

Vassil Girginov and Katerina Girginova (Eds.), **Handbook on Sport and Culture**, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025, 444 pp., \$305.00 (hardback).

Reviewed by

Argyro Elisavet Manoli

University of Bergamo, Italy

The **Handbook on Sport and Culture**, edited by Vassil Girginov and Katerina Girginova, consolidates a vast and often fragmented literature by treating sport not as a domain that merely “reflects” culture, but as a consequential arena where culture is *made*, produced, circulated, contested, institutionalized and monetized. The volume’s most important achievement lies less in offering a single canonical theory, which handbooks rarely do, than in providing an integrative conceptual map that makes sport’s cultural work legible across research traditions that do not always converse well: cultural sociology, media and communication, political economy, organization studies, and critical theory.

As such, the book becomes an interesting resource to scholars and graduate students in sport studies and cultural sociology, and is equally relevant to communication researchers who treat sport as a high-density site of mediated meaning-making. At the same time, the book is also likely to serve policy-oriented readers interested in cultural governance and legitimacy, given that contemporary sport is increasingly assessed through public-facing narratives about integrity, inclusion, sustainability, and social impact (Manoli et al., 2020). In a field characterized by rapid platformization and intensifying political contestation (Petersen-Wagner & Lee Ludvigsen, 2025), a synthetic and agenda-setting reference work is itself a valuable intervention.

The handbook’s novelty is best understood in three interlinked moves. First, it re-centers culture as constitutive infrastructure rather than interpretive garnish. Much scholarship acknowledges that sport is “cultural,” yet too often culture becomes a residual category invoked after economics, institutions, or policy have done the analytic heavy lifting. The editors’ framing pushes in the opposite direction: culture is not the “soft” layer atop sport; it is the terrain on which sport’s value, legitimacy, and boundaries are negotiated. This is a subtle but consequential shift, aligning with cultural sociology’s insistence that meaning and valuation are not epiphenomenal but causal (Alexander, 2003; Lamont, 2012).

Second, the book’s integrative stance resists the familiar split between media-centric accounts and institution-centric accounts. In sport communication research, sport is often analyzed primarily through representation, discourse, and audience practice. In organizational and political economy approaches, sport is framed through governance, capital, and regulation. The handbook’s contribution is to hold these



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together, and as such, meaning-making is treated as organized, and organization is treated as symbolic. That posture enables sharper analysis of contemporary phenomena in which governance depends on narrative (e.g., legitimacy crises) and narrative depends on governance (e.g., platform rules, broadcast rights, institutional messaging) (Couldry & Hepp, 2018; Hutchins & Rowe, 2014).

Third, the handbook reflects a contemporary "cultural politics" orientation without reducing sport to ideology critique alone. Critical sport scholarship has long explored power, inequality, and hegemony (Birrell & McDonald, 2000; Hargreaves, 2002). What feels new in the handbook's overall logic is its insistence that cultural power in sport operates through multiple registers (norms, identities, commercial narratives, institutional practices) rather than a single dominant mechanism. This pluralist critical sensibility is well suited to an era where sport is simultaneously a site of corporate branding, digital fan labor, national symbolism, and activist contestation.

Where the handbook is most effective is in showing that sport's cultural significance is not confined to spectacular mega-events. Rather, sport culture is produced through routine practices: fandom, everyday consumption, institutional rituals, embodied training, and mediated storytelling. This emphasis echoes the "serious life" tradition in sport sociology (Elias & Dunning, 1986) and the cultural studies insistence that popular culture is a primary arena of social struggle (Hall, 1997).

The book enters a moment when sport is widely understood as a strategic cultural industry. Global sport institutions and clubs operate as transnational brands, athlete and fan identities are intensified, and monetized, while controversies around governance, gender, race, doping, geopolitical conflict, and labor are amplified through real-time media systems. In this context, a handbook that treats sport as cultural production (not simply entertainment) responds to both scholarly demand and public urgency. It also aligns with the broader "mediatization" conversation in communication, which foregrounds how institutions adapt to media logics and how media infrastructures reconfigure social life (Couldry & Hepp, 2018).

Compared to canonical textbooks such as Coakley and Pike's (2014) *Sports in Society*, this handbook is less introductory and more integrative at the level of theory and research agendas. Relative to Rowe's (2011) work on global media sport and Hutchins and Rowe's (2014) account of digital disruption, it places more systematic emphasis on culture as a multidimensional analytic rather than primarily as media form. Compared to Giulianotti's (2005) sociological syntheses, the handbook format allows broader coverage and topical breadth, though it inevitably trades depth for comprehensiveness.

The volume also sits comfortably alongside, and in some respects extends, critical sport cultural studies traditions (Andrews & Silk, 2012; Whannel, 2008) by assembling contemporary debates within an explicitly "handbook" logic entailing mapping, synthesizing, and suggesting trajectories. Its distinct contribution is not a single new theory but a reorganized field of vision.

As such, the handbook's principal strength is its field-shaping clarity. By framing sport as a site where cultural meanings are made and contested, it encourages researchers to move beyond narrow outcome measures (e.g., "effects") toward richer accounts of symbolic production, valuation, and legitimacy.

It also implicitly invites methodological pluralism: discourse analysis, ethnography, institutional analysis, and political economy all have a place when culture is treated as both meaning and practice.

A second strength is its interdisciplinary usefulness. For communication scholars, sport offers a concentrated case of mediated spectacle, identity work, affective publics, and narrative governance. The handbook makes it easier to translate sport research into broader conversations about culture and communication rather than treating sport as a special subfield.

At the same time, however, the book's core limitation, which is common in handbooks, is the at times unevenness in critical sharpness and empirical density. A further risk, inherent to pluralist synthesis, is conceptual inflation; culture can become so expansive that it loses analytic bite. The editorial framing does substantial work to prevent this, but readers may still want more explicit guidance on operationalizing "culture" across different epistemic traditions.

A second limitation is the persistent challenge of global inclusivity. Sport-and-culture scholarship has increasingly emphasized decolonial critique and epistemic plurality, yet the handbook form can inadvertently reproduce North Atlantic canons as default reference points. As challenging as it might be, emphasis could be placed on pushing harder on knowledge production from the Global South and on theorizing that emerges from those contexts rather than being applied to them (Connell, 2020).

Overall, *Handbook on Sport and Culture* is a substantial and useful reference work that advances the field by reorganizing how scholars conceptualize sport's cultural significance. Its novelty lies in a coherent integrative stance: culture is treated as constitutive, mediated, and institutionalized, and politically consequential. For communications scholars, the book offers a durable resource for analyzing sport as a communicative system through which power, identity, and value are continuously made and contested.

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