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The Power of Intangible Resources for Cause Champions in Sport-For-Development: A Singapore Case Study

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Abstract

Cause champions are recognised to play a meaningful role in supporting the delivery and impact of sport-for-development (SFD) programmes. They are individuals who emerge from a programme’s target community and assume a leadership role to advocate for social change. However, there remains limited empirical inquiry on the factors that enable cause champions to thrive. Therefore, this study explored the most essential resources needed for cause champions to succeed in SportCares, an SFD organisation in Singapore. In total, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff members, coaches, and cause champions. Three essential resources were identified: sustained tangible resources (i.e., funding and physical infrastructure), invested human capital (i.e., staff and coaches’ efforts), and organisational capital of emotional authenticity (i.e., sincerity through communication). The findings demonstrated that the interaction of these resources fostered a culture of care that supported the champion’s ability to advocate for social change. These results urge monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) practices to focus more on intangible and relational processes such as co-creation sessions and authentic storytelling.

Keywords

cause champions; co-creation; intangible resource; monitoring, evaluation, and learning practices; resources; sport-for-development; storytelling

1. Introduction

Cause champions in sport-for-development (SFD) are defined as individuals who emerge from a programme's target community and assume a leadership role to advocate for social change (Cohen & Welty Peachey, 2015). These individuals use their experiences, knowledge, and social networks to develop innovative solutions to various social problems (Cohen & Welty Peachey, 2015; L. M. Hayhurst, 2013; Hoekman et al., 2019). Cause champions are common to the realm of SFD as their expertise has become instrumental in the creation of safe spaces (Cohen & Welty Peachey, 2015; Hoekman et al., 2019). Their role as cultural experts and role models in SFD programmes can act as a gateway for practitioners to learn more about their programme's local context and recipients, which are crucial conditions to achieve success (Hoekman et al., 2019; Marlier, 2022). Despite their positive involvement, there are ongoing calls to understand how cause champions' expertise can be further leveraged in programme design, delivery, and development (Holmes et al., 2015; Schulenkorf, 2010). Moreover, there remains limited empirical enquiry around supporting factors that are needed for cause champions to foster meaningful impact (Hoekman et al., 2019). This study aims to address this gap by examining the resources necessary for cause champions to thrive.

While cause champions play a crucial role in driving social change, their contributions remain difficult to capture using conventional monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) practices. MEL in SFD remains heavily outcome-driven and continues to prioritise predefined metrics over lived experiences. This creates challenges for monitoring and evaluating social outcomes, which are often intangible and unobservable. As a result, such contributions have often been met with scepticism, oversight, and undervaluation by funders and partners (Lee et al., 2013). To better understand how these intangible contributions can be recognised and leveraged, this study is theoretically underpinned by Barney's (1991) resource-based view (RBV), which recognises how critical resources interact to enhance an organisation's competitive advantage. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

- What resources are needed to support cause champions?
- How do these resources interact to provide support for cause champions?
- What implications do our results have for MEL practices in an SFD programme?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cause Champions in SFD

SFD programmes have an intentional focus on leveraging sports to achieve non-sport-related social change, and have been shown to have a positive influence on public health, on the socialisation of children, youths, and adults, on the social inclusion of disadvantaged people, and more (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). In SFD, sports can be leveraged in two distinct approaches, "sport-plus" and "plus-sport" (Coalter & Taylor, 2010). The sport-plus approach, to put it briefly, positions sports as the primary activity to be engaged in by individuals, with different social outcomes being integrated alongside it. In contrast, plus-sport programmes prioritise development outcomes, using sports primarily as a tool to attract and engage participants.

Operating within resource-constrained environments, SFDs are increasingly tasked with finding creative ways to address complex social issues to sustain their operations. In this context, cause champions have

emerged as a promising social innovation strategy for SFD programmes. Unlike social entrepreneurs, who create structured ventures for social impact (Cardella et al., 2021; Constantin et al., 2020) or change agents who facilitate community participation and network-building (Schulenkorf, 2010), cause champions draw on their lived experiences to mentor, advocate for, and inspire others within their communities. This distinction was evident in our case study, where their active engagement played a crucial part in both programme delivery and participant support.

Scholarly work in SFD has focused on the positive impact of cause champions. Hoekman et al. (2019) identified re-engaged participants as key drivers of organisational success. They served as programme culture experts, role models, and mentors. By drawing on their local knowledge, lived experiences and cultural understanding, these individuals were able to represent their communities meaningfully (Hoekman et al., 2019). They also contributed to creating a “family feel” within an SFD programme by offering social support that extended beyond sporting participation, which aligns with previous research on the benefits of familial environments in SFD. For instance, Keane et al. (2021) suggested that proactively identifying and utilising key champions can serve as a mechanism for translating the integration of SFD outcomes into “on the ground” practice. However, there remains limited empirical inquiry into the resources needed to sustain support for cause champions to thrive. Certain elements such as time and face-to-face contact have enabled the building of rapport and communication channels with stakeholders (Hoekman et al., 2019; Keane et al., 2021). Yet, it remains unclear what socio-managerial factors, such as interpersonal dynamics between stakeholders and resource management, can provide greater support for the implementation of cause champions in programmes (Barreira et al., 2022; Hoekman et al., 2019). Broader literature on peer leadership in community sports programmes suggests that providing education in both technical skills and practical knowledge can enhance an individual’s sense of leadership (Christensen et al., 2022). Other studies have identified that parents and programme staff can facilitate the transfer and learning of social skills (Newman et al., 2020) and establish opportunities that can foster positive relationships and responsibility for a long-term impact on intervention participants (Crisp, 2020). Furthermore, valuing and recognising adolescents, along with supporting informal and experiential learning, is crucial in engaging cause champions (Vertonghen et al., 2017). In our case study, we aim to identify the resources that support cause champions and offer MEL practices that both value their contributions and enhance organisational learning.

2.2. MEL Practices for SFD

MEL practices are systematic approaches that assess progress, evaluate outcomes, and facilitate continuous improvement (Coalter, 2009). Monitoring often refers to regular, systematic collection and analysis of information, whereas evaluation is the process of undertaking a systematic and objective examination of the monitored information (Coalter, 2009). Both monitoring and evaluation processes are often seen as accountability processes (Kay, 2016), with the learning component often less emphasised. Without a strong learning component, SFD programmes are vulnerable to missed opportunities to evolve and navigate contextual complexities (Levermore, 2011).

MEL in SFD has been a critically discussed research area with growing calls for more practical, robust, and diverse evaluative approaches (Engelhardt, 2018; Sherry et al., 2024). Most SFD programmes are monitored and evaluated to accommodate the requirements of funders and ensure accountability. However, many MEL frameworks are often developed from the Global North and/or top-down perspectives (Harris, 2018;

LeCrom & Dwyer, 2015; Nicholls et al., 2011). Jeanes and Lindsey (2014) acknowledged the influence of power dynamics between the Global North and South on MEL practices in SFD. Global North donors often prioritise quantifiable metrics and top-down evaluation models, which may not align with the lived experiences of SFD staff and participants. As a result, SFD staff may fear negative consequences if results do not align with funders' expectations (Jeanes & Lindsey, 2014). Furthermore, short and externally driven evaluators also fail to capture community-driven insights, hindering opportunities for authentic learning and programme adaptations.

In response, SFD researchers have shifted towards alternative methodologies that emphasise a bottom-up approach and place practitioners and/or participants at the centre of evaluation frameworks. Various studies have adopted activist (Luguetti, 2024) and/or participatory action research (Burnett, 2008; L. M. Hayhurst, 2020; McSweeney, 2023; Rivard & Mitchell, 2013; R. Smith et al., 2021). This includes qualitative methods of interviews, observations, and visual methods through photography or video. Ahmad (2021) challenges these power imbalances and advances co-constructed MEL approaches involving multiple stakeholders. They conducted workshops to equip staff with the knowledge and skills necessary to develop MEL systems within their organisation. This collaborative decision-making process can enable empowerment and value staff efforts. Building on this perspective, our study extends this focus to cause champions, exploring how their voices can be centred in evaluation processes to enhance organisational learning.

2.3. Theoretical Framework: Barney's RBV

This study is theoretically underpinned by Barney's (1991) RBV approach, which assumes organisations within an industry possess diverse resources. These resources are unique to each organisation, not uniformly distributed, and are not easily transferable or replicated. These resources can provide organisations with a sustainable competitive advantage over other organisations in the same field, depending on the extent to which a resource is valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and non-substitutable.

Barney (1991) described as encompassing the various assets, capabilities, organisational processes, organisation attributes, information and knowledge that an organisation controls and use to implement strategies aimed at enhancing its efficiency and effectiveness. Such resources can be broadly categorised into three types: physical resources (i.e., physical infrastructures, raw materials), human capital resources (i.e., knowledge and experience of staff), and organisational capital resources (i.e., organisational culture, trust, and relationships). These resources can also be classified based on their tangibility. Tangible resources include all physical items an organisation possesses, whereas intangible resources are non-physical assets. The RBV provides a theoretical perspective for managers to understand the flow of their resources, their interactions, and how these interactions can impact the outcomes of the organisation (see also Babiak & Willem, 2016; L. Lindsey, 2008; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2015; Vail, 2007). This study aims to identify the resources needed to support cause champions and to understand how such resources interact to provide support for cause champions to thrive.

As SFD organisations become increasingly institutionalised and professionalised (McSweeney et al., 2021), competition for critical resources such as funding, skilled staff, and partnerships has also intensified (Hambrick et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2018). Choi et al. (2023) highlighted that SFD nonprofits experience chronic resource deficiency, which limits their ability to deliver long-term organisational impact. For instance, MacIntosh et al. (2015) noted that funding and human resources are major challenges in sustaining and

achieving programme outcomes. Thus, resource procurement and prioritisation are important for organisational sustainability, especially for early-stage SFD organisations (Choi et al., 2023). In the broader literature, intangible resources are considered more valuable for organisational success (Won & Chelladurai, 2016). Intangible assets in nonprofit organisations include knowledge, positive relationships between the organisation and participants, loyalty, and commitment (Buonomo et al., 2020). Effective management of intangible assets not only enhances an organisation's competitive advantage but also fosters greater commitment and productivity (Buonomo et al., 2020). The RBV acts as a valuable framework to explore the various resources that support cause champions. Further, the RBV emphasises the importance of unobservable factors, as inimitable and non-substitutable resources are more likely to be sources of competitive advantage, as they can act as barriers to other competitors (Barney, 1991).

3. Methodology

3.1. SportCares, Singapore

SportCares was selected as an interesting case study due to its maturity as a well-established organisation operating for over a decade, its sustained funding, and its innovative approach of including cause champions as a programmatic feature. Established in 2012, SportCares is dedicated to leveraging sport as a force for social good. The philanthropic arm of Sport Singapore offers various sport-related programmes and initiatives to at-risk communities to promote inclusivity, resilience, and holistic development to foster positive social outcomes for a more cohesive society (SportCares, n.d.-a). Their initiatives focus on building values through sport to promote life-skill development and community engagement with volunteering opportunities. All youth programmes under SportCares are targeted towards youth aged 13–21.

This study focused on the SportCares Champions Leadership Programme (SCLP)—a plus-sport initiative that offers a leadership track in parallel to SportCares' regular programme of sporting activities. The programme recruits approximately 30 prospects a year. The champions are selected based on their active participation in an existing SportCares sporting programme and demonstrate qualities, including the willingness to learn, a heart to serve, and a strong commitment to the programme (SportCares, n.d.-b). For SportCares, the role of a champion is to organise, manage, and facilitate projects of social causes of their choice (SportCares, n.d.-b). Champions also serve as volunteer leaders at various social events throughout the year and can take up additional roles, for example, acting as an emcee for specific events. In addition to the SCLP, SportCares offer similar youth development programmes including the Youth Coaching Development Programme, Mentoring Programme, and Industry Traineeship.

3.2. Positionality and Ethics

The positionality of the research team also influenced both data collection and analysis. Author 1, with Southeast Asian roots and a Western academic background, conducted interviews that enabled horizontal openness and the ability to engage with participants in local dialects and jargon that supported rapport-building. Author 3 acted as our Singapore-based expert who supported data analysis by providing contextual insights and validated findings. Authors 2, 4, and 5 are active researchers in sport management with expertise across varied methodologies and research domains, including nonprofit sport organisations and innovation and resource management.

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the first author's University. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees and stored confidentially. Prior to analysis, data were pseudonymised.

4. Data Collection

4.1. Sampling

Data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews with SportCares' cause champions ($n = 8$), staff members ($n = 7$), and coaches ($n = 3$). Cause champions were active participants in a SportCares sporting programme who assumed a leadership role to assist with social engagements and volunteer initiatives. Cause champions are primarily guided by SportCares staff who support them in carrying out their responsibilities. SportCares coaches work closely with cause champions in the sporting programmes, providing both technical coaching and leadership mentorship as part of the SCLP. Given their involvement with cause champions, they were selected for the interviews to gain a deeper understanding and insights into the support systems that enabled cause champions to thrive. SportCares was instructed to select the most essential cause champions and coaches based on their level of engagement and involvement with the SCLP. Table 1 outlines the participants' characteristics.

Table 1. Sample characteristics.

| Sample | Number of samples | Involvement level in the SCLP | Role in the SCLP |
|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| Cause champions | 8 | High | Participant: organises, manages, and facilitates a social project |
| Staff members | 7 | Medium/High | Oversees overall programme operations and provides guidance, support, and coordination to cause champions |
| Coaches | 3 | Medium | Offers mentorship in technical skills and leadership development |

4.2. Interviews

The semi-structured interview was conducted by Author 1 during their one-month research stay at SportCares (Singapore) in August 2023. The interviews were conducted in English. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, Author 1's field notes from their observations and informal conversations with various SportCares stakeholders also supported the data analysis process. All interviewees were asked a general question regarding key success factors of the SportCares SCLP programme. The interview focus varied depending on the interviewee's role. For instance, cause champions were asked what resources and/or support they needed to effectively fulfil their responsibilities (i.e.: What helps you carry out your duties?). Meanwhile, staff members and coaches were asked about fostering engagement and building rapport with cause champions and the strategies they employ (i.e.: What strategies do you use to create a safe and supportive environment for cause champions?). Interviewees were also asked to share their perspective on monitoring and evaluating approaches (i.e.: In what ways can cause champions to be more involved?). The average duration of interviews was 75 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, except for one coach interview, as the raw file was corrupted. Field notes were used as a substitute. The in-depth interviews allowed for probing to deepen the understanding of the processes

that helped to understand the resources that supported the cause champions to fill out their role in the best possible way.

4.3. Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were inputted into NVivo for data organisation. Clarke and Braun's (2017) six-step thematic analysis was adopted for this study to emphasise the subjectivity of the researchers and their engagement with the data during interpretation. First, Author 1 became familiar with the data by re-reading the interview transcripts. Author 1's field notes also supported this step to assist with recollection. Second, transcripts were deductively coded through the RBV framework (Barney, 1991). During this step, the various resources that supported cause champions were identified. Third, themes that emerged inductively based on the research questions were coded as subthemes. Fourth, Author 1 and Author 2 reviewed the themes to either confirm or revise to ensure coherency. Fifth, Author 3 acted as a "critical friend" (B. Smith & McGannon, 2018) to ensure the quality of the coding process. Lastly, appropriate quotes were selected to support each theme. SportCares staff were invited to check and verify the analysis results. Table 2 outlines the themes, subthemes, and key quotations.

Table 2. Overview of thematic analysis with supporting quotes.

| Resources | Main Theme | Quotes |
|-------------------|------------------------------|---|
| Physical tangible | Sustained physical resources | "I'm not worried at all; it doesn't matter to me because the funding is always there and there are always [physical] resources for us to use to benefit the youths' lives" (Staff 2). |
| Human intangible | Invested human capital | <p>"She would know how our [cause champion] body language changes, and then she would come straight to us and be with us...she is always there for us" (Champion 2).</p> <p>"You really need to balance and get to know them...it's not always focused on the training. It starts from the week itself, how you [as a coach] engage them [cause champions], how you [as a coach] would text them [cause champions] in a group chat or even reach out with them personally or individually" (Coach 1).</p> <p>"The fact that she gathers the [cause champions] together, socialises with them...get [cause champions] thoughts and feedback around volunteering, what are their [cause champions] passion or interest...that is a lot of motivating factors behind why they end up doing what they [cause champions] are doing" (Staff 3).</p> |

Table 2. (Cont.) Overview of thematic analysis with supporting quotes.

| Resources | Main Theme | Quotes |
|--------------------------|------------------------|---|
| Organisation intangible | Emotional authenticity | <p>"Sincerity is important because if you [cause champion] are not sincere, then there's no point for you [prospect] to volunteer" (Champion 3).</p> <p>"I think a key factor for success with the participants is sincerity, because if they [cause champion] can realise that the coach is sincere in what he [coach] does or what's right with him [coach]...but of course it takes time, it takes trust, it takes respect...and I also want to add that the push and pull factor is very important. So, you can't be that guy [a sincere coach] all the time. You really need to balance" (Coach 1).</p> <p>"I think what works to create a safe space is the conversations we have" (Coach 2).</p> |
| Interaction of resources | Sub-themes | |
| Culture of care | Boundary-spanning | "[cause champion] might look at us as a father figure or a brother figure that they can perhaps share the most intimate details or whatever do you want to share...and then we [coaches] can possibly maybe help them in a way" (Coach 1). |
| | Social learning | <p>"I would just try to let them communicate about whatever they're going through, and then if I understand, you know I'll try to help" (Champion 1).</p> <p>"When we [staff] do things here, we [staff] always put the participants [including cause champions], the youth and the children at the forefront of everything" (Staff 1).</p> <p>"We [staff and coaches] share the same vision as well as the objectives of the programme, which is to first and foremost to build their [champions and participants] character" (Staff 2).</p> |
| | Shared vision | "I would like to see eventually 1 or 2 [cause champions] to be able to be part of the board of governance" (Staff 1). |

5. Results and Discussion

Our analysis identified various resources necessary to support cause champions. This included sustained physical resources, invested human capital, and emotional authenticity in the organisation. The most frequently discussed resources for our study were human and organisational capital, both intangible. Tangible resources were identified—but not elaborated—by interviewees as they were effectively sustained by the organisation. The interaction of these resources cultivated a culture of care. These findings propose alternative MEL practices that focus on intangible and relational processes. Figure 1 depicts the main findings of this study.

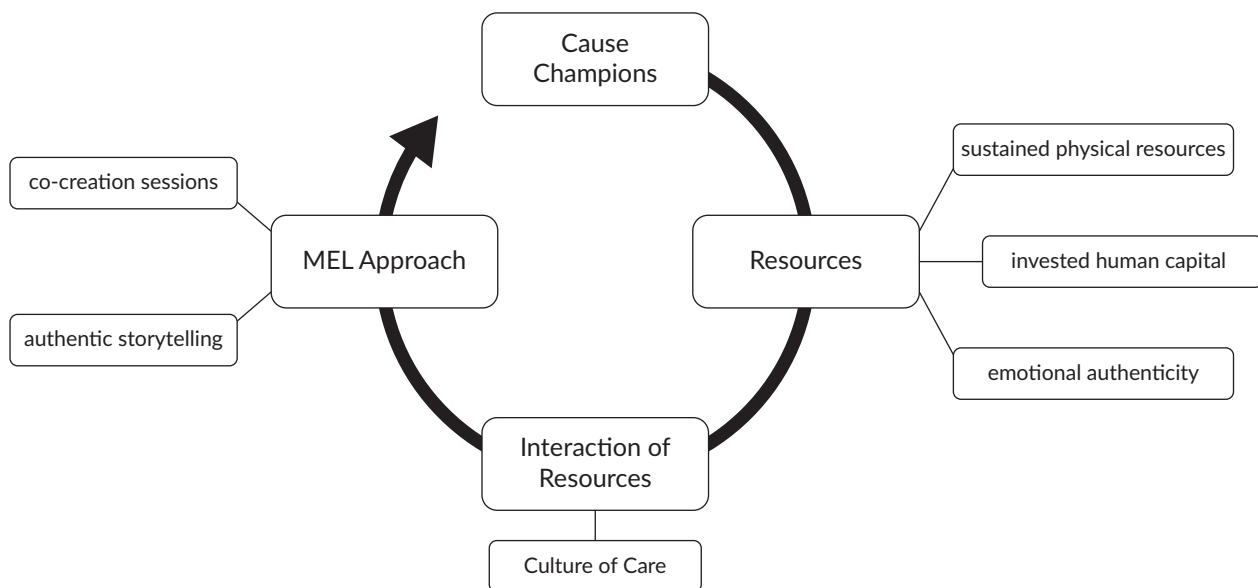


Figure 1. Identified resources, interaction of resources, and informed MEL approach.

In the following, we ask: What resources support cause champions?

5.1. Tangible Resource: Sustained Physical Resources

SportCares staff expressed that tangible resources such as monetary funding and accessible facilities were not deemed as a primary issue for the organisation. “I am not worried at all; it does not matter to me because the funding is always there and there are always [physical] resources for us to use to benefit the youths’ lives” (Staff 2). This sustained supply of tangible resources has enabled SportCares as an organisation to shift its focus towards other organisational processes, such as positive relation-building with cause champions and ensuring positive and safe environments. Our findings differed from existing SFD literature, which demonstrated the regular struggle SFD programmes face with sustaining funding and/or infrastructure due to the growing resource competition (Choi et al., 2023; MacIntosh et al., 2015; Welty Peachey et al., 2020). In line with the RBV, although tangible resources are essential for operational stability, they are not necessarily rare, inimitable, or non-substitutable, and therefore may not provide a sustainable competitive advantage (Won & Chelladurai, 2023). Thus, our study recognises that by alleviating such critical challenges, SFD organisations can re-prioritise and focus on positive relation-building, which was highlighted as a critical success factor for the creation of safe spaces (Freitas et al., 2024; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013; Spaaij & Schultenkorf, 2014).

5.2. Human Resource: Invested Human Capital

Human capital refers to the knowledge and experience of staff within an organisation (Barney, 1991). Cause champions viewed staff and coaches as essential support systems, with their influence dependent on the extent they invested in them. Staff members acknowledged that it is important to put the cause champion at the forefront of everything they do: “When we [staff] do things here, we [staff] always put the participants [including cause champions], the youth and the children at the forefront of everything” (Staff 1). Staff members also describe the efforts that other colleagues may invest in cause champions.

The fact that she gathers the [cause champions] together, socialises with them...get [cause champions] thoughts and feedback around volunteering, what are their [cause champions] passion or interest...that is a lot of motivating factors behind why they end up doing what they [cause champions] are doing. (Staff 3)

Similarly, coaches also exhibited efforts that stem beyond technical sports skills and create opportunities for life-skill development. For instance, one coach described:

You really need to balance and get to know them...it's not always that we focus on our training. It starts from the week itself, how you [coach] engage them [cause champions], how you [coach] can text them [cause champions] in a group chat or even need to reach out to them personally or individually. (Coach 1)

Here, we recognise that efforts exerted by human capital extend beyond their role description. These efforts are recognised by cause champions: "She would know how our [cause champion] body language changes, and then she would come straight to us and be with us...she is always there for us" (Champion 2). The extent of their efforts facilitates the creation of safe spaces for cause champions to comfortably execute their responsibilities. This aligns with existing SFD literature, which emphasises the need for staff support (Newman et al., 2020) and rapport-building as a predictor for positive youth development (McDonough et al., 2013).

5.3. Organisational Resource: Emotional Authenticity

An important organisational resource that was exhibited throughout the ecosystem of SportCares was sincerity and/or a culture of emotional authenticity. Cause champions noted that sincerity expressed by themselves was important for them to execute their role: "Sincerity is important because if you [champions] are not sincere, then there's no point for you [prospects] to volunteer" (Champion 3). This was also echoed by coaches:

I think a key factor for success with the participants is sincerity, because if they [champions] can realise that the coach is sincere in what he [coach] does or what's right with him [coach]...but of course it takes time, it takes trust, it takes respect...and I also want to add that the push and pull factor is very important. So, you can't be the guy [a sincere coach] all the way. You really need to balance. (Coach 1)

This aligns with scholarly work that has recognised that youth workers and community sports coaches can foster stability and socially cohesive environments through the projection of their authentic selves (Crisp, 2024). The care they express and putting the interest of youth at the heart of their work can create positive and meaningful relations (Crisp, 2024).

In the following, we ask: How do these resources interact to impact cause champions?

Various resources were identified, but the intangible resources were shown to be the most influential to support cause champions. The way the resources interacted cultivated a culture of care, exhibited across the ecosystem of SportCares. These interactions extended beyond the provision of basic needs, fostering an emotional and relational support network that contributed to cause champions' sense of belonging, security,

and personal growth. As described: “We [staff and coaches] share the same vision as well as the objectives of the programme, which is to first and foremost to build their [champions and participants] character” (Staff 2).

The culture of care is sustained by the interactions between staff, coaches and champions. Effective communication between the individuals was fundamental in cultivating trust and emotional support. A coach emphasised: “I think what works to create a safe space is the conversations we [coaches] have [with participants and champions]” (Coach 2). Such conversations are consistent and open dialogue, which reinforces positive rapport-building. This illustrated the interconnected nature of resources, shaping a supportive environment for cause champions. The ability of staff and coaches to engage with cause champions on a deeper and personal level helped ensure that their challenges beyond the programme were acknowledged and addressed. Similarly, cause champions frequently viewed coaches as figures of guidance and support, in a familial manner. A coach described:

[Cause champions] might look at us as a father figure or a brother figure that they can perhaps share the most intimate details or whatever do you want to share...and then we [coaches] can possibly maybe help them in a way. (Coach 1)

This relation reflects the boundary-spanning role coaches play within SportCares. This aligns with existing literature, which recognises that coaches can act as cultural bridges (Jeanes et al., 2019; Miller, 2008) that facilitate supportive relations between young people in the programme and wider communities. Coaches at SportCares are not just instructive but also offer the emotional warmth and mentorship that enables a cause champion to feel recognised and valued (Jeanes et al., 2019; Whittaker, 2010). It is the emotional security between coaches and cause champions that can be a crucial factor for personal growth and development (Van der Veken et al., 2022).

More importantly, the culture of care is reinforced through social learning. The valued behaviours demonstrated by coaches are learnt, positively reinforced, and imitated by cause champions. This aligns with the social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977, pp. 141–154) that suggests behaviours are observed, reinforced, and imitated within social contexts. A champion demonstrated: “I would just try to let them communicate about whatever they’re going through and then if I understand, you know, I’ll try to help” (Champion 1). As representatives of their communities, cause champions to draw upon their own experiences to relate and create connections with participants, often offering the care they once lacked. This interaction fosters social capital that can build stronger, positive, helpful social networks (Coalter, 2007; Crisp, 2020).

In the following, we ask: What are the implications for MEL?

Our findings recognised that certain crucial resources support cause champions, and impact emerges through their interactions. This raises a critical question for MEL practices: How do we track and assess these resources, particularly those of an intangible nature, to continuously support cause champions? Monitoring and evaluating social outcomes have always been considered a challenge, often due to being intangible and unobservable (Lee et al., 2013). As a result, these outcomes can be met with scepticism or even overlooked, and thus undervalued and underleveraged to sponsors, partners, or investors (Lee et al., 2013). Further, government and distant bodies can impose unrealistic policy targets and goals that reflect

very little of the practitioner and targeted sample (Collins, 2010; Nicholls et al., 2011). Although the evaluation of social outcomes has typically been qualitative, attempts have been made to quantify, standardise, and systematise measures (Lee et al., 2013). However, we argue that this can also take away the potential for progressive organisational learning.

As discussed, such social learning is demonstrated by cause champions. Staff and coaches instil values in cause champions, who in turn share those values with participants. However, this also reflects a one-directional influence. To create a more holistic, bottom-up, and human-centric programme, SportCares can leverage the role of cause champions as representatives of their communities by integrating their input into programme designs. This is particularly relevant in contexts where the target community has had limited involvement in the initial programme design. Keane et al. (2021) emphasises that translating a development plan into effective on-the-ground practice requires investment in face-to-face engagement, rapport-building with local stakeholders, and reduced staff turnover. In this regard, cause champions can serve as communicative bridges that help validate and redesign the programme to align with community aspirations.

In our study, we recognise that learning can occur throughout a programme's life cycle, rather than only at given time points. Concrete methods in SFD that are recognised but not widely adopted include co-creation sessions (Horne et al., 2023; Maenhout et al., 2023; Morgan & Parker, 2023) and digital storytelling (L. M. Hayhurst, 2020; R. Smith et al., 2021; Wijnen & Wildschut, 2015). Co-creation sessions are deemed a more acceptable, contextually appropriate, and effective strategy for programme development (Maenhout et al., 2023). Individuals from vulnerable, disadvantaged, and/or at-risk populations are often not invited to express their perspectives, with other significant figures typically representing them instead. However, our interviewees emphasised the value of amplifying the voices of cause champions: "I would like to see eventually one or two [cause champions] to be able to be part of the board of governance" (Staff 1). The involvement of young leaders in sports organisations has gained increased attention in scholarly work (Strittmatter et al., 2021). Involving young people in decision-making processes within sport organisations can help build both instrumental and relational networks, enabling them to translate their experiences into collective action (I. Lindsey et al., 2023). Thus, co-creation aims to put the participant at the centre of evaluation and creates opportunities for learning from the participant's perspective.

Similarly, some SFD programmes have adopted digital storytelling techniques (L. M. Hayhurst, 2020). For instance, through methods like photovoice, which involves visual narratives that create a compelling account of experience (Gubrium & Harper, 2009) or podcasts, which are digitally produced as audio, video, and/or text files and often a series of downloadable episodes (R. Smith et al., 2021). These methods have enabled greater engagement of socially diverse stakeholders, fostered more authentic relationships, and encouraged the expression of alternative voices (J. G. Hayhurst, 2017). From a MEL standpoint, this also brings authenticity to the stories told and shared, contributing to more rigorous qualitative data (R. Smith et al., 2021). By centralising the voices of the targeted community in the storytelling process, programmes can cultivate more authentic narratives and foster a sense of ownership among the participants (R. Smith et al., 2021; Stewart-Withers et al., 2017). SFD programmes among Indigenous communities have pioneered culturally appropriate approaches. This includes *Talanoa*, a traditional Pacific practice of open, face-to-face discussion grounded in embodiment, emotions, and empathy (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014; Stewart-Withers et al., 2017) and/or *hui* or *wānanga* within Māori communities, which are collective gatherings for sharing knowledge, experiences, and making decisions together (Lewis & Crombie, 2008).

Nevertheless, researchers in SFD have encountered challenges with such approaches, including navigating sensitive issues of trust and rapport building (Luguetti et al., 2023), inequitable access to digital technologies (Gubrium et al., 2016), and questions around research positionality (R. Smith et al., 2021). However, SportCares has maintained the necessary resources to help counter these challenges and should therefore be leveraged.

6. Strengths and Limitations

This study highlighted the strategic importance of intangible resources such as care, authenticity, and invested human capital to foster organisational learning and cultivate safe and relational spaces. Through RBV, the study demonstrated how internal and intangible assets can be valuable towards programme effectiveness and sustainability. The study also introduces the concept of a *culture of care* as a meaningful intangible asset to understand how safe spaces are internally created and sustained. This study contributes to the growing call for MEL practices to evolve beyond a tool for accountability towards more learning-centred and participatory approaches. By advocating for methods such as storytelling and co-creation, this can authentically capture lived experiences, strengthen feedback loops, and foster a greater sense of ownership among relevant stakeholders. These participatory approaches place the participant at the centre of evaluation and promote collaborative decision-making that empowers and values the contribution of all stakeholders, cause champions, staff, and coaches. By adopting more inclusive and reflexive MEL frameworks, SFD organisation can ensure that learning is integrated into their programmes, strengthen their competitive advantage, and strive for long-term impact.

However, this research is not without limitations. As a single case study conducted within a mature and well-resourced SFD organisation in Singapore, the findings may not be fully generalisable to other organisational contexts. For instance, SportCares benefits from a reliable stream of physical resources, allowing it to prioritise relational and community development. This may not be a common reality for SFD organisations, as we understand many organisations, particularly within the Global South, face chronic resource deficiencies (Choi et al., 2023). Moreover, the role of cause champions emerged in a context where the target community had limited input into the programme design. Thus, their function may differ in more bottom-up and co-design SFD initiatives.

While the RBV framework highlighted the value of intangible resources and their interaction, theoretical integration with models that are more focused on programme design, such as Programme Theory (Coalter, 2013), could offer a deeper understanding of the impact pathways. Therefore, we encourage future research to explore such theoretical intersections. Nevertheless, this study advances the conversation on how MEL frameworks can benefit from recognising and leveraging intangible resources. If these resources are not effectively leveraged, organisations may miss valuable learning opportunities that could be integrated to improve programme design and delivery. Thus, by placing organisational learning at the core of evaluative practices, SFD organisations can become more adaptive, inclusive, and grounded in the communities they serve.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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