

Silver economy and physical activity in old age: sport as an emerging market

Economía plateada y actividad física en la vejez: deporte como mercado emergente

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Abstract

Population aging has driven the development of the so-called silver economy, which interprets longevity as an economic opportunity associated with well-being and autonomy in old age. This article critically analyzes the role played by physical activity and sport in this context, focusing on the socio-economic, cultural, and territorial inequalities that condition access to and participation in these activities in Latin America. Based on a theoretical and documentary review, it examines approaches to active and healthy ageing, the expansion of sport as an emerging market, and its distributive tensions. The results show that the commodification of physical activity tends to reproduce pre-existing inequalities, limiting active ageing conceived exclusively from a market perspective.

Keywords: population aging; silver economy; physical activity in old age; socioeconomic inequalities; Latin America.

Resumen

El envejecimiento poblacional ha impulsado el desarrollo de la denominada economía plateada, que interpreta la longevidad como una oportunidad económica asociada al bienestar y la autonomía en la vejez. Este artículo analiza críticamente el lugar de la actividad física y el deporte dentro de este marco, poniendo el foco en las desigualdades socioeconómicas, culturales y territoriales que condicionan su acceso y práctica en América Latina. A partir de una revisión teórica y documental, se examinan los enfoques de envejecimiento activo y saludable, la expansión del deporte como mercado emergente y sus tensiones distributivas. Los resultados muestran que la mercantilización de la actividad física tiende a reproducir desigualdades preexistentes, lo que plantea límites al envejecimiento activo concebido exclusivamente desde lógicas de mercado.

Palabras claves: envejecimiento poblacional; economía plateada; actividad física en la vejez; desigualdades socioeconómicas; América Latina.

Introduction

Population ageing is one of the most significant structural processes in contemporary societies. The sustained decline in fertility and increase in life expectancy have profoundly transformed the age structure, leading to significant growth in the older adult population and a prolongation of life in old age (Madrigal-Martínez, 2010). This scenario has shifted the focus of the demographic debate from historical concerns about population growth – which dominated the second half of the 20th century – to the social, economic and health challenges associated with ageing societies (Meadows et al., 1972).

For decades, much of the literature addressed ageing from a deficit-centred perspective, associating it mainly with increased pressure on pension systems, higher spending on health and long-term care, and a possible contraction of the working-age population, with negative effects on economic growth and fiscal sustainability (de la Peña Esteban, 2003). In this approach, the increase in the older adult population was interpreted primarily as a source of economic and social imbalances, especially in contexts characterised by high levels of inequality and institutional fragility (Guzmán, 2002).

However, in recent decades there has been a significant conceptual shift, driven by both international organisations and academic research, which proposes interpreting ageing not only as a problem, but also as an opportunity to promote more active, autonomous and socially integrated life trajectories. Within this framework, the concepts of active ageing and healthy ageing have become central to contemporary debate, emphasising functional capacity, social participation and well-being in old age (OCDE, 2013). Within this perspective, physical activity occupies a central place.

Scientific evidence consistently shows that regular physical activity and sport in older people is associated with multiple benefits, including reduced risk of chronic diseases, improved mental health, strengthened social ties, and reduced frailty and dependency (Mora y Curbel, 2023). In this way, physical activity is not only a tool for promoting health, but also a key component of strategies aimed at improving quality of life in older age.

However, participation in physical activity and sport in old age is not uniform. Various studies indicate that access to, continuity and intensity of these activities are strongly influenced by socio-economic, cultural and geographical factors, which generate significant inequalities between different groups of older people (Meghani et al., 2023). Within this framework, physical activity and sport are emerging as a growing economic sector linked to the provision of services, infrastructure and programmes aimed at older people. Gyms and fitness centres have become key players in this process, bringing together wellbeing, consumption and active ageing.

However, the expansion of this market does not in itself guarantee greater equity in access to physical activity in old age. On the contrary, there is a risk that the commercialisation of sporting activity will reinforce pre-existing inequalities, mainly benefiting groups with greater economic resources, cultural capital and territorial availability. In this sense, the promotion of active ageing coexists with structural tensions between market logic, public policies and unequal social conditions (Rojas, 2022).

In this context, this article aims to analyse physical activity and sport in old age as an emerging component of the silver economy, placing special emphasis on the socioeconomic, cultural and territorial inequalities that affect these practices. This is a theoretical-analytical

article based on a critical review of the scientific literature and an analysis of documents and reports from international organisations, with the aim of providing an integrated and critical reading of the opportunities and limitations of sport as an emerging market in ageing societies.

Active and healthy ageing

Population ageing has traditionally been analysed within the framework of demographic transition, understood as the historical process of structural change associated with a sustained decline in fertility and mortality. In this regard, increased life expectancy is one of the most significant features of contemporary societies and reflects the interaction between medical advances, improvements in living conditions and long-term health transformations. Various studies have highlighted the plasticity of mortality and the possibility of prolonging human life beyond historically observed limits, emphasising that longevity is not solely determined by biological factors, but also by social and technological determinants (Chackiel, 2006).

However, the sustained increase in longevity does not necessarily imply an automatic improvement in health and well-being in old age. Since the end of the 20th century, the literature has emphasised the need to distinguish between the number of years lived and the quality of those years, incorporating the notions of morbidity, disability and functional autonomy into the analysis (Robine et al., 2003). In this sense, ageing is a profoundly heterogeneous process, marked by social, economic and territorial inequalities that accumulate throughout the course of life and manifest themselves with particular intensity in old age (Regidor, 1994).

In response to these challenges, the concepts of active and healthy ageing emerged as normative and analytical frameworks aimed at overcoming deficit-based and welfare-oriented views of old age. The active ageing approach proposes shifting the focus from dependency to social participation, autonomy and the optimisation of health opportunities throughout the life course, recognising older people as active subjects in society (Ballesteros and Blasco, 2016). For its part, the healthy ageing paradigm emphasises the maintenance of functional capacity as a central condition for well-being in old age, integrating physical, mental and social dimensions (OECD, 2025).

Both approaches share the premise that ageing is not a homogeneous or inevitably negative fate. However, various authors have warned that these notions can take on a normative bias when presented as individual responsibilities, disregarding the structural conditions that influence the real possibility of ageing actively and healthily (González, 2014). In contexts of high social inequality, the promotion of active ageing can become a prescriptive ideal that is difficult to achieve for large sectors of the older adult population (Bedoya, 2016).

In this context, physical activity and sport occupy a central place in discussions about active and healthy ageing. Scientific evidence consistently shows that regular physical activity in older people is associated with significant improvements in functional capacity, mental health and quality of life, as well as a reduced risk of frailty and dependency. Recent studies also confirm that organised physical activity contributes to subjective well-being and strengthens social ties in old age, reinforcing its multidimensional nature (Portegijs, Lee and Zhu, 2023).

However, effective access to physical activity and sport in older age is far from universal. Studies show that participation in these

activities is strongly influenced by socioeconomic, cultural and geographical factors, reproducing inequalities accumulated throughout the course of life. Economic constraints, the unequal territorial distribution of services and cultural barriers have a decisive impact on the levels of physical activity among older people, even in contexts where the provision of services has grown (Han et al., 2022).

From a critical perspective, some authors warn that the promotion of active lifestyles coexists with processes of commodification of wellbeing, in which access to services related to health, sport and physical exercise increasingly depends on consumption capacity (Nova, 2021). This phenomenon is particularly relevant in the context of the so-called silver economy, which sees population ageing as an opportunity for the development of new markets geared towards older people (Briegas et al., 2021).

It should be noted that the economic potential associated with a longer-living and more active population raises key questions about the social distribution of the benefits of active and healthy ageing. Recent studies warn that, without public policies aimed at reducing inequalities, the expansion of markets linked to physical activity and well-being may reinforce processes of social segmentation in old age, mainly benefiting groups with greater economic resources and capital (Ruiz-Clavijo y Díez, 2025).

In summary, the concepts of healthy ageing and active ageing are fundamental frameworks for understanding contemporary transformations in old age. However, their analytical application requires incorporating a critical perspective that considers the structural inequalities that condition access to key practices such as physical activity and sport. This perspective allows ageing to be viewed not only as a biological or individual process, but also as

a social phenomenon deeply affected by the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities and capabilities in increasingly ageing societies.

Physical activity in old age

Physical activity and sport in old age cannot be understood as homogeneous or universally accessible practices. On the contrary, they are behaviours that are deeply conditioned by the social, economic, occupational and territorial trajectories that run through people's lives and are expressed with particular intensity in old age. Although increased life expectancy extends the potential time available for wellness-oriented activities, this does not mean that all older people have the same real opportunities to maintain regular physical activity practices.

From a life course perspective, ageing should be understood as a cumulative process in which social advantages and disadvantages gradually accumulate. Employment conditions, income levels, access to education and health services, as well as previous experiences of physical activity, have a decisive influence on health status and functional capacity in old age. In this sense, physical activity is not an isolated practice in the social context, but a broader expression of structural inequalities that are built up over time.

Empirical evidence consistently shows that older adults with greater economic resources, higher educational levels, and greater cultural capital are more likely to engage in regular physical activity, especially in organised or institutionalised settings. These practices are often associated with more stable career paths, better health conditions, and greater internalisation of preventive discourses

linked to self-care. In contrast, sectors with precarious career paths, lower incomes, or greater cumulative exposure to health risks tend to have lower levels of physical activity in old age, even when they recognise its benefits (Casado, 2020).

These inequalities are not only expressed in participation or non-participation in physical activities, but also in the type of activities performed. As mentioned above, socially advantaged groups have greater access to structured, supervised and continuous activities, while the most vulnerable sectors tend to be limited to informal, sporadic or discontinuous activities, with lower levels of professional support. This differentiation has significant implications in terms of health, since the quality, intensity and regularity of physical activity directly affect its effects on functional capacity and well-being in old age.

Territory is central to understanding these gaps. The availability of adequate urban infrastructure, proximity to recreational spaces, accessibility of public transport and safety of the environment directly influence opportunities for physical activity in older age. In many cities, gyms, sports centres, and physical activity programmes are concentrated in central areas or areas with higher socioeco-nomic status, while peripheral or socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods have significantly fewer services. This unequal distribution of urban space limits access to sustained physical activity for large sectors of the older adult population (Marcucci, Ciarapica and Sanchis, 2021; European Commission, 2015).

In addition to these territorial inequalities, there are symbolic and cultural barriers that affect participation in sports activities in old age, expressed in processes of self-exclusion, discomfort or lack of identification with the sports facilities available. In this sense, old age continues to be associated in many contexts

with passivity or fragility, which can discourage participation in sporting activities, even when opportunities are available.

Within the framework of the growth of the silver economy, the expansion of physical activity services aimed at older people introduces new dynamics of access and exclusion. While diversification of supply broadens the range of options available, it also generates market segmentation processes. More personalised services, with greater professional support and better infrastructure, tend to be aimed at segments with greater purchasing power, while lower-cost alternatives have limitations in terms of continuity, quality or suitability for the specific needs of older people (Fernández and Dupré, 2022; Klimczuk, 2016).

From a comparative perspective, various studies warn that growth in the market for physical activity for older people does not necessarily translate into a reduction in inequalities in levels of participation. On the contrary, the most significant increases tend to be concentrated in groups that were already active and in better health, while the most vulnerable sectors remain on the margins of these dynamics (Rogelj and Bogataj, 2019). This phenomenon reinforces the idea that expanding supply alone does not guarantee greater inclusion.

Likewise, the growing centrality of physical activity in discourses on active and healthy ageing can take on a normative character, insofar as it is presented as a desirable ideal without considering the structural constraints that condition the real possibilities for participation. In contexts of high inequality, this logic runs the risk of holding older people responsible for their level of physical activity, obscuring the economic, territorial and social barriers that limit effective access to these practices (OCDE, 2013).

In summary, physical activity and sport in old age must be analysed as socially situated practices, affected by socioeconomic, cultural

and territorial inequalities that accumulate throughout the course of life. Although population ageing and the expansion of the silver economy are increasing the range of services related to well-being, effective access to physical activity remains deeply unequal. Recognising these gaps is essential to avoid simplistic interpretations of active ageing and to understand the limits of strategies based exclusively on market expansion as a means of promoting physical activity in increasingly ageing societies.

Physical activity as an emerging market in the silver economy

Population ageing has brought about profound changes not only in the demographic structure of societies, but also in consumption patterns, business strategies and the ways in which goods and services are provided. In this context, the silver economy has established itself as an analytical framework for understanding the range of economic activities aimed at a population that is living longer and, to a significant extent, remaining active for increasingly longer periods (Krzymińska, 2020). This approach highlights the economic potential associated with longevity, while raising questions about the social distribution of the benefits derived from the growth of these markets.

Physical activity and sport are increasingly part of these dynamics. Longer life expectancy, combined with the spread of discourse on active and healthy ageing, has increased the potential demand for services aimed at maintaining functional capacity, autonomy and well-being in old age. Since the beginning of the 21st century, various international organisations have highlighted the central role of physical activity as a determinant of health in old age, promoting its incorporation into both public policies and

market strategies linked to wellbeing (OMS, 2015). In this process, physical activity is no longer conceived exclusively as a preventive or therapeutic practice, but has been integrated into structured consumption circuits.

The growth in the supply of gyms, fitness centres and specific programmes aimed at older people is one of the most visible expressions of physical activity as an emerging market within the silver economy. These proposals tend to articulate narratives associated with autonomy, the prevention of dependency and the prolongation of active life, aligning themselves with the principles of healthy and active ageing. From an economic perspective, this set of services constitutes a growing niche market, particularly in urban contexts where the older adult population with greater consumption capacity is concentrated (European Commission, 2015; Rogelj and Bogataj, 2019).

However, the configuration of physical activity as an emerging market is not uniform or inclusive. The literature warns that these markets tend to be structured around segmentation processes, in which supply is differentiated according to price, levels of personalisation, quality of infrastructure and type of professional support. The most specialised services, tailored to the specific needs of older people and with greater supervision, tend to be aimed at middle- and high-income segments, while lower-cost alternatives have limitations in terms of geographical accessibility, continuity, or suitability for complex health conditions (De la Torre, Morales and Quiroz, 2015).

From a demographic and economic perspective, various authors have pointed out that the growth of markets associated with ageing does not necessarily imply equitable expansion of access. On the contrary, there is evidence that the silver economy can reproduce pre-existing social inequalities, insofar as it is organised according to the consumption

capacity of certain groups of older people (Enste, Naegele and Leve, 2008; Krzyminiewska, 2020). In this sense, the expansion of the physical activity market tends to disproportionately benefit the most socially advantaged sectors, while those with greater economic, health or territorial constraints remain on the margins of these dynamics.

Furthermore, recent research warns that an increase in the provision of physical activity services aimed at older people does not automatically translate into a general improvement in participation levels. The most significant increases tend to be concentrated in groups that were already active, in better health and with greater cultural capital, while the most vulnerable sectors continue to face persistent barriers to accessing these services (Bran, Popescu and Staciú, 2016). This phenomenon highlights the limitations of strategies based exclusively on market expansion as a means of promoting physical activity in old age.

The commodification of physical activity also raises tensions from the perspective of public health and social equity. While physical activity is a central component of healthy ageing, its provision predominantly through market mechanisms can lead to significant exclusion. Evidence shows that older people with lower incomes, poorer health or greater functional limitations are precisely those who face the greatest difficulties in accessing paid sports services, even though they could benefit most from these practices (Dionyssiótis, 2018).

In this context, various international organisations have emphasised the need for the development of the silver economy not to displace the role of the State in promoting welfare. Physical activity in old age requires public policies that guarantee minimum conditions of access, adequate infra-structure and programmes adapted to the heterogeneity of the older adult population, especially in contexts of high

social inequality (European Commission, 2015; OMS, 2015). Without this intervention, there is a risk that the market will reinforce processes of segmentation and exclusion rather than contributing to social inclusion.

Finally, incorporating physical activity into the discourse on the silver economy contributes to a social redefinition of old age, moving away from representations focused exclusively on dependency. However, it can also reinforce an instrumental view of older people as consumers of goods and services, in which the value of active ageing is measured in terms of its economic potential. Analysing physical activity as an emerging market from a critical perspective therefore allows us to understand both its transformative potential and its structural limitations in increasingly ageing societies.

Tensions and limits of sport in the silver economy

The incorporation of sport and physical activity into the silver economy framework has helped to reposition population ageing as a phenomenon that goes beyond the logic of social problems and is part of the dynamics of innovation, consumption and economic growth. However, this reconfiguration is not without structural tensions that limit its scope as a strategy for social inclusion and the promotion of collective well-being. The main tension lies in the coexistence of two partially contradictory logics: that of active and healthy ageing as a broad social objective, and that of the market as the main mechanism for providing goods and services related to physical activity.

From a development perspective, various authors have warned that growth in economic sectors associated with well-being does not in itself guarantee widespread improvements

in living conditions if it is not accompanied by redistributive public policies and institutional frameworks that regulate access to the benefits generated (Ranis and Stewart, 2002). In the case of sport in old age, this tension is clearly expressed in the expansion of services aimed at older people which, although they increase the range of options available, tend to concentrate on socially advantaged segments, leaving out large sectors of the population who face economic, health or territorial constraints.

One of the central limitations of the silver economy approach applied to sport lies in its tendency to prioritise a functional conception of ageing, closely associated with autonomy, productivity and reduced dependency. Within this framework, physical activity is presented as a tool for prolonging active life, delaying functional decline and reducing future health and care costs. While these objectives are relevant from a health and economic point of view, their exclusive emphasis can obscure the profound inequalities that exist in ageing trajectories, especially in contexts of high social inequality (HelpAge International, 2011).

This functional logic also tends to establish implicit standards for 'successful' ageing, in which participation in sporting activities and maintaining an active body serve as normative indicators. From a critical perspective, various authors warn that this way of conceiving ageing can reinforce processes of symbolic exclusion by holding older people responsible for their level of physical activity without considering the structural constraints that condition their real possibilities for participation (Klimczuk, 2012). In this sense, sport can become a criterion for social distinction rather than a tool for inclusion.

From a demographic perspective, these tensions are part of long-standing debates about the social effects of population change. Classic approaches to demographic transition already pointed out that changes in age structure do

not automatically affect well-being, but rather interact with economic systems, institutions, and social relations that distribute the benefits of development unevenly (Thompson, 1929; Notestein, 1945). In this context, the expansion of sport as a component of the silver economy cannot be analysed in isolation from the social and institutional contexts in which it is embedded.

Another relevant limitation is linked to the sector's working and organisational conditions. The growth of the physical activity market for older people is often based on working arrangements characterised by low levels of regulation, high turnover and job insecurity, especially in outsourced or low-cost services. From the perspective of decent work, this dynamic raises questions about the social sustainability of the model, both for those who provide the services and those who consume them (Lee and Donehower, 2011). The expansion of the market, in the absence of adequate regulations, can thus generate concentrated economic benefits and unevenly distributed social costs.

Likewise, the development of sport in the silver economy poses challenges in terms of institutional coordination. Various international organisations have emphasised that promoting active ageing requires effective coordination between the state, the private sector and civil society. Without public policies aimed at ensuring adequate infrastructure, accessible programmes and criteria for territorial equity, market expansion tends to reproduce spatial and social inequalities, particularly in fragmented urban areas (European Commission, 2015). In this sense, sport as an emerging market shows clear limitations when it is conceived as a substitute for, rather than a complement to, public action.

From a cultural perspective, tensions also arise in relation to social representations of ageing. The promotion of sport in old age

coexists with persistent stereotypes that associate advanced age with frailty, passivity, or dependence. At the same time, the glorification of an active and healthy body can generate unrealistic expectations about physical abilities in old age, reinforcing normative pressures about how an older person 'should' age (Cornet, 2014). These representations can lead to both symbolic exclusion and individual frustration, especially among those who face functional or health limitations.

Finally, it should be noted that the silver economy, by incorporating sport as one of its pillars, runs the risk of reducing the complexity of ageing to its economic dimension. While recognising older people as consumers may help to highlight their needs, it may also reinforce an instrumental view that values ageing in terms of its profitability rather than its social diversity. From this perspective, the central challenge is to prevent sport and physical activity from becoming new mechanisms of social differentiation under the discourse of active ageing.

Conclusions

Population ageing is one of the most significant structural processes in contemporary societies and poses challenges that transcend the demographic sphere to directly impact economic, social and territorial dynamics. Throughout this article, physical activity and sport in old age have been analysed as a complex phenomenon, situated at the intersection between approaches to active and healthy ageing and the development of the silver economy, with particular emphasis on the inequalities that exist in these practices.

Firstly, the study showed that the paradigms of active and healthy ageing represent an advance over deficit-based views

of old age, by emphasising functional capacity, social participation and well-being. However, it also showed that these approaches can become normative when presented as universally achievable goals, without considering the profound socioeconomic, cultural, and territorial inequalities that condition life trajectories. In this sense, the possibility of ageing actively and healthily does not depend solely on individual decisions, but on structural conditions accumulated throughout the course of life.

Physical activity emerges as a central component of these approaches, due to its positive effects on physical, mental and social health in old age. However, one of the main contributions of this article was to emphasise that physical activity and sport in older age is neither homogeneous nor universal. On the contrary, it is unevenly distributed according to socioeconomic status, cultural capital, territory, and previous work and health trajectories. Far from constituting a 'new opportunity' derived from increased longevity, physical activity tends to reproduce pre-existing advantages and disadvantages.

The analysis of access and practices showed that expanding the availability of physical activity services does not automatically translate into greater inclusion. In urban settings, the geographical concentration of gyms and sports centres, the costs associated with services, and symbolic barriers linked to representations of ageing limit effective access for large segments of the older adult population. These inequalities are particularly visible in cities characterised by strong socio-spatial segregation.

In this context, the incorporation of physical activity and sport as components of the silver economy is a central theme in contemporary debate. On the one hand, the development of markets geared towards older people responds to a growing demand for

services linked to well-being, autonomy and quality of life, and represents an opportunity for economic revitalisation in ageing societies. On the other hand, the analysis carried out showed that the commodification of physical activity introduces new forms of segmentation, insofar as access to higher quality services increasingly depends on consumption capacity.

One of the central findings of the study is that the silver economy is not a neutral phenomenon from a distributional point of view. The expansion of the market for physical activity for older people tends to benefit mainly the most socially advantaged groups, while those with fewer resources face persistent barriers to accessing regular, quality activities. In this sense, active ageing, when predominantly linked to market logic, runs the risk of becoming a privilege rather than a social right.

The article also highlighted the regulatory tensions associated with promoting sport as the cornerstone of healthy ageing. The centrality given to physical activity can lead to a form of individual responsibility that obscures the structural constraints that limit real opportunities for participation. In contexts of high inequality, this logic can reinforce stigmatisation and symbolic hierarchies between different ways of ageing, legitimising only those trajectories that conform to the ideals of autonomy and self-control promoted by the market.

From this perspective, the role of the State and public policies takes on central importance. The promotion of physical activity in old age cannot be left exclusively to the

market if equitable and sustained access is to be guaranteed. The analysis suggests that the most effective strategies combine private provision with public policies aimed at providing infrastructure, community programmes and regulations that reduce economic and territorial barriers. Without this type of intervention, the silver economy risks becoming consolidated as a segmented consumer market rather than a tool for collective well-being.

In theoretical terms, the article contributes to articulating the demography of ageing, studies on physical activity and sport, and the analysis of the silver economy, proposing an integrated reading that allows physical activity in old age to be understood as a socially, economically and territorially situated phenomenon. This articulation offers a useful conceptual framework for future empirical research that deepens the analysis of practices, the subjective experiences of older people, and the impact of different institutional and territorial configurations.

In summary, physical activity and sport are central components of active and healthy ageing, but promoting them within the framework of the silver economy presents limitations and tensions that cannot be ignored. In increasingly ageing societies marked by profound inequalities, thinking of physical activity exclusively as an emerging market is insufficient. The challenge is to develop approaches that integrate well-being, equity and sustainability, recognising the diversity of trajectories and conditions that characterise contemporary ageing.

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Author contribution

Fernando Ariel Manzano: formal analysis; conceptualisation; methodology; research; data curation; original draft writing; writing–revision and editing; supervision; validation.

Data availability statement

The entire data set supporting the results of this study was published in the article itself, given its theoretical and documentary review nature.

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