeted searches were conducted on newspaper/news-blog repository Google News representing one of the largest global news aggregators (see Weaver & Bimber, 2008). Meanwhile, organizations’ public communications were retrieved from their official websites. Concerning the media sources, it was only media articles that contained interview quotes from key players that were sampled and saved in a separate spreadsheet. This did, naturally, restrict the overall sample size but my study remained principally concerned with the qualitative textual data. Hence, the study adopted Atkinson and Young’s (2012) mixed convenience and purposive sampling approach whereby no rigid selection criteria guided the process, although articles had to be published in English and discuss/consider WHO’s role(s) in the relevant events. Concurrently, one limitation of this is the inability to create a “totalizing representation” (Atkinson & Young, 2012, p. 291) of the relevant discourses surrounding the two events. Overall, 37 articles were sampled, encompassing 20 official statements/communiqués and 17 media articles containing interview quotes, composing valuable textual data. I supplemented this with policy documents (i.e., IOC’s Olympic Playbooks and UEFA’s health and hygiene requirements for the return of spectators) and other secondary sources like the academic literature.

After saving the sampled sources, all articles were read closely before I manually deployed a frame analysis technique introduced by Goffman (1974). Concerned with social interactions—which here are seen as occurring within a social field (cf. Bourdieu, 1977)—Goffman drew attention to how experiences are organized and how individuals organize their perceptions of social realities (Millward, 2017). The selection of frame analysis as an analytical device thus allows for capturing the interactions within socially competitive spaces whose outcomes, again, rely on those interactions.

Frames therefore answer the question of “what is happening here?” and tell us “how to define situations we find ourselves in” (Manning, 1992, p. 118). Accordingly, if social actors (such as organizations and institutions) are seen as occupying space within a social field, they use communications to define specific situations through discourses that carry meaning(s) and are more heavily weighted than other discourses—reflecting their unique understandings and motivations that act as frames organizing a socially constructed world. In turn, this allows for analyzing of how key actors in the socially relational field of global sport *deployed specific frames* to define the WHO’s involvement and roles in the context of the two sport mega-events.

Adopting the key premises of Goffman’s (1974) approach, my textual data were framed according to two key frames linked to my research objectives. First, according to the framed responsibilities and roles of the WHO in sports following Covid-19. Second, how the WHO was framed as a key actor in football’s security and safety following Covid-19. The next sections unpack these emerging frames of (i) “advice and concern” and (ii) “benchmarks and best practice.”

## An Actor to Advice and Express Concern

This section unpacks the framed discourses where the WHO was framed as (or framed itself as) an advisory actor that also expressed health and safety-related concerns around the two events. For contextual reasons, the WHO is the UN's specialized agency responsible for international public health. The WHO's role thus relates to the connection of "nations, partners and people to promote health, keep the world safe" while coordinating the "world's response to health emergencies" (WHO, n.d.). When Covid-19 unfolded as an unprecedented public health threat, the WHO was the organization that declared Covid-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (BBC, 2020). And, during health emergencies, the organization provides states advice, policy guidelines, and regular updates (Hanrieder & Kreuder-Sonnen, 2014). Within the international system, the WHO has also occasionally taken up a role as government critic (Kamradt-Scott, 2011). Along with these lines, it appears from the framed statements that the WHO—immediately before and during—Euro 2020 and the 2020 Olympics possessed a role as an advising actor that concurrently publicly expressed their event-related concerns.

Importantly, in the spring of 2020, throughout the postponement processes and extended planning for the 2020 Olympics, UEFA and IOC repeatedly stated that they would closely follow the expert advice of WHO. This included, for instance, the setup of a task force involving IOC, WHO, and Tokyo's organizing committee (Lee Ludvigsen, 2022b). Quite similarly, in March 2020, UEFA was seemingly informed by the WHO's analysis in their decision to postpone Euro 2020 until June 2021 (Lee Ludvigsen, 2022a, 2022b). Notwithstanding, one year later, with the rescheduled events approaching in time, the advisory role of the WHO in sport's global security field resurfaced. For instance, in June 2021, UEFA (2021) released a statement on how it would make Euro 2020 as "safe as possible" for spectators given that all host cities had confirmed presence of fans inside their stadiums. While the decision to allow fans inside stadium was taken by each host,<sup>3</sup> UEFA concurrently confirmed that: "UEFA has worked closely with the World Health Organization (WHO) to adapt the WHO COVID-19 risk assessment tool for EURO 2020" (UEFA, 2021).

Another important exemplar of the WHO's advisory role in the pandemic epoch of sport is illustrated by the WHO Regional Office for Europe's (2021) launch—in June 2021—of a monitoring tool named the "WHO European Region UEFA EURO 2020 Explorer." This explorer was specifically designed to track Covid-19 rates in the Euro 2020's host cities across the 11 host countries. As announced, this digital tool—providing details on public health and social measures and Covid-19 case information relevant to every host city—was made available to assist the Euro 2020's organization:

The explorer is intended as a tool for authorities, organizers and the public to better understand the COVID-19 situation in host cities and assess related risks at a public health and individual level [...] The explorer provides: epidemiological trends across the Region, an

event-based surveillance system, details of public health and social measures, and tracking of cases of COVID-19 in host countries (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2021).

Crucially, the above statements yield an insight into *one* of the WHO's roles in the global security field of sports during the pandemic. Seemingly, the organization emerged as an advisor that could provide other, relevant stakeholders (i.e., "authorities," "organizers," and "the public") with necessary information relevant to Euro 2020's health and safety context. Arguably, the digital tool representing a specific mean to do this was developed to aid other, more conventional players in the "security field" (cf. Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010), including authorities and host city organizers, in "keep[ing] people safe and communicate about possible risks" (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2021).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the WHO's advisory role extended onto the 2020 Olympics which commenced only 11 days following Euro 2020's final in London. Earlier in the Olympic build-up, on May 10, 2021, IOC President Thomas Bach had also publicly thanked the WHO for their cooperation and advice throughout the pandemic in relation to Covid-19 countermeasures. He stated that:

I would like to express our thanks to WHO *for the cooperation and advice* we have enjoyed from them since the very beginning of the pandemic and *the confidence they have expressed in the planned countermeasures and the IOC* (quoted in IOC, 2021a, emphasis added)

Later, at a news conference in Geneva (July 2, 2021), the WHO also confirmed the organization's advisory role across the two mega-events stating that the Euro 2020 experiences provided lessons to learn from, and that: "The IOC and others have outlined their plans in taking their approach for the Olympics, and we have been engaging with them and advising them on the best use of those plans" (Van Kerkhove, WHO Technical Lead on Covid-19, quoted in Reuters, 2021).

This, taken together, remains significant because it demonstrates continued interactions and exchanges between international organizations on event-related health and safety-related matters. Notwithstanding, the analysis also revealed that, in addition to an advisory role for host cities and organizers on these matters, several statements associated with the WHO were framed in a way in which health and safety concerns were publicly expressed.

Particularly revealing is the case of the 11-country formatted Euro 2020. Here, two weeks into the competition (22 June), after several host cities had begun to increase the original number of allowed spectators in stadiums, one WHO official commented that:

WHO is concerned about easing of restrictions in some of the host countries [...] A few of the stadiums hosting the tournament are now increasing the number of spectators allowed in the stadium to watch a game. In a few of the host cities, COVID-19 cases are already on the rise in the area where matches will be held (quoted in Sky News, 2021)

The above example explicitly highlights how the WHO was framed as a “concerned” actor. Visibly—and importantly—such a concern was primarily framed according to certain host cities’ decision to ease Covid-19 restrictions (by increasing stadium spectator numbers) coupled with the rising Covid-19 cases in the same areas. Just over a week later, a similarly framed statement emerged. Here, concerns were publicly articulated over Euro 2020’s crowded spaces inside and outside stadiums, which was considered a possible catalyst for Covid-19 cases in host countries. A WHO senior emergency officer stated that: “We know that in a context of increasing transmission, large mass gatherings can act as amplifiers,” while also emphasizing the importance of authorities’ public health risk considerations (quoted in *The Guardian*, 2021). Commenting upon Euro 2020’s “super-spreader” potential, director of the WHO’s European Region, Hans Kluge, stated: “I hope not... but this can’t be excluded” (quoted in *The Guardian*, 2021). Indeed, similar public concerns over the impact of sport events on Covid-19 transmissions were also expressed on the mentioned news conference before Olympics, as demonstrated by Van Kerkhove’s warning: “We urge caution. We urge everyone to take caution in what they do [...] We urge everybody to take a risk-based approach in what they do and the decisions that they make” (quoted in *Reuters*, 2021).

Overall, as significant health, safety, and security questions loomed over Euro 2020 and the 2020 Olympics, it can be argued that the analyzed statements above—taken together—demonstrate that the WHO and its representatives adopted a central role as an advisor to sport’s governing bodies and local authorities in host cities. This must be understood in the context of the WHO’s emergency powers and supranational authority (Hanrieder & Kreuder-Sonnen, 2014) and how it provided technical, expert capabilities to states during Covid-19 (Domingues, 2022). Seemingly, the organization advised on the events’ countermeasures and provided concrete risk assessment tools for other stakeholders. That said, the WHO also emerged as a critic (cf. Kamradt-Scott, 2011) which, through public statements, expressed their health and safety concerns *vis-à-vis* Euro 2020’s spectator presence, potential infections associated with the events and the general running of events in a public health crisis. Ultimately, this has two key implications when situated in the context of global sport.

First, it reinforces how Covid-19 facilitated new types of interrelationships between sport’s governing bodies and the WHO (cf. Lee Ludvigsen, 2022b). Significantly, these relationships were centered on the common challenge of countering Covid-19 and then creating safe and secure events. Second, this also reaffirms the entanglement of international organizations within the field of global sport; reflecting thus the ways in which global forces have intensified exchanges and interactions *within* and *across* international organizations (see Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012).

## **Benchmarks and Best Practice**

This section unpacks the discourses in which the WHO was framed as a generator of benchmarks and best practices for major events. Reflecting wider trends in the globalization of security (Bigo, 2006) and of policy-transfer, it remains well-established that

security and safety knowledge templates, expertise, and “best practice” models employed for mega-events are highly globalized (Boyle, 2011; Klauser, 2011). Crucially, within these transnational knowledge circulations, international organizations and nonstate actors play an increasingly prominent role (Boyle, 2011). In a time where sport mega-events represent “teachable moments’ in fostering security subjectivities and structures” for sport’s governing bodies, security agencies, and international governance organizations, best practices are increasingly transferred from one event to another (Boyle, 2011, p. 181). With these circulations that essentially occur in relational and social security fields (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010), this section throws a light on how the WHO can be considered an actor within sport’s global security field whose capital and subsequent power (cf. Bourdieu, 1993) relates to their public health expertise. As argued, in the context of the Euro 2020 and Olympics, the WHO generated best practices that subsequently could be applied to new contexts, while formulating the benchmark for events’ “success” in the epoch of “covid-secure” major events.

In recent years, international governance organizations have become increasingly prominent in the realm of security best practices at major sporting events, illustrated by specific EU and UN programs that have aimed to encourage information-sharing, cooperation, and the identification of best practices (Boyle, 2011). In 2010, the WHO and IOC also published a report reflecting on the 2008 Olympics’ “health legacies” emphasizing the importance of collaboration between stakeholders (Dapeng et al., 2008). The evidence from 2021 suggests a continuation of this trend and, specifically, that the WHO also should be positioned within the aforementioned security field.

This can naturally be viewed in relation to WHO’s engagement in normative standard-setting activities (Hanrieder, 2015) which I argue was consolidated in global sport. For example, delivering a keynote address at the 138<sup>th</sup> IOC Session in Tokyo on July 21, 2021, WHO Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, expressed confidence in the Tokyo Olympics’ Covid-19 countermeasures and commented:

The mark of success in the coming fortnight is not zero cases, and I know that some cases have already been detected. The mark of success is making sure that any cases are identified, isolated, traced and cared for as quickly as possible, and onward transmission is interrupted. That is the mark of success for every country (quoted in IOC, 2021b).

Adhanom’s quote above remains of enormous significance because it essentially sets out the benchmarks of “success” in the context of major event staging in an era of “Covid-secure” events. From this, it can be suggested that the WHO, through its discourses on health and safety in sport, adapted to the role as a benchmark-setter outlining the “mark of success” of Tokyo’s operationalized Covid-19 countermeasures. Notwithstanding, within a security-oriented field of struggles between relevant actors, this is highly important as it speaks to the WHO’s authority and ability to designate these “marks of success” and to the organization’s position *within* the global

security field of sports as an enunciator and verifier of what safety and security *can be* or *look like*, for countries and/or specific organizations (e.g., IOC, UEFA).

Moreover, in the aftermath of the two events, there is evidence that the relationships between the international organizations have continued and extended into new event-specific settings. In October 2021, the WHO (2021) announced that they, together with Qatar (host of the FIFA World Cup in November/December 2022), had launched a multiyear collaboration which included close work with FIFA. This 3-year project aimed not only to promote physical and mental health but also to make the upcoming World Cup “a model for ensuring future mega sport events are healthy and safe” (WHO, 2021), thus illustrating the WHO’s impact on the generation of new models of best practice speaking to health security. It was also announced that:

In addition, another critical goal of the project is to set and translate the best practices in health promotion, security and safety, as practiced at the 2022 FIFA World Cup, for use at major sporting events around the world (WHO, 2021)

A few months later, in February 2022, the framing of WHO as a best practice generator also came to the fore when it was reported that IOC and WHO sought to strengthen their collaborations ahead of Beijing’s 2022 Winter Olympics:

WHO experts were also involved in developing the COVID-19 countermeasures that were successfully applied last summer at the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020, *an event that became a template for other large-scale events*. The global health agency worked with the IOC again during the preparations for Beijing 2022 in the challenging context of the more transmissible Omicron variant (WHO, 2022, emphasis added)

However, while the framed centrality of the WHO’s expertise in *informing* the staging of Tokyo 2020 is visible here, one may simultaneously see how this particular policy model was framed as constituting a “template” for similar large-scale events. This suggests that those countermeasures developed in tandem with the WHO represented practices that could be reproduced in new tempospatial contexts reproducing the WHO’s power further.

By looking to the relevant literature, Boyle (2011) rightfully warns against accepting evidence of networking events or activities, or public statements *reporting* on this, at face value, as indicators of *actual* learning processes. Although the evidence cannot provide a full insight of exactly what was learnt or developed, it still gives *an* insight into WHO’s position as a central actor involved in the development of standardized templates. In a way, this reflects wider trends in the best practice transfer processes in the domain of mega-events, concerning how know-how from past events can be transferred onto future host cities. Even more broadly, this reflects how global governing institutions have embraced knowledge management (Boyle, 2011) in a globalized world. Arguably, in a time where international organizations are increasingly active in the nomadic migration of safety and security templates at sport events, the WHO’s “(post)-Covid” involvement—which this study focuses on—must be regarded as

significant. That said, it also reaffirms how stakeholders do not merely interact in the pursuit of security but how they also publicly profess that they are interacting through press releases or public communications (Boyle & Haggerty, 2012).

In this discussion of best practice templates, it is also possible to visit the concept of “security legacies” which, tentatively, appears here. These are the longer-term impacts of security strategies, technologies, or practices implemented for major events (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010). They are, however, not confined to hardware/technology and can be intangible in the form of “improved inter-agency trust and working relationships, structural or organizational outcomes, and the development of practical expertise” (Boyle, 2011, p. 179). They might also encompass new security practices (i.e., those rendered “best practice”) or strengthened partnerships between relevant stakeholders (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010). Although the full implications of the following suggestion are difficult to fully grasp at this point—and require future research—it may be that one (pandemic) *security legacy* is the enhanced relationships between sport’s governing bodies and the WHO in the global security field of sports, whereby the latter has emerged as an actor generating adaptable best-practice templates, as the evidence suggests.

What remains clear, however, is that if the global security field of sports remains a metaphorical space for understanding the multiple actors in an event’s securitization, then WHO has—in a post-Covid context—emerged as one central actor within this field that is marked by competing viewpoints and contestation (Bourdieu, 1977). Indeed, the WHO “holds a central symbolic space in global health, as the coordinating authority in international health” (Ekpenyong & Pacheco, 2020, p. 389) and as argued throughout, this meant that the WHO, owing much to its expert authority *vis-à-vis* global health emergencies, consolidated its power in sport, in the pandemic context where it appeared that WHO’s main forms of capital (i.e., expertise and symbolic status) were employed by other actors almost as a reassurance that their events would be organized safely. The analysis has also demonstrated elevated interactions between the WHO and sport’s governing bodies—including UEFA, FIFA, and IOC—which now appear to be less bound by space/time and likely to extend onto upcoming events “post-Covid” milieu, as a pandemic legacy.

## Discussion and Conclusion

By building upon the notion of field (Bourdieu, 1993) and theoretical iterations affirming both global fields and security fields in sport (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012), an important question this article set out to explore related to the WHO’s inroad into global sport during the “covid-phase.” Specifically, it has explored the WHO’s positioning within a wider *global security field of sport*. As the preceding sections show, the case examples here affirm how fields, as a conceptual tool in the study of sport mega-events, allow for reflecting upon the social interactions that are extant within the production of sporting spectacles without confining such analyses to those actors that often are deemed dominant in the context of sport; such as the IOC, FIFA, or other sporting bodies (de Oliveira, 2022).

As unpacked here, the WHO's power in the global security field of sports is underpinned by its ability to designate and reconfigure the meanings of *security* in the exceptional pandemic/sporting context. This remains important, illustrating a (temporary) departure from situations where the definition of security predominantly lies with law enforcers, security agencies, and sport's governing bodies (Boyle & Haggerty, 2012).

To contextualize this important shift, we may return to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) who saw capital as central to an actor's influence in a field. Here, it could be suggested that the technical expertise, and symbolic status, of the WHO during Covid-19 consolidated its position within global sport's security field, where it took up a dominant position following mass postponements and the resumption of events. In this context, it may also be seen how an extension of power occurred through the shared principles and norms, the identification and definition of best practices, benchmarks and templates, and other markers of success. Thus, this article suggests that the WHO was framed as a *verifying actor* within the field (primarily by sport governing bodies), but that the acceptance of their shared principles and norms was concurrently contested by some actors, such as states that, for example, increased the number of spectators inside stadium and eased restrictions (Sky News, 2021) highlighting also the limitations to the WHO's power, and the difficulties in establishing an unquestioned *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1977) within the global field, given the power struggles and diverse interests within global sport between nation-states (as hosts), sport governing bodies (event owners), and international organizations (here, in form of verifying actors) (see de Oliveira, 2022).

To conclude, this article uses these theoretical insights to reinforce the political and sociological importance of global governance in sport by arguing that WHO's inroads into global sports reflect how interacting international organizations have become more fully engaged with global sport, and vice versa. The article argues that, in a period where Covid-19-related health security fears have loomed over sport mega-events, the WHO was firmly situated as a central actor in the global security field of sport.

This argument, drawn from an analysis of public communications and media sources, leans on my two subsidiary arguments. First, the WHO operated throughout 2020 and 2021 as an actor providing sport's governing bodies, host cities, and their authorities with event-specific advice and tools, while publicly articulating its concerns *vis-à-vis* events' restrictions and decision-making. Second, the evidence suggests that, within the wider transnational circuits of safety and security knowledge in-between mega-events (Boyle, 2011), the WHO can be considered a benchmark-setter, and generator of "best practice" templates that events in other places could utilize in the face of the "new" security threat. The importance of this argument for sociological and political scientific understandings of globalization and global governance relates to how this article produces a snapshot of the *interactions* and *linkages* between international organizations in a global crisis, and how Covid-19 within a Bourdieusian and global field framework (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012; Robertson, 1992) drew together a set of interdependent organizations in the global governance of the *common challenge* which the pandemic is a quintessential exemplar of. Overall, this reinforces the notion that: "as sport is gaining

the status of one of the most crucial global social phenomena,” it also “becomes a target of power clashes between old and new actors of global governance” (Włoch, 2012, p. 308) where capital, expertise, and resources matter.

Whereas the literature has explored the links between supranational organizations and football (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012), minimal research explores the interactions between the WHO and sport’s governing bodies (Lee Ludvigsen, 2022b). In doing so, the article extends the literature in three ways. First, it adds to the sociological understanding of the pandemic’s consequences on global sport. Using the notion of social fields, including the “global football field” (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012) and the “security field” (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010), which are here seen as conceptually connected, the article builds up knowledge on how the *global security field of sport* was reconfigured by the Covid-19 pandemic and mega-events in “pandemic times.”

Secondly, and related, by providing one of the first studies to focus explicitly on the WHO’s roles in sport during Covid-19, this article offers important new insight and contributes to the literature on global governance and international relations viewed through the filter of sport. Thirdly, this article extends literature on sport’s global security governance, by reinforcing the roles played by international organizations within this continuum (Boyle, 2011) and by capturing some of the new countermeasures and potential “security legacies” materializing from the pandemic moment, which altered events’ security preparations due to various health-related security concerns (Duckworth et al., 2020).

In closing, it is necessary to touch upon this exploratory study’s limitations, some of which I alluded to in the methodological discussion. Public statements and communications are extremely important data sources, yet unlikely to paint a completed portrait of the WHO’s interactions with sport’s governing bodies and their roles in sport’s global security field. Therefore, to conceptually and empirically build on this, future research could attempt to conduct elite interviews with the relevant stakeholder groups. Moreover, this paper is set up around two case studies, Euro 2020 and the 2020 Olympics. Needless to say, these were not the only mega-events impacted by Covid-19 guidelines and regulations. To produce even more holistic understandings of the WHO’s roles in sport, future research should continue to examine interactions between the WHO, sport’s governing bodies, sports teams, and national associations to gain an empirically grounded insight into these relationships’ nature.

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## Notes

1. Both the events were originally scheduled for the summer of 2020, but rescheduled due to Covid-19, to begin on June 11, 2021, (Euro 2020) and July 23, 2021 (Olympics).
2. All hyperlinks last accessed July 2022.
3. For example, Ireland, unable to guarantee a presence of fans, ended up not staging Euro 2020 games, despite its original host country status.

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