

INFLUENCING FACTORS IN PRACTICING AND DEVELOPMENT OF HANDBALL IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: The popularity of a sport in general, and handball in particular, is influenced by a variety of interconnected factors that can vary significantly from one region to another such as: Economic factors, Sports infrastructure, Government and sports organization support, Media and technology, Sports culture and tradition, Sports performance, Accessibility and participation, Social and community impact. The present research is of two types, quantitative and qualitative, based on statistical analysis of available data. The design of the study is descriptive and explanatory, with the aim of identifying the geographical distribution of handball clubs and determining the factors that influence the popularity of this sport in Romania. As a study region, we chose Romania because of its strong handball tradition and outstanding international successes. The popularity of handball in Romania is influenced by a variety of economic, social and institutional factors. While there is notable development in certain regions, significant inequalities remain that require better targeted public policies and strategic investments. The promotion of handball as a national sport, supported both by adequate infrastructure and by educational and regional development policies, could contribute to increase the popularity and performances of this sport at the national level.

Key words: strategy, factors, performance, results, development, population

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INTRODUCTION

The popularity of a sport in general and of handball in particular is influenced by a variety of interrelated factors that can vary significantly from region to region. The popularity of handball is not globally uniform and regional variations can be explained by a combination of region-specific contextual factors. Studying these dimensions provides a clear perspective on how the sport can be supported and developed in the future.

Handball, one of the most popular team sports in Europe, has evolved significantly in Romania, largely influenced by demographic, social and economic factors. These have shaped the infrastructure, participation and success of the sport at national and international level. Understanding these influences is essential for identifying the key factors that have facilitated or hindered the growth of handball in Romania (Chirilă & Moldovan, 2018).

Demographic factors, such as population distribution and demographic changes, directly influence the level of participation in handball, especially among young people. One of the main demographic factors influencing handball in Romania is the age structure of the population. Romania has experienced significant demographic changes, including a decline in birth rates and an ageing population, which has led to a decrease in the number of young people participating in sports, including handball (Buhas et al., 2017; Herman et al., 2018). Urban areas, with higher population density and adequate sports infrastructure, have been the main centers of the development of the sport. In contrast, rural areas, where the population is more dispersed, face difficulties in promoting and practicing handball (Ionescu, 2019).

From a social point of view, handball has played an essential role in community cohesion and physical education in Romania. Historically, the sport has been introduced in schools and clubs, promoting a sense of team spirit and physical fitness (Ștefan & Dumitrescu, 2018). However, with the advent of digital entertainment and the increasing popularity of other sports, such as football and basketball, handball has faced challenges in maintaining its position as the leading team sport in the country (Franek & Kacprzak, 2017). Despite these challenges, Romania's national teams continue to achieve outstanding results at the international level, demonstrating the continued popularity of handball (Tătaru, 2019).

Economic factors have a direct influence on sports infrastructure development and financial support for local and national teams. Insufficient investment in sports halls and equipment has limited training opportunities, especially in poorer areas. However, the international success of Romanian teams (Biro et al., 2001) has helped to attract sponsors and increase public interest in handball (Romanian Handball Federation, 2023). Although the country has produced top athletes and successful teams, the lack of consistent financial support for local clubs and grassroots initiatives has limited the growth potential of the sport (Kovács, Popescu & Ionescu, 2020). Moreover, the dependence on public funding for infrastructure development and the lack of private sponsorship compared to other sports have hindered the expansion of handball at community and regional levels (Rusu & Ciobanu, 2016).

This paper aims to explore the various demographic, social and economic factors that influence the practice and development of handball in Romania. Through a review of relevant literature and an analysis of available data, this study aims to identify the challenges and opportunities shaping the future of sport in the country.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The present research is of two types, quantitative and qualitative, based on statistical analysis of available data. The design of the study is descriptive and explanatory, aiming to identify the geographical distribution of handball clubs and to determine some of the factors influencing the

practice of this sport in Romania. Thus, the correlations between the number of handball clubs at all levels in relation to demographics, gross domestic product and unemployment rate were analyzed.

The study conducted may be influenced by limited access to data, possible reporting errors or the influence of unanalyzed factors. The management of the limitations focused on checking sources and updating data to ensure the relevance and accuracy of the analysis. Also, extending the analysis for future research to include additional factors and qualitative methods for a deeper understanding of the targeted phenomenon can complement and certify the results of the present study.

The sports clubs included in the analysis are distributed geographically by counties, considering both their total number and their distribution by age, performance or value levels.

RESULTS

Taking into account the total number of sports clubs that have handball sections, the situation of their distribution by counties is presented in Fig. 1.

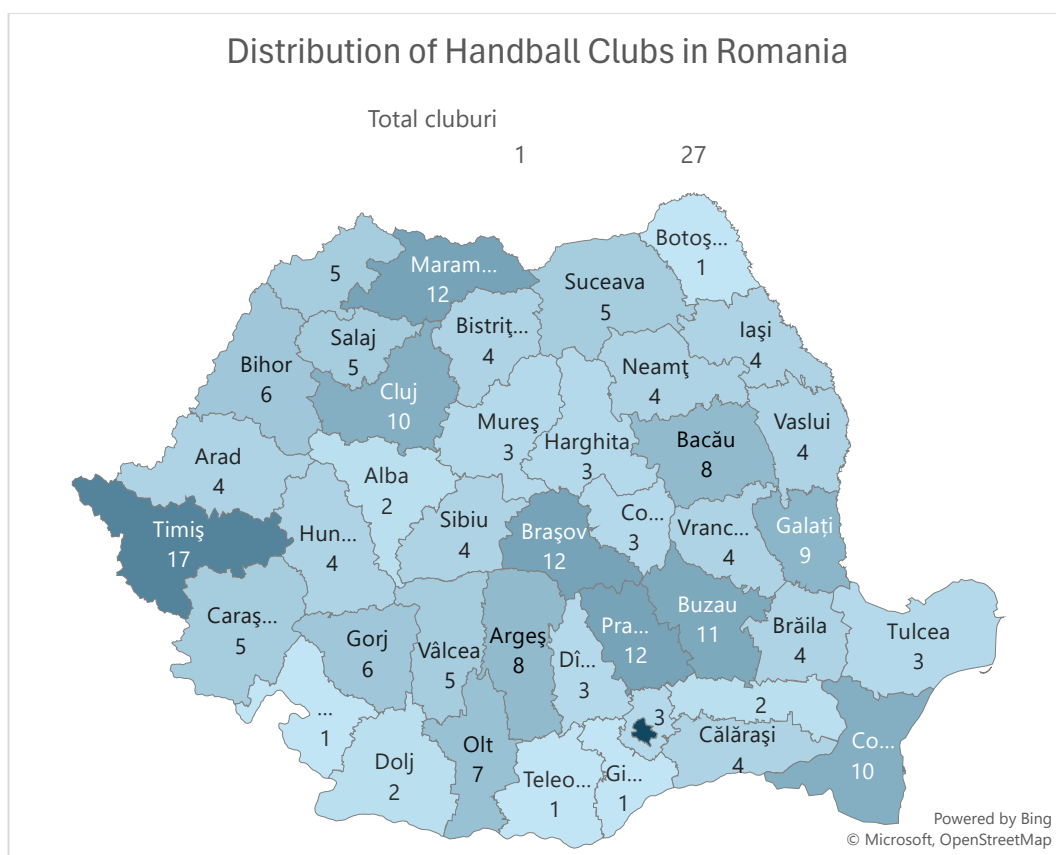


Figure 1 Distribution by county of sports clubs with handball sections

It can be seen that the most sports clubs are in Bucharest (27). The county with the most teams is Timiș (17), followed by Maramureș, Prahova and Brașov (12), Buzău (11), Cluj and Constanța (10). At the opposite pole, we find several counties with the lowest number of clubs: Botoșani, Mehedinți, Teleorman and Giurgiu with only one sports club with an active handball section.

Influencing factors in practicing and development of handball in Romania

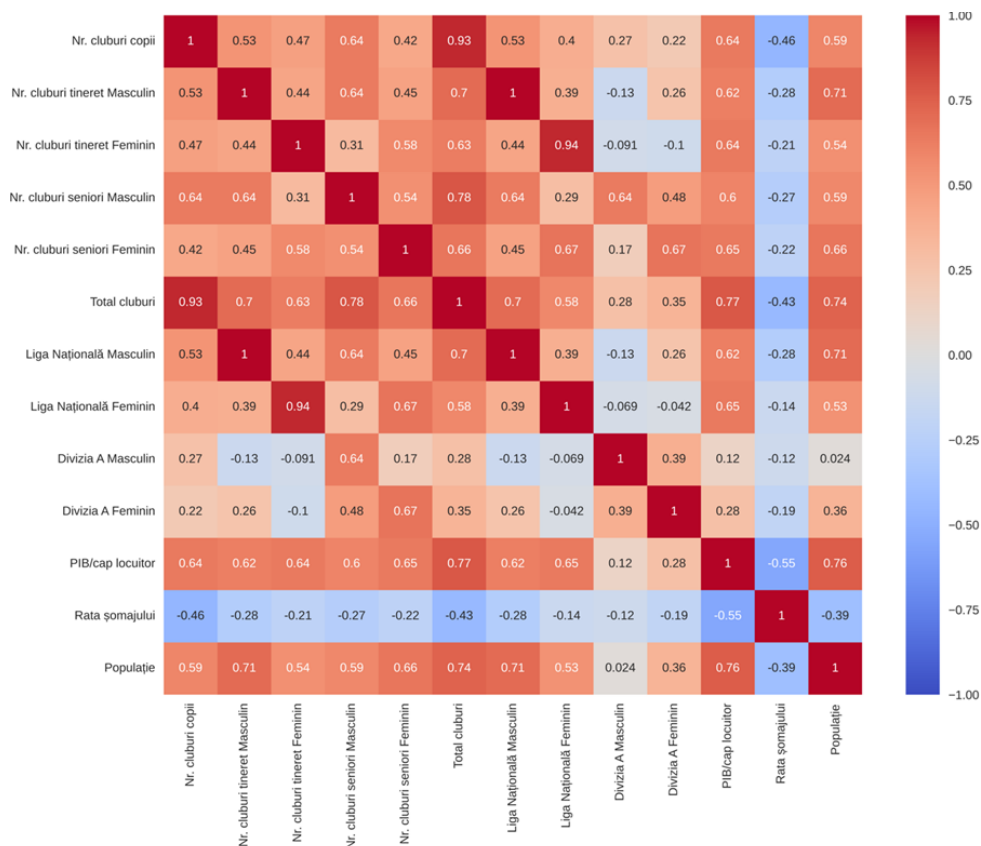


Figure 3 Correlation matrix for the variables investigated

In Fig. 3 we can also observe other important aspects regarding the correlation between the number of clubs and a number of factors that may influence their distribution by county or region:

1. Population: There is a positive correlation between county population and total number of clubs. Counties with larger populations tend to have more sports clubs.

2. GDP per capita: There is a positive correlation between GDP per capita and the number of clubs. Richer counties tend to have more sports clubs.

3. Unemployment rate: There is a weak negative correlation between the unemployment rate and the number of clubs. Counties with lower unemployment rates tend to have more sports clubs.

Table 1 Average of variables for counties with most clubs

	Above-average clubs	Below-average clubs
Mean	11.07	3.32
GDP per capita	104.12	73,76
Unemployment rate	2.79	4.06
Population	603866,43	378560,18

Comparing the means for the counties with the most and the fewest clubs (Table 1), we see that counties with more clubs have, on average:

- higher GDP per capita (104.12 vs. 73.76)
- a lower unemployment rate (2.79% vs 4.06%)
- a significantly higher population (603866,43 vs 378560,18)

DISCUSSIONS

Economic factors

The economic factor has helped handball. The professionalism of the game is given by the athletes who get to be paid fairly and to participate in international competitions at a high level of performance. Regions with a high standard of living tend to have a population that has more free time and financial resources to devote to sporting activities, both as participants and spectators. (Schneider, 2017)

Sports infrastructure:

The availability and quality of sports infrastructure (stadiums, sports halls, training grounds) are crucial for the development and popularization of a sport. Investing in sports infrastructure attracts more practitioners and bigger competitions. At the same time, sports infrastructure can boost tourism, local economy but also social cohesion of the community (Buhas et al., 2021). Adequate sports infrastructure is a major determinant of handball popularity. Studies show that access to well-equipped sports halls and training grounds directly influence the number of practitioners. In Scandinavian countries, continuous investment in infrastructure has helped to keep handball's popularity high. (Larsson, 2018)

Support from government and sports organizations

Research shows that government support and the involvement of sports organizations are essential for the development of handball. Government policies that promote sport in schools and the funding of sports clubs contribute significantly to the popularization of handball. For example, in Germany, the German Handball Federation works closely with the government to develop training programs and competitions at the national level (Schneider, 2017). Through collaboration between government and sport organizations, it can facilitate the promotion of sport, improve sport performance and stimulate public participation in sport activities. This sustained engagement can generate a beneficial impact on society, highlighting the benefits of sport and reinforcing a stronger and more inclusive sport culture.

Media and technology

Media coverage plays a crucial role in increasing the popularity of handball. Studies show that television broadcasts of handball competitions and the sport's presence on social media platforms attract new fans and practitioners. In France, the success of national handball teams at international competitions has been intensively publicized in the media, which has led to a significant increase in the popularity of the sport. (Dubois, 2019)

Innovations in technology such as video refereeing, health monitoring, and player performance analytics have played an important role in improving performance and safety. These include: video analytics systems, timing and statistical systems, tactical screen television technology, sports performance monitoring devices. Promotion, branding and marketing strategies aim to increase popularity and interest in a particular sport. Satisfying the needs and wants of supporters, relationships with sponsors and partners, ticket sales, advertising campaigns and merchandising impact not only popularity but also revenues. This theory helps make a positive and valuable impact for sports consumers.

One marketing strategy often practiced is interaction with the public during matches. Various raffle-type competitions are held with different team-related items as prizes. For example: players' jerseys, team merch: clothing accessories, scarves, mugs, free tickets to the next matches and so on.

Sports culture and tradition

Sports with a strong history and tradition in a particular region tend to be more popular. Sporting traditions are handed down from generation to generation, creating a loyal and stable fan base. Local sporting culture and tradition significantly influence the popularity of handball. In countries such as Romania and Hungary, handball is an integral part of the national sports culture and has been promoted since school (Nagy, 2017). Studies show that this sporting tradition creates a favorable environment for the development of handball and the attraction of new talent.

The positive and recognized performances of teams and players in the past have contributed exponentially to the growing popularity of national and local handball. Tradition can sometimes have an impact that is not only limited to the field and the rules of the game, but can itself positively influence the educational, social and cultural level without the help of other factors. Future generations need inspiring role models. Science proves that a successful person who comes from the same background or from the same country or city as another person can motivate and be a role model for the latter.

Sports performance

Successful performances of national teams and athletes on the international stage contribute to the popularity of sport among the general public. International successes generate national pride and attract new practitioners. For example, football is a sport that has become popular because of its international success. World championships such as the World Cup have helped to attract millions of fans worldwide.

Successful athletes who become public figures help promote the sport. These celebrities can influence young people to turn to sport and to want to pursue a sporting career. Top players who succeed internationally become icons and role models for generations (Ivanov, 2018).

Accessibility and participation

Affordability can influence the popularity of a sport by impacting people's active participation. When sports require expensive equipment or high participation fees it is likely that middle-income individuals are financially unable to participate.

Through accessibility, a sport can become more attractive to a wider range of people (Andersen et al., 2016). Through sports education programs, fair play, health and team spirit are promoted, thus helping to increase interest and involvement in sport. Thus, education and development programs support increasing the popularity of a sport by actively involving participants and promoting the positive values associated with the activity.

Social and community impact

Through sport, strong connections can be created between individuals from different backgrounds, of different ages or from different cultures. This provides opportunities to collaborate, share passions and overcome differences between people. Sports teams can be a good environment for strengthening interpersonal relationships, learning mutual respect and promoting diversity. Involvement in joint sporting events can bring people together, helping to foster collaboration and solidarity.

CONCLUSIONS

The popularity of handball in Romania is influenced by a variety of economic, social and institutional factors. While there is notable growth in some regions, significant inequalities remain which require better targeted public policies and strategic investments. The promotion of handball as a national sport, supported by adequate infrastructure as well as educational and regional development policies, could contribute to increasing the popularity and performance of the sport at national level.

More urbanized and economically developed regions, such as Bucharest-Ilfov and central areas of the country (e.g. Brasov, Cluj), have a significantly higher number of sports clubs compared to counties in less developed regions, such as the South-East and North-East.

This disparity reflects the influence of economic factors and sports infrastructure on the popularity and development of the sport, supporting the hypothesis that access to financial resources and infrastructure is a major determinant in the promotion of handball at the local level.

In areas with higher incomes and lower unemployment, the popularity of handball is higher. This indicates that financial stability and standard of living contribute to young people's access to performance sports and financial support for clubs.

In addition, in regions where sport is supported as an integral part of education, such as in large university centers, an accelerated development of handball, including at performance level, has been observed.

Aknowlegments

All authors had an equal contribution to this article.

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