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I HAVE A RESEARCH IDEA, NOW WHAT? A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO RESEARCH METHOD SELECTION IN SPORT MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Research in sport management often defaults to cross-sectional surveys analyzed with regression or structural equation modeling, even when questions and data environments call for temporal, experimental, ethnographic, or integrated designs. This paper addresses that misalignment by advancing method–question fit as the organizing principle for design in sport. We (a) synthesize how quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods are actually used in sport and where each is strongest; (b) present a five-step, sport-specific decision framework (align question–theory, audit data/access, balance epistemology and feasibility, plan ethics by design, and integrate methods for innovation); and (c) consolidate guardrails for quality (psychometrics, model fit and invariance, qualitative trustworthiness, and mixed-methods integration). Theoretically, we articulate a sport-specific evidentiary logic, an integration blueprint joining variance and process explanations, and a reliability/transportability charter suited to proprietary data contexts. We conclude with practical implications for organizations and training, and a future research agenda emphasizing longitudinal, experimental, ethnographic, and mixed-methods programs.

Keywords: *Sport Management, Research Design, Mixed Methods, Decision Framework*

1 INTRODUCTION

Research in sport management has matured rapidly over the last three decades, expanding across consumer behavior, sponsorship, governance, organizational behavior, social responsibility, digital platforms, and event management (Doherty, 2013; Smith & Stewart, 2010). Journals such as Journal of Sport Management, Sport Management Review, and European Sport Management Quarterly document this breadth and its growing methodological sophistication. Yet method selection in published studies remains uneven. Many projects default to cross-sectional surveys analyzed with regression or structural equation modeling even when the question, context, or available data call for alternative designs better suited to inference. Conversely, qualitative designs are sometimes adopted without clear links to epistemological stance or analytic rigor, and mixed methods remain underused despite sport management's inherently multi-level, stakeholder-rich settings (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015).

Methodological rigor determines the credibility of findings that guide decisions on sponsorship and activation budgets, season-ticket pricing, fan-engagement strategy, athlete and employee well-being initiatives, governance and compliance, and community sport investment (Cornwell, 2013). Sport's distinctive features (e.g., simultaneous co-operation and competition, strong emotional identification among fans, the co-production of experiences by consumers and organizations) create design challenges not always present in other industries (Smith & Stewart, 2010). These conditions complicate sampling, measurement, causal inference, and ethics, making careful alignment between research questions and methods essential.

A further shift intensifies both the opportunity and the responsibility to choose wisely: sport organizations now generate extensive digital traces; transactional ticketing, dynamic pricing histories, app and web analytics, social media engagement, and, in high-performance contexts, wearable and

biometric data. These sources can support designs beyond single-wave self-reports, including longitudinal panels, event-history models of churn, quasi-experiments around staggered rollouts, and field experiments embedded in communications. At the same time, access to boardrooms, back-of-house operations, and online fan communities creates opportunities for ethnographic and case-based insights that surveys cannot capture (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Washington & Patterson, 2011). Despite these opportunities, publication patterns still reflect a narrower methodological repertoire than the field's questions (and data) would support.

This paper addresses that misalignment by offering a practical, domain-specific guide to method selection in sport management. The central gap is twofold. Substantively, there is a patterned over-reliance on cross-sectional self-report surveys for questions that are temporal, relational, or processual in nature, for which longitudinal, experimental, ethnographic, or mixed-methods designs would yield stronger evidence. Methodologically, the field lacks consolidated sport-specific guidance that translates general research design principles into the constraints and opportunities of sport organizations. General methods texts provide foundations (e.g., Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Kline, 2023), but researchers still lack a clear mapping from sport management questions to feasible, defensible designs.

Our contributions are practical and theoretical. Practically, we (i) synthesize how quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches are actually used in sport and identify where each is strongest, grounding the discussion in influential scholarship and drawing out the design logics that make those contributions credible; (ii) present a five-step decision framework tailored to sport (align question–theory; audit data/access; balance epistemology and feasibility; plan ethics by design; integrate methods for innovation); and (iii) consolidate sport specific guardrails for quality—psychometric reporting (reliability; convergent/discriminant validity; measurement invariance), model assessment and parsimony in SEM, mitigation of common method variance, qualitative trustworthiness, and integration standards for mixed methods; so researchers can design ex ante for rigor rather than retrofit diagnostics ex post (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Henseler et al., 2015).

Theoretically, we advance three ideas. First, we propose a sport-specific mapping from question types to evidentiary standards, linking prevalent constructs (e.g., identification, perceived value, experience quality, brand associations, psychological safety) to designs required to adjudicate rival explanations. Second, we clarify how integration across methods enhances explanation: quantitative models identify patterned relationships; qualitative analyses reveal mechanisms and contingencies; mixed-methods integration yields meta-inferences that travel across organizations and cultures (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Venkatesh et al., 2013). Third, we outline a reliability and transportability charter for access-constrained sport research, advocating design transparency, preregistration where feasible, instrument and code sharing within contractual limits, and explicit discussion of what is likely to generalize across clubs, leagues, and contexts (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2019; Miles et al., 2014).

2 UNDERSTANDING RESEARCH METHODS IN SPORT MANAGEMENT

2.1 The three families: principles of design, data, and inference

Sport management research relies on three methodological families: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, each with its own logic of evidence and inference. Quantitative designs are used to test hypotheses, estimate relationships, and assess effects with numeric data; they prioritize measurement validity and statistical inference and are typically operationalized through structured instruments, archival datasets, or controlled manipulations (Fischer et al., 2023; Field, 2024). Qualitative designs are used to examine processes, meanings, and contexts through interviews, observation, and documents; they emphasize depth, reflexivity, and trustworthiness, and they are indispensable when researchers seek to understand mechanisms, interpretations, or organizational dynamics not easily captured in standardized measures (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Mixed-methods designs purposefully integrate both traditions (sequentially or concurrently) to triangulate findings and produce more complete explanations when questions span both patterned relationships and underlying processes (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

Method selection should follow the logic of the research question. When the goal is to estimate the strength or direction of relationships and test directional hypotheses, for example the effect of perceived sponsor–team fit on purchase intention, quantitative models are the appropriate evidentiary route. Where the aim is to understand how governance reforms unfold, or why fans co-create particular meanings around teams, qualitative designs are better suited. Many sport management questions, however, have both elements: they require estimation of relationships that generalize to broader populations and explanation of processes that vary across contexts. In these cases, mixed-methods designs are warranted.

Across the three families, data collection decisions determine what can credibly be inferred. Quantitative work in sport typically relies on structured surveys/questionnaires; archival and administrative sources such as ticketing, pricing histories, and attendance records; digital traces from web, app, and social media analytics; and, where feasible, experiments in laboratory, online, or field settings. Good practice begins with construct clarity, careful item development or adaptation, pilot testing, and transparent reporting of sampling frames and response rates (Hinkin, 1998; DeVellis, 2021). Qualitative work typically draws on semi-structured interviews, observations and ethnography, internal documents and communications, and digital artifacts; sampling is purposeful rather than probabilistic, with explicit strategies for access, diversity of perspectives, and ethical protection, especially where power asymmetries are pronounced (Patton, 2015; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Mixed-methods projects must plan integration from the outset; for example, using an initial survey to identify segments for qualitative follow-up (explanatory sequential), building a survey instrument from qualitative codes (exploratory sequential), or collecting both strands concurrently and integrating them analytically (convergent).

Once data are collected, analysis proceeds along well-established routes. In quantitative studies this can involve anything from descriptive statistics (Nick, 2007) through linear or logistic regression (Christensen, 1997) and ANOVA/ANCOVA (Rutherford, 2011) to structural equation modeling (Yuan & Bentler, 2006). Researchers should report internal consistency, convergent and discriminant validity, model fit indices, and, when comparing groups, tests of measurement invariance; they should design for and diagnose common method variance in single-source designs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Henseler et al., 2015; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Qualitative analysis commonly employs thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017), constant comparison (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011), and case-based logics; credibility is strengthened through member checking, audit trails, reflexive memos, and thick description (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles et al., 2014). Mixed-methods analysis requires explicit integration to avoid parallel narratives and to achieve genuine complementarity (Venkatesh et al., 2013).

Validity, ethics, and feasibility have sport-specific contours (Robertson et al., 2017). Proprietary fan lists and event-based intercept sampling introduce coverage and nonresponse biases; organizational gatekeeping constrains access to data and people; sensitive topics such as integrity, safeguarding, and employee well-being elevate ethical risks. Quantitative work should avoid causal language without appropriate designs (e.g., longitudinal or experimental) and report sampling and invariance transparently. Qualitative work should foreground researcher positionality and participant protections in hierarchically structured settings. Mixed-methods projects must sequence realistically given club and league timetables and resource trade-offs, and they should document how integration informed interpretation and recommendations. In all cases, a defensible design in sport requires explicit attention to method–question fit, data access and quality, and the ethical implications of studying passionate publics and vulnerable stakeholders (Andrew et al., 2019).

2.2 Methods most used in sport management

Within sport management, several methods recur because they align well with common questions and available data (Veal & Darcy, 2014). Cross-sectional surveys analyzed with regression or SEM are dominant in consumer research, service and experience quality, brand and loyalty, and sponsorship effectiveness; interviews and case studies are prevalent in governance, leadership, and organizational

change; ethnography and thematic analysis appear where lived experience and culture are central; and mixed-methods designs emerge when researchers connect patterned outcomes with process explanations (Trail & James, 2001; Greenwell et al., 2002; Yoshida & James, 2010; Wicker et al., 2013).

In quantitative consumer and sponsorship work, researchers typically use multi-item scales to operationalize constructs such as motivation, identification, perceived value, brand associations, and perceived sponsor–team fit (Olson et al., 2011). These are validated through factor-analytic procedures and modeled via regression or SEM to estimate direct and indirect effects on satisfaction, word-of-mouth, and behavioral intentions. The strength of this approach lies in clear construct–indicator mapping and the ability to test theoretically specified pathways; its main limitations are reliance on single-wave self-reports, vulnerability to common method variance, and restricted causal inference (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Where organizations grant access to transactional or engagement data, researchers can augment surveys with behavioral outcomes (renewals, purchases, attendance), adopt longitudinal designs, or embed field experiments in communications, thereby strengthening inference.

In governance and organizational studies, qualitative interviews and case studies enable researchers to access decision processes, role negotiations, and strategic capability building within sport organizations (Morse & McEvoy, 2014). These designs allow triangulation of interviews with observations and internal documents, producing context-rich explanations of change and performance. Their strengths are depth and ecological validity; their limitations include challenges to generalization and the need for reflexive, transparent analytic procedures to ensure credibility and transferability (Yin, 2018; Miles et al., 2014). Ethnographic approaches extend this depth by immersing researchers in match day operations, volunteer management, or online fan communities, revealing tacit norms and emotional labor that surveys rarely capture (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

Mixed-methods studies are particularly well suited to sport because many managerial problems involve attitudes and meanings (captured qualitatively) as well as behaviors and outcomes (captured quantitatively; Rudd & Johnson, 2010). Explanatory sequential designs can begin with large-scale modeling of satisfaction and renewal, followed by interviews with atypical cases to diagnose barriers; exploratory sequential designs can build new measures of board capability from qualitative insights and then generalize via survey; convergent designs can contrast what fans report about sponsorship engagement with how managers describe activation decisions. Integration (rather than mere coexistence) should be the hallmark of such projects, with joint displays and explicit meta-inferences guiding recommendations (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Venkatesh et al., 2013).

To crystallize these patterns, Table 1 links influential sport management studies to their principal design choices (study design, data collection, analytic approach) and adds brief notes on strengths and limitations relevant to method selection.

This mapping illustrates why certain methods became dominant in sport management and where their boundaries lie. Survey-based SEM, for instance, has been exceptionally productive in clarifying the structure of fan experience, brand associations, and loyalty drivers. At the same time, governance and organizational change have required designs capable of opening the "black box" of process; interviews, case studies, and, where feasible, ethnography. Finally, where organizations provide behavioral data or permit intervention, the field can progress beyond association to stronger inference through longitudinal, quasi-experimental, or experimental designs, and through mixed-methods integration that connects patterns to mechanisms. Together, these insights provide a domain-specific foundation for selecting methods that fit the question, the data environment, and the ethical constraints of sport organizations.

3 DECISION-MAKING FRAMEWORK FOR METHOD SELECTION IN SPORT MANAGEMENT

We propose a five-step framework for transparent, defensible method selection tailored to sport contexts. Although presented sequentially, these steps are iterative in practice: researchers move back and forth as access evolves, ethical is-

Table 1: Integrative mapping of influential sport management studies to method choices

Biscaia et al. (2013)	Quantitative survey; cross-sectional	Survey of fans from a professional soccer team (loyalty, sponsorship awareness, purchase intention)	SEM	Integrates value perceptions; cross-sectional limits on causality
Cornwell (2013)	Conceptual/theoretical review and synthesis	No primary data; draws on prior literature	Critical literature review and conceptual integration	Provides a high-level synthesis of sponsorship research; applicability to specific context may be limited
Filo, Lock, & Karg (2015)	Systematic literature review	Reviewed 70 peer-reviewed journal articles in English-language sport management journals on social media and sport	Categorization of studies into three domains: (1) strategic, (2) operational, and (3) user-focused.	Comprehensive review provides a structured overview of the field; limited to the sport management journals
Greenwell, Fink, & Pastore (2002)	Quantitative survey; cross-sectional study	Survey of 218 minor league ice hockey spectators	Multiple regression and hierarchical regression analyses	Empirically examines the relative importance of physical facilities within broader service experience; single sport context limits generalizability
Gwinner & Bennett (2008)	Quantitative; cross-sectional survey	Survey of 552 attendees at the Dew Action Sports Tour	SEM	Expands sponshorship literature by shifting focus from outcomes of fit to predictors of fit; single event and location may limit generalizability
Kunkel, Funk, & Hill (2013)	Quantitative; cross-sectional survey	Online questionnaire of football consumers (n = 752)	CFA, MANOVA, paired-sample t tests, frequency analysis, chi-square tests, and linear regression	Large sample size provides statistical power and reliability; focus on a single sport may limit generalizability
Shilbury & Ferkins (2011)	Qualitative action research combined with literature integration	Empirical data from a larger action research study of New Zealand national sport organization boards	Thematic analysis	Provides empirical insights into the strategic functioning of sport governance boards; context-specific
Wicker & Breuer (2011)	Quantitative, large-scale survey study with longitudinal component	Cross-sectional survey (2007, n = 13.068 clubs) and longitudinal survey (2005-2007, n = 1.648 clubs)	Step 1: cross-sectional (subjective scarcity measure); step 2: detailed analysis of each capacity dimension; step 3: objective scarcity measure through longitudinal indexes comparing 2005 – 2007, tested for statistical significance with paired t-tests	Massive sample provides representativeness: longitudinal period limited to two years

Note. CFA = confirmatory factor analysis; SEM = structural equation modeling; MANOVA = multivariate analysis of variance

sues surface, and theoretical clarity improves. The aim is not to prescribe a single "right" design but to make method–question fit explicit, to surface constraints early, and to document choices in ways that strengthen credibility and usefulness for sport organizations.

Step 1: Align with the research question

The starting point is conceptual, not technical: clarifying what kind of claim the study must support. If the primary aim is to test relationships or effects; for example, whether perceived sponsor–team fit increases purchase intention, then a quantitative design that estimates the size and direction of effects with appropriate controls is usually warranted (Black, 1999). If the aim is to understand processes or meanings: how governance reforms unfold in a national sport organization or why fans co-create particular narratives around a club, then a qualitative design that traces mechanisms and interpretations is more suitable (Skinner et al., 2020). Many sport management problems demand both: we need estimates of patterned relationships that generalize and thick explanations of how and why those relationships arise in particular settings. In such cases, mixed-methods designs can integrate complementary strands within a single, coherent program of inquiry (Venkatesh et al., 2013).

Framing the question also means tying it explicitly to theory. In consumer and fan research, for example, the Psychological Continuum Model (Funk & James, 2001) and identification–loyalty frameworks specify mechanisms that translate into testable paths for SEM or regression. In governance and leadership, theories of board capability or organizational learning (Klarner et al., 2021) motivate procession questions better served by case study or ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). When researchers anchor their questions in theory, design becomes cumulative rather than ad hoc: constructs are clearer, rival explanations can be specified, and appropriate evidence standards follow from the conceptual claims.

Two practical heuristics help at this step. First, ask whether the claim is causal, associational, or interpretive. Causal claims require designs that justify counterfactual inferences (experiments, strong quasi-experiments, or longitudinal cross-lagged models; Shadish, 2002). Associational claims can be addressed with cross-sectional models if measurement is sound and language stays non-causal. Interpretive claims prioritize context, meaning, and mechanism, and they rely on transparent qualitative procedures for credibility (Lincoln, 1985; Maxwell, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Second, specify who/what/when/where with precision. A question such as "What drives renewal?" can be sharpened to "Among season-ticket holders with at least two years of tenure (who), which aspects of perceived fairness in pricing communications (what) predict renewal in the next cycle (when) controlling for performance and seat location (where)?" Such sharpening naturally points to feasible data, models, and, if needed, qualitative follow-ups to understand anomalies.

Step 2: Consider data availability in sport settings

Method–question fit is constrained and enabled by what data exist and can be ethically accessed. Sport organizations sit on rich stores of archival and transactional data and, in high-pressure settings, wearable and biometric streams (Andrew et al., 2019). These sources can support panel models, event-history analyses of churn, and quasi-experimental designs that leverage staggered rollouts or natural experiments. When customer-level linkage is possible, longitudinal modeling and segmentation become realistic; when only aggregate data are available, time-series or difference-in-differences at the unit level (e.g., game or month) may be feasible. Where archival data are not accessible, well-designed primary data collection becomes the backbone of the design.

Early, candid conversations with clubs, leagues, and national sport organizations are crucial to match organizational utility and research rigor. Gatekeepers may constrain sampling frames (e.g., only email subscribers), impose timing windows (e.g., off-season only), or request limits on experimental manipulations. Researchers should inventory feasible data sources, identify what can be linked (and at what level), document data quality (coverage, missingness, measurement issues), and anticipate access

failures by preparing fallback designs. Transparency about these realities strengthens the credibility of inferences and signals respect for organizational partners.

This step also includes assessing digital traces. Social media and app analytics can capture revealed engagement, complementing self-reports and enabling convergent validation. However, platform metrics can be volatile and proprietary (Verbeij et al., 2022); researchers should document how metrics are defined, whether algorithms changed during observation, and how such changes were handled analytically. When combining digital traces with survey or experimental data, plan the integration from the start (e.g., unique tokens to link responses to behavior, within contractual limits and with informed consent).

Step 3: Balance philosophical stance and practical constraints

In a post-positivist view, priority is given to hypothesis testing, statistical control, and approximate causal explanation, which aligns with experiments, quasi-experiments, and longitudinal models. An interpretivist/constructivist stance privileges meaning and context, aligning with ethnography, case studies, and in-depth interviewing. A pragmatic stance legitimizes mixed methods, selecting tools that best answer the question given constraints (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Bryman, 2016). Making this stance explicit strengthens coherence between questions, evidence standards, and analytic choices.

Alongside stance, researchers must weigh practical constraints (e.g. time, budget, access, staff skills, organizational risk appetite) and choose designs that are both rigorous and feasible. A randomized controlled field experiment on pricing communications may be ideal but infeasible if a club is unwilling to randomize renewal emails; a quasi-experiment that exploits a phased rollout or an A/B test in a subset of channels may be acceptable and still improve causal leverage. If repeated measures are impossible, researchers can mitigate limitations in cross-sectional surveys by designing for common method variance reduction (proximal/psychological separation, varied scale formats), including marker variables, and, where feasible, collecting multi-source outcomes (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In qualitative projects, if prolonged ethnography is infeasible, a multiple-case design with purposeful sampling and replication logic can still yield robust process explanations (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Skill sets also matter. SEM requires competence in model specification, identification, and diagnostics (Kline, 2023; Hair, 2009); event-history modeling and panel data require econometric expertise (Box-Steffensmeier & Jones, 2004); ethnography demands reflexivity and disciplined fieldwork (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). If the research team lacks a critical skill, collaboration or training is preferable to forcing a method ill-suited to the team's capacity. Reviewers and editors in sport management increasingly reward designs that are well executed over those that are merely fashionable.

Step 4: Ethical considerations specific to sport

Privacy and informed consent are paramount when studies involve ticketing records and wearable or biometric data (Osborne, 2017). Researchers should adopt data minimization, store identifiable data securely, and obtain informed consent proportionate to the sensitivity of the data and the risks involved. Where contracts restrict data sharing, researchers can still enhance transparency by sharing synthetic codebooks, analysis code, and de-identified outputs consistent with agreements (Bai & Bai, 2021).

Athletes, volunteers, junior employees, and even fans may feel obligated to participate, particularly when studies are brokered by the organization. Protocols should provide independent consent channels, assure participants that non-participation has no consequences, and allow withdrawal without penalty. In qualitative work, researchers must be vigilant about confidentiality in small communities where roles are identifiable; plans for disguising cases and removing indirect identifiers should be set in advance. Reputational risk is acute in governance, integrity, or safeguarding work. Designs should anticipate the potential for harm to individuals and organizations. Data handling, anonymization, and reporting conventions should be agreed with partners before data collection (Oetzel & Spikermann,

2014). Researchers should also plan for adverse findings: if crises or misconduct are uncovered, the protocol must specify how information will be handled, consistent with legal and ethical obligations.

Finally, sport research often involves minors and vulnerable groups (youth athletes; para-sport). Tailored consent/assent procedures, additional protections, and, where required, external ethical approvals are mandatory. The ethical stance should be integrated into design decisions from the outset, not appended as a compliance step. In qualitative projects, reflexive memos can document ethical decision points; in quantitative projects, preregistration can clarify analytic intentions without disclosing proprietary data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Lincoln, 1985).

Step 5: Integration and innovation

The final step is forward-looking: choosing methods that not only answer the immediate question but also advance cumulative knowledge and inform decisions in sport organizations. Integration can proceed in either direction. Qualitative insights can be translated into variables and hypotheses for quantitative testing (e.g., codes on fairness narratives become survey items and experimental manipulations). Quantitative patterns can guide purposive sampling for qualitative follow-up (e.g., interviewing "defectors" who report high satisfaction but do not renew). True integration occurs at interpretation, where strands are brought together to generate meta-inferences that neither strand could support alone (Venkatesh et al., 2013).

Innovation often means deploying underused designs that fit sport's data realities. Longitudinal/-panel models can track loyalty trajectories, separate state from trait effects, and test cross-lagged relations between identification and behavior. Event-history models can estimate hazard rates for churn and identify time-varying covariates linked to retention (Box-Steffensmeier & Jones, 2004). Field experiments can test pricing and messaging at scale with minimal disruption, provided randomization is ethically and operationally acceptable (Shadish, 2002). Digital ethnography/netnography can uncover norms in online fan communities that shape advocacy and resistance (Fenton & Parry, 2022). Clustering and segmentation can be applied transparently to inform targeted activation (Nur & Siregar, 2024), avoiding the opacity of purely black-box models. These innovations are not ends in themselves; they are means to sharpen inference and practical relevance.

Transparent reporting underpins cumulative progress. Quantitative studies should report sampling frames, response rates, measurement properties (reliability; convergent/discriminant validity), model fit, robustness checks, and, when applicable, measurement invariance across groups (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Henseler et al., 2015). Where feasible, preregistered analysis plans can reduce researcher degrees of freedom and clarify confirmatory versus exploratory components. Qualitative studies should specify sampling rationale, access, researcher positionality, coding procedures, theme development, and strategies for credibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006;). Mixed-methods studies should present joint displays that align quantitative results and qualitative themes, make the logic of integration visible, and discuss convergence and divergence explicitly (Venkatesh et al., 2013). Even when data cannot be posted, sharing instruments, codebooks, and analysis code (with simulated data where necessary) enhances reproducibility.

4 Discussion

This paper set out to close a persistent gap in sport management: the misalignment between the questions scholars and practitioners actually ask and the designs most commonly used to answer them. Drawing on established methodological foundations and domain exemplars, we argued for method–question fit as the organizing principle of design in sport, and we proposed a five-step, sport-specific framework to make that fit explicit, ethical, and feasible. In this discussion, we synthesize where the field stands, highlight underused opportunities that match sport's data realities, and clarify the contributions of this article, both practical and theoretical. We close by acknowledging limitations and outlining a future research agenda that can accelerate cumulative, credible knowledge production.

4.1 Underused opportunities: broadening the repertoire without breaking feasibility

The methodological center of gravity in sport management remains cross-sectional surveys analyzed with regression or SEM, complemented by qualitative case work in governance and leadership. That center has yielded durable measurement traditions and mid-range theory around motivation, identification, perceived value, brand associations, service quality, and sponsorship mechanisms (Trail & James, 2001; Greenwell et al., 2002; Yoshida & James, 2010; Kunkel et al., 2013). Yet much of what matters to organizations is dynamic, contextual, and multilevel and thus poorly served by one-wave self-reports. Four opportunity spaces deserve emphasis.

Temporal designs (1). Loyalty development, renewal, and sponsorship ROI unfold over time; so do governance reforms and culture change. Longitudinal panels and cross-lagged models can adjudicate directionality claims that cross-sectional SEM cannot (Kline, 2023; Hair, 2009). Where customer-level linkage is possible, event-history (survival) models can estimate churn hazards and time-varying covariates, a natural fit for ticketing (Box-Steffensmeier & Jones, 2004). *Field and quasi-experiments (2).* A/B tests embedded in routine communications (email, app, social) can evaluate message framing, sponsorship disclosure, or price fairness cues at scale; where randomization is not possible, staggered roll-outs and other quasi-experimental strategies can meaningfully improve causal leverage (Shadish, 2002). These designs align with operational rhythms and risk tolerances of clubs and leagues.

Digital ethnography and netnography (3). Fan communities are partly constituted online; ethnographic approaches can surface the norms and informal governance that shape co-creation, advocacy, and resistance, providing mechanisms that complement quantitative patterns (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Filo et al., 2015). Linking these qualitative insights to behavioral analytics strengthens both explanation and prediction. *Archival and administrative data (4).* Econometric analyses of attendance, membership tenure, facility usage, and funding (often held by clubs, leagues, or municipalities) extend external validity and reduce sole reliance on self-report (Wicker & Breuer, 2011). With careful governance and privacy protection, these sources can be integrated into mixed designs.

4.2 Theoretical contributions

This paper makes three connected contributions about how evidence should warrant claims in sport management. First, we offer a sport-specific evidentiary logic that ties claim types to appropriate designs. We distinguish causal, associational, and interpretive claims and specify minimal adequate designs given sport's data realities. Causal assertions (e.g., effects of activation framing or renewal communications) call for randomized or strong quasi-experimental designs, or longitudinal models that establish temporal precedence (Shadish, 2002; Kline, 2023). Associational claims (e.g., identification ↔ word-of-mouth) can rely on cross-sectional regression/SEM if measurement is rigorous and language remains non-causal (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Hair, 2009). Interpretive claims (e.g., how board capability emerges; how fan communities co-create meaning) are best warranted through transparent qualitative designs (Lincoln, 1985; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles et al., 2014). The novelty lies in contextualizing this mapping for sport: separating selection from persuasion in sponsorship becomes a design choice (experiment/panel), and distinguishing satisfaction-driven renewal from structural inertia points to event-history modeling (Box-Steffensmeier & Jones, 2004).

Second, we provide an integration blueprint that composes variance and process explanations across levels typical in sport. Quantitative models delimit the space of plausible mechanisms and estimate for whom/how much; qualitative analyses reveal the sequences, routines, and meanings through which effects are produced or blocked; mixed methods coordinate both to yield meta-inferences that travel further than either strand alone (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Venkatesh et al., 2013). Our five-step framework operationalizes this by planning integration at design time (e.g., sampling quantitative "outliers" for interview follow-ups; building survey items from qualitative codes; using joint displays), so theories accrue as linked variance–process propositions rather than parallel narratives.

Third, we advance a reliability and transportability charter suited to proprietary, access-constrained sport contexts. Instead of unrealistic "share everything" prescriptions, we specify practices that raise credibility: preregistration where feasible; explicit reporting of sampling frames and data governance; instrument and code sharing with synthetic data; measurement invariance checks for group comparisons (Henseler et al., 2015); and qualitative audit trails that protect identities (Miles et al., 2014). We also foreground transportability; arguing, with evidence, what is likely to generalize across clubs, leagues, and countries and what is local.

4.3 Practical implications

For sport organizations, this article's mapping from question types to feasible designs translates directly into better decision-making. Marketing and ticketing teams can prioritize field experiments and event-history models to optimize renewal messaging and reduce churn; sponsorship units can combine A/B tests of activation framing with survey-based SEM to separate persuasion from selection; community and participation programs can use longitudinal tracking to evidence impact rather than relying on one-off satisfaction polls. Governance and HR leaders can commission qualitative case work to diagnose capability, culture, and psychological safety before scaling changes. The five-step framework also clarifies data governance and ethics by design (e.g., informed consent for wearable data, independent opt-outs for athletes and volunteers), helping clubs and federations align legal, reputational, and analytical considerations early.

For researchers and graduate programs, the framework offers a curriculum and workflow upgrade. Methods teaching should move beyond tool proficiency toward method–question fit, adding practical modules on partner negotiations, preregistration, measurement invariance, CAQDAS-supported analysis, joint displays, and reproducible code sharing (with synthetic data when required). When pursuing club or federation partnerships, scholars can use the framework to set realistic sequencing (e.g., survey → panel → experiment), to document trade-offs between rigor and access, and to ensure transparent reporting that meets journal standards even under proprietary constraints. Departments and centers can institutionalize impact by hosting instrument/code repositories, ethical templates, and mixed-methods exemplars specific to sport. The net effect is a portfolio of studies that are more causally credible, contextually insightful, and actionable.

4.4 Limitations and future research ideas

This article is intentionally pragmatic rather than exhaustive. Our synthesis draws on influential exemplars and widely used methodological texts to build a sport-specific logic of evidence, but it is not a systematic review of every subdomain. As a result, niche areas (e.g., esports governance, parasport participation, women's professional leagues) may involve constraints or opportunities that differ from those highlighted here. A second limitation is that we do not empirically test the five-step framework; its value is normative and organizing. Finally, sport systems vary widely in legal regimes, data infrastructures, and governance models; what counts as feasible (e.g., randomization, customer-level linkage) in one league may be unrealistic elsewhere. Researchers should therefore treat the framework as a scaffold to adapt, not a template to apply mechanically.

Future work should evaluate the framework in practice. One promising path is to run design-registered "method deployments" in partnership with clubs or federations: teams would prospectively apply the five steps, preregister designs where feasible, and then report feasibility, partner utility, and evidentiary quality (e.g., causal leverage, transportability). Comparative work could test the same question, such as season-ticket renewal or sponsorship activation, under alternative designs including cross-sectional SEM, panel studies, and field experiments, and across different leagues and countries. Meta-science audits of published sport management studies that track reporting of psychometrics, measurement invariance, remedies for common method variance, qualitative trustworthiness, and the integration of mixed methods would help calibrate journal standards and reveal persistent gaps that training or guidelines should address.

A second strand should build infrastructure for cumulative work. Priorities include shared instrument repositories with documented psychometrics and invariance properties; open, well-annotated analysis code (paired with synthetic datasets when raw data cannot be shared); template agreements for ethical data governance with sport organizations; and exemplars of joint displays and meta-inferences to normalize strong mixed-methods practice. Substantively, we encourage more longitudinal and experimental programs on loyalty trajectories, churn, and pricing fairness; event-history and panel models that integrate archival and behavioral data; and digital ethnography/netnography that links community norms to measurable engagement. Cross-league and cross-culture comparisons should explicitly test transportability and boundary conditions, while participatory and co-design approaches with athletes, fans, and staff can surface ethical and practical constraints early, improving both rigor and relevance.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that advancing sport management scholarship and practice depends less on adding methods to our toolkit than on achieving method–question fit within the realities of sport organizations. By mapping claim types to appropriate designs, consolidating sport-specific guardrails for quality, and proposing a five-step, design framework, we offer a practical route from research ideas to defensible studies that generate credible, decision-relevant evidence. The review of dominant approaches and exemplars shows where current strengths lie and where temporal, experimental, ethnographic, and integrated designs can lift the evidentiary bar.

The task now is implementation. Researchers should begin with concise design briefs, negotiate access that enables longitudinal, experimental, or mixed-methods work where warranted, and report transparently so findings travel across clubs, leagues, and cultures. Organizations and journals can accelerate this shift by rewarding fit-for-purpose designs, establishing clear data-governance pathways, and normalizing open materials (instruments, code, synthetic data) when full sharing is impossible.

EXTENDED SUMMARY/IZVLEČEK

Raziskave na področju športnega managementa pogosto temeljijo na presečnih anketah, analiziranih z regresijo ali modeliranjem strukturnih enačb, tudi kadar raziskovalna vprašanja in podatkovna okolja zahtevajo časovne, eksperimentalne, etnografske ali integrirane raziskovalne zasnove. Ta članek obravnava to neusklajenost z uveljavljanjem načela ujemanja metode in raziskovalnega vprašanja kot osrednjega vodila pri raziskovanju v športnem managementu. V prispevku (a) sintetiziramo, kako se v športu dejansko uporabljajo kvantitativne, kvalitativne in mešane metode ter kje ima vsaka svoje prednosti; (b) predstavljamo petstopenjski, za šport specifičen odločitveni okvir (uskladitev vprašanja in teorije, presoja podatkov in dostopa, uravnoteženje epistemologije in izvedljivosti, etično načrtovanje raziskave ter integracija metod za inovativnost); in (c) združujemo temeljne smernice za kakovost (psihometrične lastnosti, prileganje in invarianco modelov, verodostojnost kvalitativnih raziskav ter integracijo mešanih metod). Teoretično prispevek oblikuje športno specifično dokazno logiko, integracijski načrt, ki povezuje pojasnjevanje variance in procesov, ter okvir za zanesljivost in prenosljivost, prilagojen lastniškim podatkovnim okoljem. Zaključujemo s praktičnimi implikacijami za management v športu in usposabljanje ter s predlogom raziskovalne agende, ki poudarja longitudinalne, eksperimentalne, etnografske in mešane raziskovalne programe.

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