# Who Deserves the Seat? Examining the Struggle for Diversity and Equity in Sports Management Selection in Romania

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## Abstract

This study explores the complexities of sports manager selection, investigating the impact of affirmative action, recruitment strategies, organizational culture, diversity initiatives in board selection, and career advancement insights from coaches' perspectives.

To conduct this investigation, a purposive sampling technique was employed by, selecting 78 prominent sports managers and coaches from Romania.

Data were collected over an extended period, spanning from winter 2023 to spring 2024, through semi-structured interviews with sports managers and coaches. The findings revealed persistent challenges in effectively implementing affirmative action measures, as sports managers grapple with balancing the promotion of deserving candidates while maintaining continuity in board culture. Achieving meaningful diversity requires nuanced approaches that consider both candidate quality and cultural compatibility.

Moreover, this study sheds light on coaches' perspectives when considering executive council positions, highlighting various pathways to career advancement. Recruitment practices prioritize informal methods, emphasizing board cohesion. Despite the recognized importance of diversity, challenges persist in selecting candidates based solely on demographic representations.

This study provides valuable insights into promoting diversity and inclusivity within the executive councils of sports organizations. Future research could focus on longitudinal trends and qualitative experiences of underrepresented groups in sports organizations to promote equity.

**Key words:**  affirmative action, recruitment strategies, organizational culture, board selection, career advancement insights.

## 1.Introduction

The call for an Affirmative Action Policy now resonates more than ever. Our society is grappling with an unprecedented wealth gap, disproportionately affecting women, people of color, and other marginalized communities, exacerbating economic and societal disparities, and perpetuating cycles of disadvantages that affect entire generations and communities (Brown & Langer, 2015; Libertella eta l., 2007; Cooper et al., 2020).

To chart a path towards a more just future, sports managers must recognize the pressing need for their active engagement in effecting change. This study highlights the importance of understanding the board's role as the highest authority in organizations, responsible for supervision and decision-making. Consequently, it emphasizes how selection processes determine who has the right to govern (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007; Hovden et al., 2018). While sports managers establish an overarching framework for organizational policies and operations, the significance of their roles extends beyond mere administration (Edwards, 2015). Membership on sports organization boards, particularly at the national level, carries considerable prestige and power. These bodies wield a significant influence over the delivery of services crucial to the organization's primary activities.

Moreover, the landscape of sports organizations is evolving towards a more professionalized model akin to corporate boards (Love et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2019). This shift reflects a response to the growing complexity of the demands of these organizations. However, unlike traditional corporate boards, sports organization boards often have more social diversity due to their varied constituencies (Forde et al., 2015). Nevertheless, managers in the sports industry find themselves in a unique position in this evolving landscape. Sports managers' responsabilities transcend their conventional managerial duties. They are entrusted by shaping not only the operational aspects of their organizations but also contributing to broader societal conversations around equity and inclusion. Therefore, they must navigate the nuances of professional management practices while remaining attuned to the diverse needs of their constituents. By embracing inclusivity and leveraging its influence, sports managers can play a pivotal role in driving meaningful change, both within their organizations and society at large (Schulenkorf et al., 2019; Hovden et al., 2021; Stefanica, 2022).

Although extensively discussed, particularly in conversations about improving management in national and international sports organizations, researchers highlight an intriguing aspect. There are few studies on how boards choose their members, despite the importance of this issue (Takos et al., 2018; Mikkonen et al., 2021; Enjolras & Waldahl, 2010; Parent & Hoye, 2018).

Social dynamics within organizations are intricate and, characterized by a continuous interplay between inclusion and exclusion (Stancu, 2017). Exclusion, though not absolute, is inherent in the complex web of interactions among organizational members. These interactions serve as channels through which individuals glean information regarding their perceived place within the organizational hierarchy, as well

as the values and norms embedded within their structures. Concurrently, individuals engage in identity work, deciphering their affiliations and corresponding expected behaviors (Rich & Misener, 2017).

Studies, such as those conducted by Patterson and Parent (2018) and Wood and Danylchuk (2015), illuminate this process of identity negotiation within organizational contexts. Through these interactions, power dynamics emerge, delineating social groups along lines of gender, race/ethnicity, age, and other markers of identity. Typically, these dynamics establish a dichotomy between the power elite and less-empowered sectors, with the former wielding greater influence
and privilege within the organizational framework.

Despite formal inclusion within organizational structures, individuals from minority or less- empowered sectors often find themselves marginalized. This marginalization is perpetuated through established interaction patterns and the construction of shared meanings or 'common sense' within the organization (Cunningham, 2019). These dynamics can manifest in various ways, from subtle biases in decision-making processes to overt discrimination.

For example, while the organization may boast policies promoting diversity and inclusion, day-to-day interactions among employees reveal the underlying power dynamics. Women and ethnic minorities may find themselves excluded from informal networks or overlooked for advancement opportunities, despite possessing equal qualifications. These dynamics not only hinder individual progress, but also perpetuate systemic inequities within the organization (Knoppers et al., 2021; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007).

Organizational inclusion is not solely determined by formal structures but is intricately woven into the fabric of daily interactions and shared perceptions. Addressing these dynamics necessitates a comprehensive approach that acknowledges and confronts entrenched power imbalances, fostering environments where all individuals feel valued and empowered to meaningfully contribute (Trussell & Kerwin, 2024).

Organizational management dynamics can perpetuate exclusionary practices, even when not explicitly intended. Members of social groups holding positions of power may inadvertently or strategically engage in behaviors that reinforce the hierarchies of dominance and marginalization within the organization. This phenomenon, documented by Evans and Knepper (2023) and Dwight (2021), highlights how those in positions of influence often act as gatekeepers, regulating access to top-tier positions. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as "boundary policing," in which individuals consciously or unconsciously control access to coveted roles and opportunities within an organization. These actions can manifest in various forms, including biased decision-making processes, favoritism towards individuals from similar backgrounds, and the perpetuation of traditional power structures (Whitmer, 2021).

For example, let us consider a large sports organization where the executive management team is predominantly white males. Despite the organization's commitment to diversity and inclusion, established leadership may unconsciously

perpetuate exclusionary practices. In meetings and decision-making processes, subtle biases may manifest, such as dismissing ideas from women or minorities, or assigning lower-value tasks to individuals perceived as outside the dominant social group (Vianden & Gregg, 2017).

Consequently, individuals from marginalized social groups may find themselves facing barriers to advancement and feeling undervalued within the organization. This not only undermines their professional growth but also perpetuates a cycle of inequality within the organizational culture.

Managers' behavior within an organization plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of different social groups. Addressing the issues of exclusion and marginalization requires proactive efforts to dismantle existing power structures and promote inclusivity at all levels of management. Only through conscious and deliberate actions can organizations truly create environments in which every member feels valued and empowered to contribute fully (Stenling et al., 2020).

The primary objective of this research was to delve into the selection process of board members within sports organizations in Romania. Romania was selected as the focal point because of its unique characteristics and historical context (Valentina&Daniel, 2018; Rosu et al., 2022). As an emerging economy, Romania has demonstrated notable achievements in high-performance sports, particularly in disciplines such as gymnastics, football, and athletics, during the communist regime. However, in the 35 years since transitioning to democracy, Romania has gradually lost its prominent positions in the global and European sports stages. In Romania, high-performance sports are predominantly organized through a public framework consisting of national federations, local clubs, and associations (Stefanica, 2022). These sports organizations serve as critical entities in facilitating competitive opportunities and nurturing athletic talent nationwide. Consequently, gaining insights into the selection processes of board members within these organizations is imperative for comprehending the intricate dynamics of sports management in Romania (Stefanica et al., 2024).

By focusing on Romania, researchers can delve into the nuanced factors influencing sports governance and management within an evolving socio-political landscape. This examination provides valuable insights not only into the challenges facing Romanian sports but also sheds light on broader issues pertinent to sports management in emerging economies. Thus, Romania serves as an appropriate and compelling case study to explore the complexities of sports governance and management in transitional contexts.

## 2.Methods
### 2.1.Research subjects
We took great care in selecting participants from various roles within Romanian sports management, ensuring diverse perspectives. These participants had backgrounds in sports and management education, along with significant experience in coaching or sports management. We used purposive sampling to select 78 individuals, including 40 sports managers (34 men, 6 women) and 38 coaches (26 men, 12 women). This study

involved directors and executive directors from all 42 County Youth and Sports Departments as well as leadership and coaches from the 48 Municipal Sports Clubs across Romania. The sample comprised 40 managers, recognized for their expertise and significant experience in sports and youth management, along with 38 coaches. Participants ranged in age from 35 to 60 years, with an average professional experience of 10 to 25 years in their respective fields. These individuals were selected for their extensive knowledge and professional insights, ensuring a thorough and diverse representation of perspectives critical to addressing the study's research objectives.

## 2.2.Procedure

The data collection process lasted from winter 2023 to spring 2024. It involved semi-structured interviews with sports managers and coaches from Romanian sports organizations. These interviews were designed to understand the interactions between sports managers (considered part of the power elite) and coaches (seen as less empowered) when a coach aims to join the power elite. This exploration aimed to uncover how individuals from these groups navigate their roles, relationships, and identities within sports management. By examining these dynamics, the interviews aimed to reveal the challenges, power dynamics, and socio-cultural factors affecting the integration of coaches into sports management.

A semi-structured interview approach, a qualitative research technique, was employed, allowing for flexibility and depth in gathering insights.

The research methodology consisted of four stages, commencing with a thorough literature analysis to inform the development of semi-structured interview questions (Morse & McEvoy, 2014; Skinner et al., 2020). In the second stage, three focus groups were organized to engage in practical realities. The questionnaire development was based on insights gathered from these focus groups, which included specialists, researchers, and lecturers in higher education, specializing in sports management (focus group 1), sports-oriented non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (focus group 2), and representatives from elite athletes and coaches (focus group 3) (O. Nyumba et al., 2018).

Following each interview, data analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and topics, enabling an iterative refinement of the interview questions. Additionally, feedback and insights from two specialist academicians well-versed in qualitative research were incorporated to enhance the robustness of the interview process (Mashuri et al., 2022).

The interviews continued until saturation was reached, signifying that no new information or insights emerged from subsequent interviews. Thus, it was concluded that the collected data comprehensively represented the attitudes and perspectives of sports managers and coaches serving or intending to occupy positions on the executive councils of sports organizations in Romania. (Hoekman et al., 2022).

This comprehensive survey encompassed five topics aimed at elucidating critical aspects of the selection process for sports executive council members within sports organizations in Romania:

1.  Balancing Affirmative Action
2.  Recruitment Strategies
3.  Organizational Culture
4.  Diversity Strategies in Board Selection - Insights from Coaches
5.  Career Advancement Insights – Coaches' Perspectives

This comprehensive survey aimed to provide valuable insights into the complexities surrounding the selection process for sports board members, with the ultimate goal of enhancing transparency, fairness, and effectiveness within sports organizations in Romania.

Ferkins and Shilbury (2012) assert that the concept of negotiating "fit" offers a foundational framework for analyzing the variety of strategies employed by both the power elite, represented by sports managers, and the less empowered sector, consisting of coaches as employees of sports organizations, in their efforts to foster inclusivity and improve representation within the sports management sphere.

Through this lens, the study scrutinized the intricate interplay of tactics and dynamics, as individuals from both groups sought to navigate and assert their notions of suitability and compatibility within the organizational context.

## 2.3. Data Acquisition Process

The semi-structured interview included 25 main questions and took place between September 5, 2022, and March 16, 2024. The study followed the ethical guidelines outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Doctoral School of Physical Education and Sport Science at the University of Pitesti (ID: 12/4.09.2022). Before the interviews, participants were informed about the research goals, confidentiality measures, and the exclusive use of their data for research purposes to protect their anonymity. As participants didn't provide written consent for public data sharing, supporting data isn't available due to the sensitive nature of the research. Each participant willingly took part in interviews conducted in Romania, either in person or online, with an average duration of 60-90 minutes.

The researcher followed a structured four-step analysis process to examine the data. First, they carefully reviewed interview transcripts to understand participants' views on strategies, challenges, and impacts in selecting sports managers, as well as insights into recruitment and selection dynamics. Next, two academics with Ph.D. degrees in sports sciences independently analyzed a portion of the data, comparing coded quotations with the entire dataset to ensure accuracy. Then, they identified key topics and explored potential connections between them. In the fourth step, they conducted a final analysis of emerging topics and the entire dataset, selecting relevant data samples for inclusion in the research report  (Atkinson, 2002). Finally, they synthesized the analysis results with relevant literature (Edwards & Washington, 2013; Cunningham, 2019).

### 3.Results
### 3.1.Navigating entry boundaries - strategies, challenges, and implications in sport manager selection

Chelladuraiand and Kim (2022)  posited that power elites, such as sports managers, employ diverse strategies to maintain social homogeneity within a given position or occupation. In the current study, incumbent board members demonstrated a tendency to regulate entry boundaries through two primary strategies. One strategy involved the implementation of affirmative action policies, while the other centered on recruitment and selection procedures.

### 3.2.Balancing affirmative action - realities in sport manager selection

Most managers, especially those involved in sports, acknowledge the importance of competent representation in leadership positions. They argue that the issue of promoting a skilled coach on a board is often deliberated upon when a board vacancy arises. Sports managers supporting affirmative action policies credit these measures to increase the number of esteemed executive council members. They attributed the increase in esteemed executive council members to the enactment of these measures.

Such measures include the selection of a qualified individual who, when applied alongside an influential candidate, is judged similarly qualified.

Although sports managers mention various competencies, the key aspects of this criterion emphasize that executive councils should not be biased in terms of the skills possessed by their members, and that positions should be based on qualifications rather than social categories (such as the less empowered sector). This aspect also encompasses two additional criteria that again underscore the board's role as the primary decision-making body of a sports organization: the board's capacity to advance the sports entities, both organizationally and in terms of the sport itself, and the importance of the board being familiar with specific circumstances and managerial visions.

Simultaneously, some sports managers insist that each individual possesses a unique combination of qualities, skills, experiences, and characteristics that distinguish them from others. This recognition emphasizes that comparing individuals based solely on their qualities can be challenging because these qualities are inherently distinct and not interchangeable. Finding qualified board members, especially coaches who have never been managers, is very challenging. As one of them expressed, ``Given that many of them merely shuffle paperwork from one desk to another without showing any initiative, the effectiveness of affirmative action is limited.``

However, these sports managers ascribe limited authority to implementing affirmative action measures. They believe that the backing of other executive council members is crucial for implementing affirmative actions, especially if individuals without connections and influence are to be chosen. As one sport manager put it, ``We have talented individuals within our workforce whom we could promote, but it ultimately comes down to the willingness of the executive council to make those decisions.``

Another sports manager, who understood how crucial it is to have skilled people in leadership roles and supported affirmative action, did not take responsibility and

believed his colleagues were to blame for the lack of progress. He said, ``If we need to talk about inclusive leadership issues, they'll probably be delayed, with other more important matters taking priority.``

These sports managers believe that the lack of support from their colleagues stems from the fact that individuals from less influential sectors are not well-represented on the executive council. Additionally, they have specific criteria for selecting individuals from these sectors, emphasizing that they must bring qualities that current council members do not possess.

In sports management, many managers are hesitant to fully support affirmative action initiatives. They argue that selection processes should look beyond social categories and focus on evaluating candidates based on a wide range of criteria, including diversity and effectiveness. This perspective emphasizes the need for a balanced decision-making approach that considers both individual qualifications and the benefits of diversity for organizational performance. While these sports managers express verbal support for affirmative action, recognizing the importance of both diversity and organizational effectiveness, their actions suggest that this endorsement may not translate into actual hiring practices. Many managers believe that the composition of the executive council will naturally evolve over time without the need for specific policy interventions. They claim to endorse affirmative action in principle, but often fail to implement it in practice. This indicates a tendency towards what Piggott (2022) refers to as "homologous reproduction" – a continued preference for members of the dominant group because they are perceived as the "best" fit.

### 3.3. Strategic recruitment practices in sports management- formality and informality

Recruitment practices among most sports managers involve a combination of formal and informal methods to identify suitable candidates. Formally, vacancies are announced several months before the formal selection process begins. This announcement typically involves reaching out to known individuals who may be potential candidates, soliciting nominations from sports clubs and other relevant organizations, and utilizing various channels, such as the Internet, sports assemblies, and newsletters for advertising purposes. However, this approach often yields limited results.

In response, sports managers often turn to informal channels, relying on their personal networks to find potential candidates. For example, they argue, "You want people whose life circumstances allow for board participation. It can be challenging to include parents with young children on the board due to the complexities of their lives. Typically, it's older individuals who end up on boards because they have more flexibility."

Another perspective from the board is, "We're searching for someone who can confidently share their opinions during board meetings while also being willing to support decisions made by the majority. The ideal candidate should have skills that align with the board's needs or complement those of departing members. They should also have practical knowledge. For instance, if I asked for recommendations on

affordable and high-quality suppliers for sports equipment and facilities, they should already have this information."

The selection criteria vary depending on the positions to be filled. The board's requirements provide a framework for finding suitable candidates. Certain responsibilities need to be met, so it's important to find individuals with the necessary capabilities to fulfill these duties.

### 3.4. Between quality and cultural fit - challenges in sport manager selection

Selection procedures in sports management entail establishing formal criteria for each board vacancy. These criteria typically revolve around having a clear vision of the future of the association and the sport, possessing the ability to grasp the broader context, having experience in governance, and demonstrating a strong affinity for the sport. Additionally, candidates are expected to possess a combination of relevant skills, knowledge, attitudes, and time availability, which are conducive to effective board membership. For instance, experience in governance, politics, or corporate environments is deemed advantageous due to the networking opportunities and sponsorship connections they bring: ``It's really helpful if someone has worked in government, politics, or companies before. This background often provides valuable networking opportunities and connections for sponsorships. If a candidate has previously worked in government or politics, they understand how things operate in these areas, which can help us establish stronger networks and gain support for our initiatives. Similarly, connections within the corporate sector are crucial for securing sponsorships and partnerships.``

The foremost priority in candidate selection, underscored unanimously by all participating sports managers, was creativity. Within this context, creativity encompasses various elements such as innovative problem-solving abilities, forward-thinking strategic planning, the capacity to envision and implement novel initiatives to enhance sports programs or events, and the ability to adapt to changing trends and challenges within the sports industry.

However, while candidates are expected to bring value to the board, they are also expected to assimilate into the existing board culture without significantly altering it. This alignment with the prevailing culture is essential for candidate acceptance, regardless of their background.

Notably, candidates from the less-empowered sector face the additional challenge of adapting to a culture that may not fully resonate with their own, despite their qualifications and capabilities.

The notion of "fit" within the board culture is emphasized, with the expectation that new members, including those from subordinate groups, must seamlessly integrate into the existing dynamics.

Nevertheless, caution is advised when selecting candidates based solely on affirmative action policies, without considering their compatibility with the board's culture. Making selections solely based on demographic representation, rather than considering cultural fit, risks undermining the cohesion and effectiveness of the board.

Consequently, while there is a moral imperative to diversify board membership, maintaining continuity in board culture remains a priority for incumbents. This gate-keeping approach significantly shapes how individuals from subordinate groups navigate their entry into these boards, highlighting the complex interplay between diversity initiatives and organizational culture.

### 3.5.Insights into recruitment and selection dynamics- perspectives from coaches

We conducted interviews with members of the less empowered sector (coaches) to gain insight into their perspectives on the recruitment and selection processes, as well as their strategies for advancing their own candidacy in these processes.

### 3.6.Network dynamics and deliberate recruitment strategies in executive council selection - insights from coaches

Our findings revealed that all interviewed coaches were part of predominantly group networks, which played a significant role in their recruitment for these high-level positions. However, mere membership in these networks was insufficient. Each coach was approached to join the executive council for specific reasons, one of which was to provide a fresh perspective from the field. As one coach stated, "They sought new recruits because the executive council lacked diversity in terms of age, and they desired a greater representation of younger members'." Essentially, their recruitment was a deliberate effort by the executive council to diversify age composition.

The coach highlighted that having an executive council solely comprised of old board members was no longer considered legitimate. Prior to the recruitment process for a new executive council member, an incumbent member from the less- empowered sector was consulted by other executive council members to gauge their comfort level as the sole new addition and to consider adding another friend from the subordinate group. He expressed his stance by stating, ``If you believe I require another coach friend, you are mistaken. I am content. It is more important to find the right individual than prioritize friendships. I value someone who can integrate seamlessly into the team, regardless of their personal relationship with me."

One coach expressed his bewilderment, saying, "I found myself wondering why they consulted me when the board consisted solely of older individuals'." Another coach reluctantly accepted the position, despite initial reservations, stating, ``I hesitated to accept this role and declined multiple times because I held low regard for the existing members of the executive council. Most of them are chosen through political influence. They do not have any real connection to sports as a phenomenon and probably aspire to advance further in governmental or ministerial roles rather than actively contributing to the development of sports."

Furthermore, some coaches were hesitant to join the executive council because of their concerns about the expected role and potential consequences of unpopular decisions. One coach explained this reluctance, saying,``When they approached me about joining the council, I was fully focused on leading my team to the national finals. I thought to myself, 'If I become the only new member among four incumbents, with one or two often absent, I will end up taking all the heat for any problems that arise.' So, I decided to pass on the opportunity, not wanting to take on that kind of responsibility."

These findings suggest that while these coaches possessed ambitions, they were discerning about accepting an executive council position, placing importance on specific circumstances. They felt the need to tread carefully to express their aspirations, emphasizing their dedication to the role itself. One coach shed light on the perception of ambitious behavior within the power elite: ``Cautioning, and displaying superior qualifications may provoke backlash. Thus, it is crucial to demonstrate their commitment and enthusiasm. Excessive ambition among individuals from less empowered sectors can impede progress, and humility tends to yield better outcomes. Based on my experience, adopting a modest approach could lead to significant achievements."

### 3.7. Pathways to advancement - insights from coaches on achieving higher positions

One coach explained how he achieved his goal of getting a higher position: ``Success in sports governance boils down to a few key principles``, the coach began. ``Firstly, you gotta have the right attitude. It is all about being committed and investing your time in the work of the board. Most importantly, it is about passion for sports. We need folks who are completely loyal to their roles and always prioritize what is best for the sport, not just what benefits them personally.``
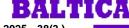
The coaches felt that they were chosen as candidates because they fit the criteria set by affirmative action policies and had necessary experience in sports. One coach explained: ``Being on the board isn't just about having a title; it's about being there for the right reasons.`` The coach emphasized: "A bad board member only cares about their own club or area, forgetting about the bigger picture of developing the sport. At this level, having good people skills is key – you gotta talk, discuss, and act professionally. You need to be able to speak up and share your thoughts during meetings, but also be ready to go along with what the majority decides."

Unlike previous board members who had to climb up ranks, those selected in recent years did not have to go through the same process. However, all had backgrounds in sports and/or master's degrees.

Coaches with similar backgrounds knew that they were sought after and could join executive boards because of their experience in sports, governance, and sometimes politics. Another factor in their selection was the track record of their sports performance. This highlights another aspect of the selection criteria.

One coach shared his experience with the selection process. The coach recalled: ``There weren't many welcoming faces there, especially none who could handle tough situations with kindness. Maybe that's why they picked me.'So, what I'm getting at is', if any of you ever find yourselves on a board, remember this: you've gotta have humor, be friendly, and keep an open mind. These things don't just make things more pleasant, they help us communicate better and solve problems together."

## 4.Discussion

The discussion reveals the intricate dynamics surrounding sports manager selection, emphasizing the delicate balance between affirmative actions, recruitment strategies, and organizational culture. Despite acknowledgment of the importance of diversity and inclusion, challenges persist in effectively implementing affirmative action measures. Sports managers grapple with the tension between promoting deserving candidates from less-empowered sectors and maintaining continuity in board culture. While affirmative action policies aim to diversify board membership, their effectiveness is contingent upon the support of incumbent members and their ability to navigate entry boundaries. Ultimately, achieving meaningful diversity in sports management requires a nuanced approach that considers both the quality of candidates and their cultural fit within the existing organizational context. The study also underscores the nuanced considerations coaches take into account when contemplating executive council positions, including concerns about potential repercussions and perceptions of ambitious behavior. Additionally, it sheds light on various pathways to advancement as perceived by coaches, ranging from excelling in current roles to meeting affirmative action criteria.

### Balancing affirmative action - realities in sport manager selection

The discussion on balancing affirmative action in sports managers' selection reveals a nuanced landscape among sports managers. While there is collective acknowledgment of the importance of diverse representation in leadership, opinions diverge on the practicality and impact of affirmative action measures.

Supporters of affirmative action policies credit them to increase the number of esteemed executive council members. They argue for a selection process based on qualifications rather than social categories, emphasizing the need for a nuanced evaluation framework. However, challenges arise in assessing candidates' unique qualities and experiences, especially those transitioning from coaching to managerial roles.

Sports managers stress the importance of support from fellow council members in implementing affirmative action. However, some avoid taking responsibility or prioritize other concerns, showing a reluctance to fully embrace inclusive initiatives. Despite verbal commitments, actions often fall short, reflecting a preference for maintaining the existing power dynamics.

This discrepancy highlights the gap between rhetoric and action, perpetuating a cycle of homologous reproduction in which dominant group members are favored. Ultimately, the discussion underscores the complex dynamics at play in achieving diversity and organizational effectiveness in sports management.

Cho (2020) conducted a study investigated how employers' personal dispositions, particularly implicit biases related to race and gender, influence their perceptions of candidates for entry-level sports management positions. This research was divided into two sections based on a conceptual framework. The first section, focused on the preference for higher social status groups, such as white men, drawing from implicit bias, social role theory, and intersectionality. The second section explored tendencies

toward in-group favoritism based on the subjective uncertainty reduction theory and social identity theory. This study highlights the complex interplay between personal dispositions, implicit biases, and perceptions of candidates in the hiring process, with implications for promoting diversity and addressing biases in employment practices.

Vianden and Gregg (2017) emphasized the importance of studying the perspectives of privileged social groups, particularly heterosexual white male undergraduate sports management majors, in addressing the lack of diversity in the sports industry. Their focus group study of 22 participants sheds light on perceptions related to diversity in sports management, the role of women in the field, meritocratic hiring policies, and individual responsibility for fostering change. The authors call for sports management faculty and administrators to encourage self-reflection among white male students, challenge them to recognize their privileges, and take active steps towards promoting diversity and social justice in the sports industry.

Cunningham (2019) offers a comprehensive examination of diversity within sports organizations, covering a wide range of dimensions, such as race, gender, age, ability, appearance, religion, sexual orientation, and social class. It provides practical strategies for managing diversity effectively in both the workplace and sports environments. Additionally, Cunningham emphasizes the crucial role of diversity training in creating inclusive workplaces where all individuals feel valued and respected.

**Strategic recruitment practices in sports management- formality and informality**
Strategic recruitment practices in sports management reflect a blend of formal and informal methods used by sports managers to identify suitable candidates for board positions. While formal approaches involve announcing vacancies in advance and utilizing multiple advertising channels, informal avenues, particularly personal networks, play a crucial role.

In these informal networks, managers seek individuals whose life circumstances align with the demands of board membership, often favoring older individuals  because of the flexibility afforded by their life circumstances. Moreover, informal recruitment emphasizes identifying candidates who exhibit compatible conduct and skills for board engagement, such as effective communication, professionalism, and the ability to advocate their positions confidently.

These recruitment practices underscore the importance of board cohesion, with managers prioritizing candidates who share similar demographics and perspectives. Ultimately, the specific criteria for candidate selection depend on the vacancy being filled, guided by the board's requirements and the need to identify individuals capable of fulfilling the responsibilities associated with the position.

The research findings provide insights into employers' expectations of sports management opportunities. The most common sought-after management and leadership expectations include achieving results, working effectively with people, utilizing resources efficiently, and providing clear direction. Entry-level recruitment tends to prioritize skills, such as excellent communication, strong planning and organizational abilities, and effective problem-solving skills. Selection criteria often emphasize experience, qualifications, and suitable work ethics or passion for the field.

Overall, this study offers a benchmarking profile of sports management opportunities in Australia, which can serve as a basis for further research and development of curricula tailored to the needs of the industry. (Emery et al, 2012)

**Between quality and cultural fit - challenges in sport manager selection**

Selection procedures prioritize candidate quality, encompassing knowledge, experience, and personal attributes. Candidates are expected to assimilate into the existing board culture, which presents a challenge for individuals from subordinate groups. Althoug diversity initiatives are important, selecting candidates based solely on demographic representation risks undermining board cohesion. Maintaining continuity in board culture remains a priority, shaping how individuals from subordinate groups navigate their entry into these boards.

Stenling et al. (2020) aimed to investigate board selection processes and their impact on board composition, addressing two main questions: the criteria used in these processes and how they are prioritized. This study is significant in the context of good governance, access to positions of power in sports organizations, and representation issues. Using interviews with representatives from Swedish national sports organizations, this study found that trade-offs occur among various representation and efficiency criteria, leading to the formation of hierarchies of criteria. Contrary to previous suggestions, this study reveals that trade-offs are not solely between gender and merit. These implications suggest the need for future studies to consider the range of evaluative criteria involved in the board-selection processes. Additionally, this study provides insights for sports management practitioners to effectively understand and address representation issues.

Fink and Pastore (2012) discovered that diversity within positions of power in sports, particularly in interscholastic, intercollegiate, and professional settings, is significantly lacking, especially for individuals who do not fit the traditional profile of white, heterosexual males. They noted that the underrepresentation of diverse groups extends beyond demographics, and includes attitudes, values, and leadership priorities among those in leadership positions in sports. Drawing on insights from the corporate world, they proposed a framework comprising three dimensions: non-compliance/compliance, reactive diversity management, and proactive diversity management. This framework aims to provide a fresh perspective on the lack of diversity within Division IA intercollegiate athletic organizations and offers potential applications in kinesiology, physical education, and sports.

**Network dynamics and deliberate recruitment strategies in executive council selection - insights from coaches**

One of the central findings of this study revolves around the pivotal role of networks in the selection process of executive council members. Coaches were predominantly part of group networks, which significantly influenced their recruitment to high-level positions. However, mere membership in these networks was insufficient; coaches were approached for specific reasons, often aimed at diversifying the age composition of the executive council and bringing fresh perspectives from the field.

Interestingly, the study reveals deliberate efforts by executive councils to diversify their age composition and, recognize the importance of representation from younger members. This shift underscores the evolving perception of legitimacy within executive councils, where an exclusively older composition is no longer considered acceptable.

Moreover, this study sheds light on the nuanced considerations that coaches undertake when evaluating executive council positions. While ambition is evident among coaches, they discern the circumstances in which they accept such roles. Concerns about the potential repercussions of unpopular decisions and perceptions of ambitious behavior within the power elite significantly influence their decision-making process.

Parnell et al. (2023) investigated the recruitment strategies of Sporting Directors in elite-level football clubs, focusing on the role of network theory in these strategies. They conducted a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews with 25 managers from the English Premier League and English championship clubs. These findings suggest that, contrary to conventional recruitment practices, trust and familiarity play a more significant role in football recruitment. This reliance on closed networks, termed homophily, could potentially limit information flow and innovation within the industry, thus affecting organizational performance.

**Pathways to advancement - insights from coaches on achieving higher positions**

By exploring the pathways to advancement perceived by coaches, this study uncovered various strategies and considerations. Some coaches emphasize the importance of focusing on excelling in current roles, whereas others attribute their selection to fitting the criteria set by affirmative action policies and demonstrating experience in sports. Additionally, coaches with backgrounds in sports, governance, and sometimes politics are highly sought after for executive board positions, underscoring the multifaceted nature of the selection criteria.

Furthermore, coaches should carefully navigate perceptions and stereotypes associated with subordinate groups when vying for higher positions. Demonstrating professionalism and avoiding negative stereotypes were crucial considerations in the selection process.

De Schepper et al. (2021) aimed to investigate the extent to which sports management students engage in critical reflection during work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences and whether these skills meet the needs of employers in the sports industry. They surveyed 314 WIL stakeholders to compare their perceptions across students, Academic Supervisors, and Industry Supervisors. The study found disparities in perceptions, with Industry Supervisors noting that students mainly focused on seeking feedback and reflecting on their career ambitions. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening critical social reflection skills to better align with industry needs and enhance graduate employability. The classification of critical reflection skills into six dimensions provides a useful framework for assessing and improving students' skills development in sports management.

Škorić (2018) and Voicu (2013) examined the perspectives of future employees in sports organizations regarding the essential knowledge and skills required by sports

managers. The students identified willingness to take risks, organizational abilities, expertise in sports management, and entrepreneurial skills as critical competencies for sports managers. Notably, expertise in sports management was ranked as the top priority for students.

## 5. Limitations, Implications and Future Research Directions

*Limitations*

While this study provides valuable insights into executive council selection processes in sports organizations, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, it primarily focuses on the perspectives of sports managers and coaches, potentially overlooking the viewpoints of other stakeholders involved in the selection process, such as board members and administrative staff. Additionally, the sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader contexts within the sports industry. Moreover, the study's reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases or inaccuracies, as participants may provide socially desirable responses or omit relevant information. Finally, the study's cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between variables, necessitating caution when interpreting the findings.

*Implications*

Despite these limitations, this study had several practical implications. First, the findings underscore the importance of promoting diversity and inclusivity within executive councils to enhance organizational effectiveness and legitimacy. Sports organizations should prioritize efforts to recruit and retain qualified candidates from diverse backgrounds, ensuring that decision-making bodies reflect the demographics of their stakeholders. Additionally, this study highlights the need for ongoing training and development programs to equip executive council members with the skills and competencies necessary for effective leadership in diverse environments. By fostering an inclusive organizational culture, sports organizations can harness the full potential of their executive councils to drive innovation and success.

*Future Research Directions*

Building on the insights gained from this study, future research can explore several avenues to further advance our understanding of this area. First, longitudinal studies could investigate how executive council compositions evolve over time in response to changing organizational dynamics and external pressures. By tracking changes in demographic representation and decision-making processes, researchers can assess the long-term impacts of diversity initiatives on organizational performance. Additionally, qualitative research approaches, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, could provide richer insights into the experiences of underrepresented groups within executive councils, shedding light on the barriers they face and strategies for overcoming them. Furthermore, comparative studies across different sports organizations and geographic regions could identify contextual factors that influence executive council selection processes, informing the development of tailored interventions and best practices. Finally, experimental research designs could test the

effectiveness of various diversity interventions, such as mentorship programs or bias training, in promoting inclusive leadership and organizational outcomes. By addressing these research gaps, scholars can contribute to ongoing efforts to create more equitable and inclusive sports organizations.

## 6.Conclusions

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the intricate process of sports manager selection, revealing the interplay between affirmative action, recruitment strategies, organizational culture, diversity initiatives in board selection, and career advancement insights. Despite advocating for qualification-based evaluations, sports managers face challenges in assessing candidates' unique qualities, especially during transitions from coaching to managerial roles. The importance of support from fellow council members in implementing affirmative action is emphasized, yet some reluctance persists, reflecting a preference for maintaining the existing power dynamics. Informal recruitment methods prevail, prioritizing board cohesion and similar demographics among candidates. Selection procedures prioritize candidate quality, with continuity in board culture shaping entry into these boards. Networks play a pivotal role in executive council member selection, with coaches often seeking to diversify their perspectives. Coaches navigate stereotypes to advance professionally, underscoring the need for nuanced evaluation frameworks and the active embracing of inclusive initiatives in sports management.

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