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Ng, Shuang Yin Cheryl, Bloom, Alle, Corcoran, Su Lyn, Fletcher, Thomas and Sibley, Jonathan  (2022) "If you respect us...listen to us": how sporting event media reframes or reinforces representations of street-connected children. *Leisure Studies*, 41 (6). pp. 757-774. ISSN 0261-4367

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2022.2088830>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

Version: Published Version

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To cite this article: Shuang Yin Cheryl Ng, Alle Bloom, Su Lyn Corcoran, Thomas Fletcher & Jonathan Sibley (2022): 'If you respect us...listen to us': how sporting event media reframes or reinforces representations of street-connected children, *Leisure Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/02614367.2022.2088830](https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2022.2088830)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2022.2088830>



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'If you respect us...listen to us': how sporting event media reframes or reinforces representations of street-connected children

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ABSTRACT

Advocacy programmes targeting street-connected children involve changing public and policy makers' perceptions about this group of often stigmatised children. Increasingly, such programmes centre leisure activities, sports, and sporting events as potential platforms for sharing messages aimed at effecting social change. For effective impact, such advocacy goals require that safe spaces are developed for emerging children's political messages and managing media narratives to centralise their individual challenges and, more importantly, the root-causes of their street-connectedness. In part influenced by an Ecological Framework for Human Development, we explore how the media engage meaningfully with Street Child United (SCU) events and how they represent street-connected children. Thematically analysing this media coverage, we explore SCU partners' relationships with the media and whether advocacy messages are communicated coherently and consistently. We found that messages of advocacy and children's rights are present, but inconsistently framed, reinforcing a binary between pity and inspiration, and limiting opportunities of challenging public perceptions and effecting change. For SCU, similar sports event organisers, and civil society organisations to successfully determine media narratives, they need to develop strategies to manage relationships and more continuous engagement with the media and other stakeholders to sustain interest and leverage impact.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 July 2021
Accepted 06 June 2022

KEYWORDS

Media; sports events; Street Child World Cup; Street-connected children; managing advocacy

Being street-connected suggests a variety of ways in which children engage with and experience the opportunities and challenges inherent to inhabiting the interactive space understood as 'the street' (Kaneva & Corcoran, 2021). Street-connected children are not a homogenous group and, for example, could live and/or work on the street full time, part-time, returning to stay with their parents at the end of every day, have infrequent or no contact with parents, or live on the street with street-connected parents. The General Comment on children in street situations (GC21) to the United Nations Convention to the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) outlines a policy framework and definitive legal guidance for governments protecting street-connected children (United Nations, 2017). For example, it provides these children with the right to associate and assemble freely in

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public spaces without harassment or arbitrary removal (Thomas De Benitez, 2017) and, as we discuss below, could be used as an advocacy tool towards acknowledging street-connected children's rights in national social policy.

Including street-connected children in policy appropriate to their needs, however, is not straightforward, particularly given how they can be positioned in society and represented in deficit terms (Corcoran, 2015; Echwalu, 2014). A major component of advocacy programmes for street-connected children, therefore, necessitates a process of changing public perceptions. These programmes can take many forms, including leisure, sports, and sporting events as platforms for communicating messages at local, national, and international levels. To explore the use of international sporting event platforms in effecting change, and the role of sporting event media coverage as a tool for reframing or reinforcing representations of street-connected children, this paper focuses on media coverage of Street Child United (SCU) events (see below).

SCU is a UK-based charity aiming to 'tackle the widespread stigma street-connected children face and raise awareness and understanding of their situation' (SCU, 2020). They use the power and visibility of sport to provide a platform globally for street-connected children to not only be seen, but heard – raising awareness of, and tackling, the widespread stigma they face – through sport. Since 2010, SCU has organised three Street Child World Cups (SCWC) ahead of the men's Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) Football World Cup, the Street Child Games (SCG) ahead of the Summer Olympics in Rio (2016), and the first Street Child Cricket World Cup (SCCWC) in Cambridge and London (2019) ahead of the men's International Cricket Council (ICC) World Cup. These small-scale international sports events attract in-person audiences of a few hundred people.

The aim of SCU events is to inspire national governments, policy makers, and communities to better protect and respect street-connected children, supporting them to 'realise their fullest potential' (SCU, 2020). Each event has brought up to 24 teams of up to nine players (aged 14–17) to host countries to compete and, more importantly, provide opportunities for children to speak out about their experiences of being street-connected, and facilitate a change in attitude towards how they are positioned and supported in society. Unique to SCU events, is the facilitation of an arts festival and a General Assembly, where the children deliver co-produced messages developed as part of a series of workshops known as the Congress. The messages they communicate – about what it is like to be young and street-connected and what is needed to improve their lives and the lives of others like them – are aimed directly at governments and policy makers in their home countries.

Disseminating these messages beyond the General Assembly to broaden the impact of SCU events on the children, the communities they come from, and the civil society organisations (CSOs) that support them, requires that these organisations engage effectively with the media (Corcoran et al., 2020). Therefore, to inform the development of media management strategies, it is vital to understand how the media have previously been utilised to meet SCU's aims of changing public perceptions.

We present an analysis of media coverage of all SCU events organised between 2010 and 2019, focused on understanding: 1. how street-connected children and the impact and transformation created by SCU events are represented; 2. how the different organisations engage with and benefit from media attention at the local level; and 3. any missed opportunities for leveraging exposure for social change. Using the findings, we make recommendations about managing the media as a vehicle for leveraging the power of sports and communicating the transformative impact of sporting events to improving street-connected children's lives.

Sports events, media coverage, street-connectedness, and community development

Being street-connected suggests a variety of ways in which children engage with and experience the opportunities and challenges inherent to inhabiting the interactive space understood as 'the street' (Kaneva & Corcoran, 2021). There are both positives and negatives inherent to being street-

connected and many reasons for why children are on the street (Meda, 2011; Wakia, 2010). They may have not only experienced trauma and violence on the street, but also run from traumatic experiences and abuse at home (Thomas De Benitez, 2007). Therefore, working with street-connected children involves building trust and forging appropriate relationships between adults and young people who have previously been let down by adults (Ferguson, 2017). To develop trusting relationships with street-connected children, social work teams build self-confidence and involve them in decisions about their next steps – in terms of going (back) into education, reconciling with family members, and/or reintegrating into the wider community (Johnson, 2017; Kaime-Atterhög et al., 2007).

One way in which CSOs engage with street-connected children is through sport. For example, football (Kath & van Buuren, 2013; Williams, 2010), cricket (Denborough, 2015) and boxing (Ferguson, 2017) have been highlighted as useful for involving and supporting children affected by trauma. For street-connected children, sport can provide a space of enjoyment and freedom (Corcoran et al., 2020). For CSOs, it can provide a foundation for advocacy programmes aiming to change public perceptions of street-connectedness. Using sport-based programmes with specific groups of children, in this way, relates to hypernorms that can reinforce perceptions about the contributions of sport to the resolution of complex social issues and cultural challenges inherent to fostering understanding, tolerance and peace between often divided communities (Meir & Fletcher, 2019, 2020; Richardson & Fletcher, 2020; Schulenkorf, 2012). Sport-based interventions are frequently used to engage with young people at the micro-level, where activities provide opportunities to alleviate distorted relations, and potentially encourage social interaction, cooperative behaviour, and trust, between young people and the agencies who support them.

The use of sport-based programmes to positively impact street-connected children's lives may be conceptualised within a multi-level system, which combines macro-level/distal or 'experience-distant' philosophical thoughts about the inherent benefits of sport with micro-level/proximal or 'experience-near' sport specific activities (Tudge et al., 2009). Delivering such sport-for-development programmes to benefit specific communities of participants, suggests the existence of a 'ripple-effect' of an activity's impact filtering through to other layers of a participants' social world (Brunett, 2015). This observation resonates with Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Framework for Human Development, which describes how interconnections within and across different societal levels influence specific stakeholder's development. The different layers that make up such an ecological system (micro, meso, exo and macro) represent boundaries where stakeholders and the environment interact (Duerden & Witt, 2011).

To conceptualise the relationship between SCU sports events and related media coverage, the Ecological Framework aid our conceptualisation of the interconnections within and across the different societal levels and how these then influence perceptions of street-connectedness (Duerden & Witt, 2011). The micro-layer relates to the internal setting in which SCU operates and the interrelations between individuals within the organisation. The meso-layer is the industrial context in which SCU operates and considers the influence of the activities of the organisation – i.e. events that use sports to draw media attention towards street-connected children. The exo-layer refers to the partners – in this case the media – that have the ability to influence perceptions of SCU, their events, and street-connected children. The macro-layer includes the macro-societal hyper-norms, which shape grand narratives around sport, events, street-connectedness and children.

The interconnections within and across the meso-level, which occur at events and/or within specific sport-related programmes, enable children's access to leisure time and fun and are potentially motivated to promote engagement with other education programmes and services provided. In communities where outreach work is carried out to ensure the retention of children in schools and prevent their migration to the street, the provision of organised sport provides opportunities for children to engage with each other, develop new skills, and receive informal education (Njoroge, 2017). In relation to the interconnections within and across the exo-level between sporting events and the associated media through which they are observed there is an opportunity to provide insight into athletic performance,

but also commentary on a range of issues; in particular, showcasing activities which seek to bring about social change and support the advancement of groups who are often perceived as underprivileged and underrepresented within society. In this way, media are one part of a complex, multi-layered system connecting sporting events with individuals and collective groups for a specific moment in time (Black et al., 2020, 2021; Dowse & Fletcher, 2018; Malcolm & Fletcher, 2017).

Media messages associated with an event are frequently influenced by societal pressures such as politics, economics and culture. These determine the narratives through which sport and its relationship with collective identities are shaped (Dashper et al., 2014), and further emphasise the interrelatedness between the exo- and macro-levels of the system. For instance, previous research analysing media coverage of sports and sporting events indicates that it can both create and reinforce dominant social norms (Black et al., 2020). In particular, the news discourse surrounding sporting events often consists of ideological representations, in which topics reported on and terms set, underpin dominant frames of reference that contextualise sporting events at particular historical moments.

Therefore, media associated with sporting events can perpetuate and reinforce ideologies of domination, such as the macro-level hypernorms related to gender, 'race', class, sexuality and nation – especially when advocacy processes associated with the media aim to engage global and local audiences. As such, there is potential for media sports reporting to reflect deep-rooted inequalities and reinforce negative and deficit perceptions of groups usually positioned as marginal or under-represented (Fletcher & Dashper, 2013; Dashper et al., 2014). Alternatively, when the engagement of these groups in sport receives responsible media coverage, audiences can be introduced to concepts and ideas they may not have previously considered, or that challenge taken-for-granted perceptions (Brittain, 2017).

There is a limited focus on children in the literature concerned with sports, events, and the media, and even less of a focus on how street-connected children are represented, suggesting that children are not seriously considered as legitimate stakeholders in sport event narratives (Dowse et al., 2018). However, for partners bringing teams to compete in SCU events, sport is an incredibly important aspect of their advocacy plans. Organisations fielding teams at the 2018 SCWC for example, considered it a platform for increased media exposure and awareness of their work. For some, the event was central to their advocacy programme, providing a space for sharing their message(s) on the world stage through the Congress and General Assembly (Corcoran et al., 2020). For example, in the messages they shared, a number of teams focused on the campaign for all street-connected children to be provided with identification documents and access to basic services (SCU, 2018).

Supporting street-connected children to develop their messages meets the aim of GC21, which clearly states that they are experts on their own lives, and advocates for their involvement in the development and implementation of initiatives aimed at their protection. In sharing their stories with the world, they believe that they are active participants in advocating for change (Corcoran et al., 2020). How these messages are utilised and acted upon, therefore, is a significant responsibility of all stakeholders involved, including the media, in taking that advocacy forward. To disseminate these messages as widely as possible, SCU's media team attempts to engage closely with national and international media organisations, many of which have an active presence at the events. SCU's aim is to construct the image of street-connected children as capable, talented and resourceful. For example, each of the events centralises the strapline: #IAMSomebody. Emphasising the importance of interactions across the different levels of the system, where the media (exo-level) are placed at the centre of attempts to disseminate advocacy messages developed at events (meso-level), raises important questions over the management of media narratives (micro-level) by SCU relating to the representation of street-connected children at their events and more broadly (macro-level).

In the remainder of this paper, we explore the extent to which the media have engaged meaningfully with SCU events and/or curated positive representations of street-connected children. Our findings provide insights into the role of sports event organisers and media companies in framing narratives around street-connected children and for leveraging social impact for groups of young people often identified as being vulnerable and/or marginalised.

Research design

The study explored in this article is part of a wider series of projects. Corcoran et al. (2020) focused on the impact of SCU events on the players, their communities and the organisations that support them (Corcoran et al., 2020). A Leisure Studies Association-funded follow up is exploring the potential of the events to leverage impact towards long-term social change, involving interviews with the participants, project leaders, volunteers, trustees, and delivery partners. The media analysis presented here was part of the Manchester Metropolitan University RISE internship programme and was developed to inform aspects of the wider debate that focused on managing stakeholder relationships towards developing specific media messages.

As use of the media is a key part of SCU's advocacy programme, an analysis of their and their partners' previous engagement with the media (locally, nationally and globally), has the potential to highlight challenges and opportunities for how best to manage media narratives. This study aimed to identify the tone and content of media coverage related to all SCU events organised so far: the Street Child World Cup (2010, South Africa, 2014, Brazil, 2018, Russia), the Street Child Games (Brazil, 2016), and the Street Child Cricket World Cup (England, 2019). We thematically reviewed online media sources related to all these events. Primary data was retrieved from online sources between June and September 2020. We used Google News due to its functionality, accuracy of keyword searches, and translate function. As this is the first media analysis of SCU events, we intentionally kept our search terms broad. These included:

- Street Child United.
- Street Child World Cup.
- Street Child Games.
- Street Child Olympics (there has never been a Street Child Olympics as the term 'Olympics' is heavily copyrighted, but we wanted to find media sources that had unintentionally conflated the terms 'Games' and 'Olympics').
- Street Child Cricket World Cup.

In addition to the broad online search, we also targeted local online newspapers and magazines, specific to the competing nations, which were known to the research team, such as *Standard Media* in Kenya. We identified 112 sources that referred to SCU events. The full list of media sources are included in an open access document here: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1aYrYhIpr_ANG4vStH3_HSDoj4ErHLYuM7wFm1-7Z_Z8/edit?usp=sharing.

The majority of the sources ($n = 92$) were written in English. Our search also returned sources ($n = 20$) in Indonesian, Urdu, Tamil, French, and Dutch. Each of these either had headlines written in English and/or had referred to 'Street Child World Cup' or 'Street Child United' in English in the body of the articles. In this relatively small number of cases, the authors used their own language knowledge and the Google Translate tool. In addition, colleagues of the authors translated Tamil and Urdu video dialogue.

While not a focus of our analysis it should be acknowledged that the limited number of media sources written in languages other than English raises questions about the representativeness of the results, but more importantly, the power of these sources to influence global audiences. Due to our large reliance on English language sources, we recognise that our analysis will have likely missed content emerging from local media sources in some of the teams' home countries and indeed, where the events have been held. Moreover, while Google Translate is effective for some languages, there are limitations to how nuanced these translations are.

The content of the articles was thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Open coding was used to group relevant findings from the text of these sources, and repeated re-reading and analysis of the data allowed for the emergence of themes. In this paper, we were particularly concerned with

how the media represented: 1. street-connected children in general; 2. the players and the organisations that support them; 3. SCU as an organisation; and 4. SCU events. We identified five themes inherent to how the media sources depicted the above:

- (1) Impersonal and informative. Focused mainly on the logistical information of the events and not their wider purpose and significance.
- (2) Paternalistic. Representing street-connected children in deficit terms and as in need of rescuing.
- (3) Emotive. Privileging of street-connected children's struggles.
- (4) Issue-focused. Drawing variously upon the collective struggles of the children to represent street-connected children and street-connectedness.
- (5) Empowering. Narratives underscoring the children's strengths, aspirations and agency, while also highlighting the potential and impact of SCU events.

Impersonal and informative

The sources categorised as presenting impersonal and informative narratives tend to relay logistical information about the events, with very little or no detail about their wider purpose in terms of advocacy, giving young people a voice, and impact. Around a third of sources (39/112) focused almost exclusively on the sports. This is noteworthy as SCU explicitly states that the competition is of marginal importance compared to the Congress and General Assembly, as well as general campaigning and advocacy. Indeed, only 27 sources centralised these issues. For example:

By giving a voice to children who have all spent time living in poverty, [SCU] aims to put pressure on communities and governments to protect the rights of vulnerable kids. (Church, 2019)

The goal of these Olympics-inspired games was to raise awareness around the challenges street children face, as well as provide the children with an opportunity to compete using sports as a positive tool for change. (Selby, 2016)

In relation to the event itself, only 18 sources described opportunities, such as the General Assembly, for the children to speak out:

The tournament aims to unite people from various nations and spotlight the life of #TheInvisibles. Off the pitch, the young people will make their voices heard and make recommendations to help improve the lives of street children worldwide. (India CSR network, 2019)

In some cases, the aims of the event were completely misrepresented:

[SCU] is seeking to promote sports among the underprivileged class and encourage them to pursue a career in sport. (Raheel, 2016)

The impersonal and informative narrative was epitomised by sources (n = 26) which predominantly relayed logistical information, such as dates, player names and competition outcomes:

The Philippines-Payatas team suffered the same fate it experienced 4 years ago after it absorbed a 0-1 loss to Brazil in the semifinals . . . The all-girls football squad . . . will face England for the bronze medal while the defending champions seek to retain their crown against Tanzania. (Rappler.com, Rappler, 2018)

Other sources went completely against the event narrative by focusing on the competition and, in some cases even showcasing national sporting talent:

The impressive squad . . . successfully passed them in the semi-finals. (Adhiyasa, 2018)

Within these sources, SCU, SCU events, and partner organisations, were barely mentioned, or the organisations were either simply named or positioned as saviours who have rescued the players from their street situations (e.g. Bolotsky, 2018; WowKeren, 2013). These will be discussed further below.

Interestingly, children were often described using terminology more akin to that associated with professional athletes – e.g. ‘international players’. In other instances, children were depicted as national representatives, with no acknowledgement of their street-connectedness. For example, this quote from a speech by the President of Indonesia:

The Garuda team that will depart is expected to be able to maintain stamina and mentality and we pray that the brothers make the name of the nation proud in the 2014 SCWC Brazil event. (Kompas, 2014)

It was also common for sources to detail the children’s gameplay, skills, training schedules, scores, and surface profiles (i.e. ages, names, nationalities, and associated organisations). However, while such representations offer positive narratives of individual success, they overlook or ignore opportunities to engage audiences in the events’ wider purpose – raising awareness of street-connectedness.

Reporting on the successful performances of the children could be considered empowering, in that they reinforce the view that these young people are capable individuals. However, we argue that by focusing on the sport, these sources shift the lens away from street-connected children’s lived realities and the messages they develop and articulate via media engagement.

There is, therefore, a disconnect between the aim of the events and some of the media framing. In attributing success to children’s hard work, the implication is that street-connectedness can be resolved through hard work and talent alone. In reality, street-connectedness results from inter-related and complex structural inequalities (Lucchini & Stoecklin, 2020; Thomas De Benitez, 2011). If the media fail to communicate these effectively, the goals of SCU and its events will be harder to realise.

Paternalistic

In this paper, we define paternalistic representations in relation to GC21 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 2017), which describes paternalism as treating street-connected children as victims in need of rescuing. Such representations, when used to define social policy or interventions of support aimed at these children, inevitably involve decision-making that does not consider their desires and views, taking away their right to be heard (United Nations, 2017). Of the sources, 36 reinforced a paternalistic discourse, 19 of these were published during the most recent event in 2019.

Paternalistic representations could be further categorised as either taking a ‘saviour’ (n = 23) or ‘paying back’ (n = 13) perspective. Those adopting a saviour perspective focused on the ways in which stakeholders (i.e. corporate sponsors, state sponsors and agencies/CSOs) had a hand in helping the children. The paying back perspective underscored narratives of the children as national representatives and the national pride associated with their participation.

Sources presenting a saviour perspective were often guilty of misrepresenting street-connected children’s lived realities (e.g. Balajee, 2016; Pratama, 2018). They frequently emphasised the aid and support given by donors, organisers, and government officials, representing the children’s performances as products of the charity rather than emphasising the context in which these children live, the hurdles they have overcome, and their agency. As a result, the successes of the children are positioned as exceptional (and unexpected) in relation to their street-connectedness. It was common for sources to provide personalised narratives and individual case studies to elicit empathy and sympathy among readers. For example:

Kanadoss moved to Chennai as a youth and slept in a railway station before being taken to a shelter ... “I cannot imagine what would have been my life on the streets if Karunalaya had not rescued me,” he said. (Meenaghan, 2014)

In contrast, sources adopting a paying back perspective emphasised narratives of success, depicting players as symbols of nation and national pride. For example, accompanied by an image of Pakistani children displaying their medals and striking Usain Bolt's famous 'To Di World' pose, Tanwir (2016) writes how:

Our youth is considered as a treasure for Pakistan. This particular youth segment of our population is making the whole country proud at a global level.

It was common for these sources to utilise personal narratives. Nath (2016) focused on Hepsiba who won gold in the 100 metres for Team India at the 2016 Street Child Games, reflecting:

Have you ever wondered how people live on the streets? What are their hours of working? How do they manage academics and finances? Do they have any hobbies? Well, we can tell you one thing for sure - there is a certain section of young street dwellers in Chennai who've made India proud in Rio de Janeiro, where they won medals in the Street Child Games.

Discourses of nation and pride were not isolated to winning teams:

Only here [SCWC] . . . would you see a team of Indonesian girls trailing 8-0 to the host country after only 10 minutes yet spending much of their half time respite dancing and singing and grinning like the scores were reversed? (Meenaghan, 2014)

Such narratives celebrated the children for being at the event and representing their country rather than their performances *per se*. Children were frequently positioned as inspirational role models for other street-connected children to identify with (Church, 2019). For example, Jayarajan (2018) referred to Indian players at the Moscow SCWC as the 'pride of the street', going on to describe Sangeetha's story and her intention to use the event's momentum to inspire more girls into football:

"There aren't many women coaches here. I want to train to be a coach, get a licence and teach many kids to play football".

Emphasising the saviour narrative, some of the articles did not mention the children at all; preferring instead to highlight the work and involvement of sponsors and CSOs:

Seeing a twelve-year-old with a magnum revolver is not a rare sight inside the narrow winding streets of favelas. But there was a ray of hope. The good folks of 'Favela Street' was there. (Dey, 2016)

Paternalistic perspectives are problematic as they work to disempower street-connected children by highlighting deficit notions of street-connectedness (Corcoran, 2015) and/or the actions of saviour organisations/donors through a discourse that emphasises the rescuer-rescued binary (Beazley & Miller, 2015; Kaneva & Corcoran, 2021).

Emotive

Sources framing an emotive narrative were categorised by their use of emotive language, primarily aimed at inciting similarly emotional responses from the reader. Of the sources, 21 presented such narratives of the children, events, and organisers. Case studies of children were commonly used to highlight individual struggles, journeys, and transformation, routinely describing them as 'struggling' and having experienced 'hardship' throughout their lives (e.g. Chanda, 2019). Participation in the event was depicted as providing the children with 'hope' and sources emphasised how they felt 'proud' to be there (e.g. Titiknol, 2017). Within such sources, the players' achievements and newly found 'fame' are regularly juxtaposed against a backdrop of hardship and exploitation. For example:

Hear the stories of the Filipinas who beat overwhelming odds to succeed in Russia . . . The stories of these brave footballers are both heartbreaking and inspiring. (Guerrero, 2018)

At the slum they live, these youngsters are celebrities now. Posters with their pictures dot the area. But they lead a hard life. (Chennaiyin, n.d.)

Rather than exploring structural inequalities and systemic limitations to educate readers about the complex lived realities of being street-connected, these simplified emotive narratives serve to elicit their emotional responses. For example:

“I feel very lucky. Not many other children are as lucky as me,” said Somad, who helps his parents collect garbage daily. (BBC, 2018)

Emphasising how lucky he feels and, later in the article, his ‘higher spirit’ against having to ‘scavenge’ for food, reinforces deficit constructs and the rescue-remove binary that we see elsewhere in representations of street-connected children (Beazley & Miller, 2015; Kaneva & Corcoran, 2021).

Moreover, there was also evidence of street-connected children being (incorrectly) branded as ‘homeless’ and/or ‘orphans’. For example:

The Street Child World Cup helps remind the public that there are homeless youngsters across the world, not just in South Africa. (Nkosi, 2017)

The tournament’s stars are orphans, who were either abandoned by their parents or come from extreme poverty. (The Nation, 2018)

Emotively written, deficit representations of street-connected children’s lived realities undermine their multi-dimensional and complex experiences of street-connectedness, while exercising their agency on a day-to-day basis, and through their participation in SCU events. While the above sources may aim to highlight street-connected children’s issues and develop a call to action directed at the public, the overly emotive and sympathetic discourse is problematic. Firstly, they potentially reinforce the role of the saviour, leading to readers perceiving themselves in this role. Secondly, focusing on individual stories homogenises lived experiences. Thirdly, positioning street-connectedness as an individual problem detracts from the reality that it requires community-, regional-, and national-level focus on implementing systemic change.

Issue-focused

Articles (n = 40) that took an issue-focused approach drew variously upon the collective struggles of the children to create a broad representation of their street-connectedness (e.g. Baggott, n.d.; Hares, 2018). These sources emphasise street-connectedness as a wider structural issue affecting their, and their families’, lived realities. For example:

“A lot of girls on the streets are fleeing early marriage, as well as sexual abuse and violence. But the streets are not safe. My real father now is Forhad [Hossain] because he helped me and got me an identity document, which is proof of my age and protects me from marriage.” (Geraghty, 2019)

“The whole time that I’ve been out in the streets, I haven’t been able to see any respect to my rights . . . I’m not talking about only my own rights, but the rights of all of those who are out in the streets.” (Long, 2016)

Using this last quote from Luana, who represented Brazil at the 2016 Street Child Games, as a starting point, Long (2016) goes on to state how ‘the campaign [i.e. SCU and SCU events] asserts the human rights of street children and advocates the need for special protection in the lead-up to mega-sporting events’. The article goes on to say that ‘street children face an increased risk of human rights violations as host cities prepare to host mega-events, including forced evictions’. Other sources similarly place mega-sporting events in the spotlight. For example:

A month before the FIFA World Cup in Russia, the week-long event aims to draw attention to a problem that experts say is vastly under-reported and leaves young people at risk of sex trafficking and arrest. (Griffin, 2018)

The spectacle and excitement surrounding the Olympics can make it easy to forget about the many lives impacted by events of this nature . . . The true cost of the Olympics is a human cost . . . placed on the people who can least afford it . . . who live and work in Brazil’s urban slum neighborhoods. (Selby, 2016)

Issue-focused sources offered more nuanced contextualisation of the political, social, and economic situations that could put children at risk of becoming street-connected (e.g. Dey, 2016). Sources citing interviews with the likes of Duncan Ross from StreetInvest (Griffin, 2018), or Claudia Cabral of Terre De Hommes (Duncan, 2014), highlight a range of issues underpinning street-connectedness, such as conflict, poverty, and urbanisation, as well as the (lack of) provision of basic services, the risk of neglect or physical, psychological and sexual abuse, or involvement in drug use and trafficking. Many of these sources refer explicitly to SCU's purpose of providing a platform for street-connected children's voices. They mention the General Assembly (e.g. ITV, 2019; Young, 2014) and/or often include interviews with SCU representatives, such as this one with John Wroe (CEO):

“We say our campaign message is ‘I am somebody’, and to get young people and families that are completely off the radar and don't officially exist, on the radar. Therefore, they are able to access education and healthcare, able to work in something other than the informal economy . . .” (Taylor, 2019).

Issue-focused articles alert readers to the complexities of being street-connected, as well as emphasising wider structural issues that the players' themselves want to see addressed, such as birth registration (e.g. News7Tamil, 2016). Many issue-focused narratives intersect with one or more of the other themes that have been identified. For example, paternalistic approaches use issues underpinning street-connectedness to underscore donors' efforts to address the issues while simultaneously overlooking the children's perspectives (e.g. Meenaghan, 2014; Nath, 2016). Such representations allude to narratives of street-connectedness that reinforce the saviour discourse, disempowering street-connected children and minimising the impact of the agency and voice evident in their articulations at the General Assembly.

More positively, some issue-focused sources constructed empowering narratives focused on the children's lived realities, placing their voices front and centre. These would often refer explicitly to the General Assembly and the messages shared (e.g. Balasubramanian, 2018; Ramadhani, 2014). Sources framed in this way highlight the agency, voice and demands of the children as they described the deep-rooted inequalities contributing to their street-connectedness.

Empowering

Sources articulating empowering narratives ($n = 37$), underscored the children's strengths, aspirations, and agency, while also highlighting the potential impact of SCU events. This theme was distinct from the others, in that the sources aimed to engage with the complexities of street-connected children's lives *without* evoking the sympathy or pity identified earlier. Rather, these sources emphasised how street-connected children have relative agency over their own lived experiences and their abilities as political and social activists. Many of these sources drew upon specific calls to action from the children themselves and there were various examples emerging from the different SCU events.

To capture the strength of conviction, we refer to three examples in particular, relating to children from India. In Griffin (2018), Usha describes how her participation at the SCG inspired her campaign to change how street-connected children are perceived and treated globally:

Most people ostracise and stigmatise those of us who live on the street. They treat us like lesser human beings and blame us for the way we are forced to live. But, because we lack any form of legal identification . . . welfare, education and healthcare are all impossible for us to access . . . [which] limits what you can achieve in life . . . Without a legal identity, we are powerless.

Usha's participation in the SCG facilitated her access to a legal identity. She acknowledges that many other young people are not as lucky and demands action.

Balasubramanian (2018) focuses on Shalini and her team's journey to Moscow:

[Shalini] was saved from child marriage [and] wants to become a social worker. “Being here has influenced me to serve the society. I want to help street children like me,” she says.

Similarly, Sidharth (2019) captures an evocative moment from the 2019 SCCWC General Assembly. Monisha’s speech described living on the street without protection or basic facilities such as water, toilets, and clean food, and the risk of abuse that street-connected children face. Her call to action, included the following:

“If you respect us, you will listen to us. If you listen to us, you will protect us. Please protect us.”

The children featured in many of the sources asserted their gratitude for being able to participate in SCU events and having what they perceived to be potentially life-changing opportunities for personal growth and wider activism.

Other sources presenting an empowering narrative refer to the aims and mission of SCU of providing a platform for communicating street-connected children’s voices. For example:

... in this tournament, the players are all street kids ... It’s the first event of its kind, aiming to grab the football spotlight to give children a platform to speak about the poverty and violence they face on the streets. (The Himalayan Times, 2018)

For John, who is now studying community development in university and works as a social worker, football was the way out. “The most important thing here is not about competing in football,” John said of the Street Child World Cup. “It’s about making the voices of street children all over the world heard and making them realize that they can be somebody.” (Smirnova, 2018)

The children were regularly presented as multi-faceted agents with dreams, aspirations and challenges, which span well beyond their participation. For example:

There is so much that needs to be done for children and families living on the street and so many stories that need to be counted. They are backed up by a lifetime of experience. When I am older, I want to work to improve the conditions in my community so that other children can also go to school and study. Now, I want to send a message to the government ... it should act so that no child has to live on the streets. (Elumalai, 2016)

We are cautious not to over-state the transformative potential and impact of SCU events on the children. Without follow-up research with children who have participated in these events it is impossible to suggest what impact, if any, these events have in the medium- and long-term. However, a focus on empowerment amplifies street-connected children’s voices and presents narratives that highlight wider structural issues contributing to their street-connectedness.

Media focus on street-connectedness, sporting events, or both?

Our analysis aimed to understand how the media communicates street-connected children’s experiences and whether such representations of street-connectedness and/or SCU events are cognisant with SCU’s goal of transforming public perceptions. We identified five overarching narratives. Impersonal and informative articles focused on logistical information rather than the events’ wider purpose. Paternalistic approaches positioned street-connected children as in need of rescuing. Emotive sources used overly emotive language to focus on the children’s struggles, while issue-focused sources represented street-connectedness through the children’s collective struggles. Finally, empowering sources underscored children’s strengths, aspirations, and agency and/or highlighted the potential and impact of SCU events.

In general, messages of advocacy and children’s rights are present, but inconsistently framed. For example, a source taking an impersonal dominant approach may mention an SCU event and the aim of supporting street-connected children, but not the detail required to transform readers’ perspectives of street-connectedness. In contrast, using emotive language to position the events, SCU, or SCU partners, as rescuing the children from terrible situations, presents one-dimensional perspectives of street-connectedness centred upon the children’s lack of agency.

Thus, within the media narratives there exists a binary between pity and inspiration. This is not specific to media representations of street-connected children. Indeed, there have been similar calls for better management of the media and messages that are conveyed about disability sport and disabled athletes (Brittain, 2017; Kearney et al., 2019). This is especially evident in representations of disabled athletes and ‘supercrip’ discourses (McGillivray et al., 2019; Schalk, 2016). Brittain (2017) argues how, while the level of media coverage for disability sport and athletes is increasing, the quality of this coverage varies greatly. In many cases, he suggests that ‘the media still needs to be properly advised in order to ensure that they do not send the wrong messages’ (p. 259).

Similar criticisms of media narratives have emerged in the context of the Homeless Football World Cup. Sherry and Osborne (2011) for instance, argue that media coverage tends to reinforce dominant political positions on key social issues such as homelessness, asylum seeking, and immigration. English et al. (2020) lamented how media coverage of the Invictus Games highlighted a greater focus on the celebrity and entertainment of the event, than on the competitors. SCU aims to provide a global platform for highlighting the rights and demands of street-connected children. The success of this is contestable because, as we have highlighted, the children, events, and conceptualisations of street-connectedness are often simplified or misrepresented and we found limited narratives focused on the children’s experiences of the events. Their stories of being street-connected were used to contextualise the sports and/or the events, and their words were not unpacked or explored.

There is a missed opportunity in many of the sources, especially given the children’s efforts to develop clear advocacy messages for the General Assembly. The Congress is structured to enable a safe space for the children to share their stories and co-create the messages they later share. The pride they feel about being spokespersons for other street-connected children and their hope for meaningful social change (Corcoran et al., 2020) indicates a responsibility for ensuring these messages are broadcast, and that there is follow up in the months and years after the event. There is, therefore, a difficult balance to establish between drawing in the curious reader, educating them about the ‘big’ issues, and changing their perceptions of street-connectedness. The events organised by SCU attract global media coverage, which is a clear success indicator and a good foundation to work from in developing strategies towards ensuring that advocacy messages are discussed beyond the confines of each event.

Returning again to Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) Ecological Framework, facilitates our understanding of how interconnections within and across different societal levels (i.e. micro, meso, exo, and macro) influence the narratives about sports events and the representations of street-connected children. In re-examining the five overarching themes, we find that the focus of impersonal and informative articles on logistical information, rather than the wider purpose of the events, suggests an interaction across the exo- and meso-levels. In contrast, the paternalistic, emotive, and issue-focused articles suggest interaction across the exo- and macro-level as representations of street-connectedness appear to be influenced by the distal societal hypernorms associated with homelessness and children. Therefore, to change public perceptions of street-connected children, it is crucial for local and international media channels to present narratives that are both empowering and issue-focused – as they hold the potential to communicate the realities of street-connectedness at both local and global levels. A strategy to manage relationships with the media and other stakeholders is required if organisations like SCU are to successfully determine the media narratives.

It must be noted that we are not positioning the media coverage of the events as lazy or poor. We are working to understand whether advocacy messages are being disseminated effectively and what SCU needs to consider in relation to developing relationships with the media that ensure child-led processes of managing narratives. Small organisations like SCU rely on intimate relationships with stakeholders, therefore, it is important to keep the network small and work with it.

Conclusion

Sporting events and the media coverage they receive are often used by organisers, policy makers and even entire governments to raise awareness of domestic and global issues. To make the most impact it is vitally important to present a coherent narrative around these events. This narrative must be determined at the micro-level (e.g. with SCU in the case of this paper) as, without a coherent narrative, the public are likely to become confused and subsequently disengage. Although it is recognised that SCU aims to construct narratives of street-connected children as capable, talented, and resourceful (#IAMSomebody), such narratives have prioritised individual events at the meso-level. As we have shown throughout this paper, SCU places significant emphasis on the media for maximising its global messaging. To successfully disseminate the desired narrative, however, organisations like SCU must ensure that media companies, editors, and journalists understand what they and their events stand for.

Essentially, the message must ‘ripple’ outwards to impact other levels of the ecosystem, which is not necessarily the case as 67 sources did not mention SCU at all. As such, the impact of SCU’s mission is limited as they are not positioned as the driving force behind the message. Without this micro-level guidance and direction, cultural intermediaries, such as the media, have autonomy in shaping macro-level hypernorms, and without intervention, these hypernorms invariably cast street-connected children in deficit terms. This also extends to how SCU events are portrayed.

SCU events are not principally sporting events (though sport is undoubtedly an important hook for engaging with the media). Greater attention should be placed on managing media narratives to centralise the children, their individual challenges and, more importantly, the root-causes of their street-connectedness. Concerning the latter, it was noteworthy that less than half of the sources contained explicit calls to action ($n = 49$). Given the prominence SCU places on the General Assembly and the work of the children to disseminate their messages, the media must be more effectively embedded in the advocacy process. Moreover, we found limited media coverage of the impact of SCU events, suggesting that media engagement is temporary: taking an interest in the event while it plays out rather than buying into the longer project. This highlights the limits of media activism in terms of both reach and capacity to effect change in isolation as media activism is at its most potent when it links and interacts with other actors across the entire ecosystem (see, also McGillivray et al., 2021).

We suggest the need for more continuous engagement with the media to sustain interest and leverage impact – and that this extends beyond the time scale of the event to maintain a focus on the issues affecting street-connected children if they are to effect social change. All of this requires an informed and comprehensive media management plan framed within a holistic theory of change model (e.g. Lewis, 2017). A number of studies similarly advocate the need for event advocacy narratives to be co-created via sustained engagement with the media (e.g. Grohs et al., 2020). Understanding how sport event organisers – and/or CSOs in general – and the media can work together to create shared value is paramount, especially given that value is co-created and individually determined by the different actors (Grohs et al., 2020). SCU and their partners should seek to manage the narrative to ensure a specific direction of travel for advocacy messages to enable social impact. As GC21 suggests, the narrative is key to changing public and policy makers’ perceptions about street-connected children. Such an advocacy message cannot be homogenised: local aims and objectives defined by SCU’s partners and the young people they support will necessarily differ from the messages broadcast by SCU (inter)nationally. Structures must be enabled to develop these individual advocacy messages as part of, and within, a holistic approach to relationship building with the media at all stakeholder levels.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Street Child United for providing us with the opportunity to work with them, the Leisure Studies Association for funding part of the project, and Annie Carol Merciar and Nasrullah Ali for their help translating sources.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the The Leisure Studies Association.

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