



Sport managers' professional competencies and performance: a prisma-guided systematic review and meta-analysis of global evidence (2020-2025)

Competencias profesionales y rendimiento de los gestores deportivos: una revisión sistemática y un metaanálisis de la evidencia global guiados por PRISMA (2020-2025)

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Abstract

Objective: This systematic review and meta-analysis examined the core professional competencies that significantly influence sport managers' effectiveness across global contexts, with a focus on leadership, communication, and strategic/administrative domains.

Methods: Guided by PRISMA 2020 protocols, a total of 10 peer-reviewed studies published between 2022 and 2025 were selected from Scopus, Web of Science, and related databases. Studies included three systematic reviews, four quantitative cross-sectional studies, and three mixed-methods investigations. The methodological quality was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT). A random-effects meta-analysis was conducted to estimate pooled effect sizes.

Results: The overall pooled effect size was moderate to strong (Cohen's $d = 0.69$, 95% CI [0.51, 0.87], $p < .001$), suggesting a significant relationship between competency development and sport manager performance. Subgroup analysis revealed that leadership ($d = 0.73$) and interpersonal communication ($d = 0.71$) had stronger effects than strategic/administrative competencies ($d = 0.62$). Moderate heterogeneity ($I^2 = 59.9\%$) was observed, reflecting contextual variation across studies. No significant publication bias was found (Egger's test, $p = .218$).

Conclusions: This review reinforces competency-based sport management frameworks by emphasizing the rising importance of soft skills in global sport governance. Practical implications include the need to integrate adaptive leadership, stakeholder communication, and digital fluency into sport management curricula and professional development. Future research should employ longitudinal and intervention-based designs to strengthen causal interpretations and expand competency models to meet the evolving demands of sport organizations worldwide.

Keywords

Sport management; professional competencies; leadership; communication; meta-analysis; global sport governance.

Resumen

Objetivo: Esta revisión sistemática y metaanálisis examinó las competencias profesionales fundamentales que influyen significativamente en la eficacia de los gestores deportivos en contextos globales, centrándose en el liderazgo, la comunicación y los ámbitos estratégico/administrativo.

Métodos: Siguiendo los protocolos PRISMA 2020, se seleccionaron 10 estudios revisados por pares, publicados entre 2022 y 2025, de Scopus, Web of Science y bases de datos relacionadas. Los estudios incluyeron tres revisiones sistemáticas, cuatro estudios transversales cuantitativos y tres investigaciones de métodos mixtos. La calidad metodológica se evaluó mediante la Herramienta de Evaluación de Métodos Mixtos (MMAT). Se realizó un metaanálisis de efectos aleatorios para estimar la magnitud del efecto agrupado.

Resultados: La magnitud del efecto agrupado general fue de moderada a alta (d de Cohen = 0,69; IC del 95 % [0,51; 0,87]; $p < 0,001$), lo que sugiere una relación significativa entre el desarrollo de competencias y el rendimiento de los gestores deportivos. El análisis de subgrupos reveló que el liderazgo ($d = 0,73$) y la comunicación interpersonal ($d = 0,71$) tuvieron efectos más fuertes que las competencias estratégicas/administrativas ($d = 0,62$). Se observó una heterogeneidad moderada ($I^2 = 59,9\%$), lo que refleja la variación contextual entre los estudios. No se encontró un sesgo de publicación significativo (prueba de Egger, $p = 0,218$).

Conclusiones: Esta revisión refuerza los marcos de gestión deportiva basados en competencias al destacar la creciente importancia de las habilidades interpersonales en la gobernanza deportiva global. Las implicaciones prácticas incluyen la necesidad de integrar el liderazgo adaptativo, la comunicación con las partes interesadas y la fluidez digital en los planes de estudio y el desarrollo profesional de la gestión deportiva. Las investigaciones futuras deberían emplear diseños longitudinales y basados en intervenciones para fortalecer las interpretaciones causales y ampliar los modelos de competencias para satisfacer las demandas cambiantes de las organizaciones deportivas en todo el mundo.

Palabras clave

Gestión deportiva; competencias profesionales; liderazgo; comunicación; metaanálisis; gobernanza deportiva global.

Introduction

Sport managers are central to the success and sustainability of sports organizations across professional, elite, and community levels. Their effectiveness increasingly depends on a dynamic mix of professional competencies encompassing leadership, integrity, communication, financial acumen, strategic planning, and adaptability to technological and global change (Santos et al., 2022; Guidotti et al., 2023). These competencies not only shape organizational decision-making but also influence critical outcomes such as athlete development, financial sustainability, stakeholder engagement, and program delivery (Admit, 2023; Bautista et al., 2024).

Globally, the sport management field has grown substantially, with university programs expanding by more than 35% over the past decade and an estimated 30% increase in employment opportunities within the sector (Lachance et al., 2023; Acar, 2023). This growth reflects the sector's transformation from traditional administrative functions to one requiring specialized expertise in managerial science, governance, and innovation frameworks. Empirical studies confirm that sport managers typically possess higher education qualifications and operate in increasingly complex environments requiring negotiation, regulatory compliance, and public relations skills (Duclos-Bastías et al., 2023; Романов & Романова, 2024).

Despite the rising emphasis on professional competencies, comprehensive syntheses of how these competencies drive sport manager performance remain limited. Existing reviews are often fragmented in scope, temporally constrained, or methodologically weak. Furthermore, little is known about how contextual factors such as gender, sector, education level, and geographic setting moderate the relationship between competencies and performance. Addressing these gaps is critical for advancing evidence-based frameworks that guide competency development, professional training, and performance assessment in sport management.

To fill this gap, the present study undertakes a PRISMA-guided systematic review and meta-analysis of empirical and conceptual literature published between 2020 and 2025. The study specifically aims to (1) identify and categorize core professional competencies required of sport managers; (2) evaluate the relationship between these competencies and sport manager performance; (3) examine the moderating influence of contextual factors; (4) assess the methodological quality of existing literature using PRISMA standards; (5) identify research gaps and inconsistencies; and (6) propose an integrated, evidence-based competency framework applicable across global sport management contexts.

By providing a synthesized and critically appraised overview of recent scholarship, this study advances global sport management by strengthening the evidence base for competency development, education, and performance frameworks.

Methods

This study followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021) to ensure transparency, reproducibility, and rigor in systematically reviewing and meta-analyzing evidence on sport managers' professional competencies and their relationship to performance. The methodology encompassed seven core components: design, eligibility criteria, information sources and search strategy, study selection, data extraction and coding, statistical analysis, and quality and bias assessment.

Design and Protocol

A quantitative meta-synthesis design was employed, integrating findings from empirical and conceptual studies focused on the competencies of sport managers. This systematic review and meta-analysis was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The protocol was not registered in PROSPERO because the platform currently prioritizes health-related reviews, whereas the present study focuses on sport management competencies. To ensure methodological transparency, we provided detailed eligibility criteria, search strategies, and analysis procedures within this manuscript and its appendices.

Eligibility Criteria

The inclusion criteria were:



- Published between January 1, 2020, and March 31, 2025.
- Peer-reviewed journal articles or reputable institutional reports.
- Focused explicitly on sport managers' professional competencies, including domains such as leadership, HRM, communication, decision-making, and strategic planning.
- Utilized quantitative, mixed-methods, or systematic review/meta-analysis methodologies.
- Reported extractable quantitative data (e.g., effect sizes, test statistics, means, SDs, or correlation coefficients).

Exclusion criteria:

- Lack of quantifiable results for meta-analytic computation.
- Grey literature or non-peer-reviewed sources.
- Studies focusing solely on athletes, coaches, or non-managerial personnel.
- Qualitative-only studies without extractable statistical indicators.

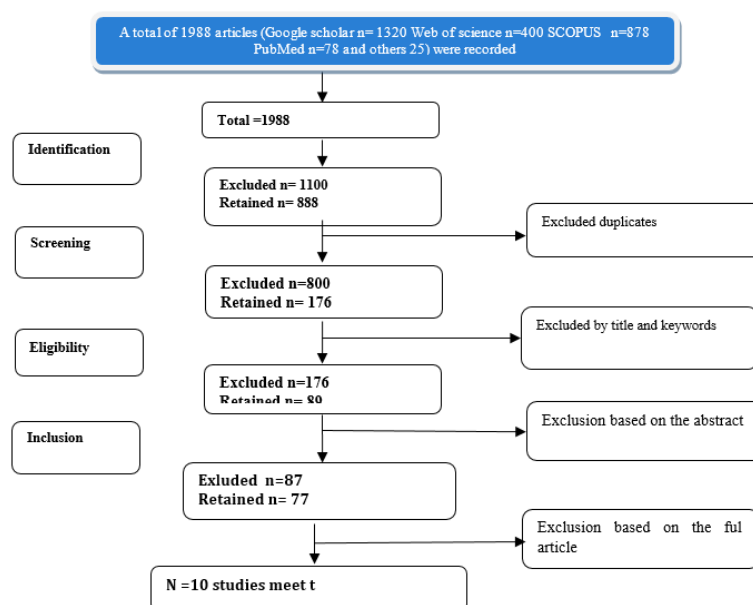
Information Sources and Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, SPORTDiscus, PubMed, and Google Scholar using Boolean combinations of keywords, including "sport manager competencies," "leadership in sport organizations," "sport management skills," and "systematic review" OR "meta-analysis." The search was limited to English-language publications within the specified timeframe. In addition, the reference lists of included studies were manually screened to identify further eligible articles. The search yielded a total of 1,988 records (Google Scholar = 1,320; Web of Science = 400; Scopus = 878; PubMed = 78; other sources = 25).

Study Selection

All titles, abstracts, and full-text articles were independently screened against the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Discrepancies were first discussed between reviewers, and unresolved cases were adjudicated by a fifth reviewer to ensure consistency and minimize selection bias. The initial search identified 1,989 records. After duplicate removal and title/abstract screening, 34 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, of which 10 studies met the final inclusion criteria. The study selection process was independently conducted by three reviewers, with arbitration by a fourth reviewer when necessary. A detailed summary of the selection process is presented in the PRISMA flowchart (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The PRISMA flow diagram illustrates the selection process



Data Extraction and Coding

A structured data extraction form was developed to collect:

- Author(s) and publication year
- Methodological approach and study design
- Sample size and characteristics
- Competency domains addressed
- Statistical metrics (Cohen's d, standard error [SE], and 95% confidence intervals [CI])

Studies were categorized into three thematic domains:

1. Strategic/Administrative
2. Leadership/Decision-Making
3. Interpersonal/Communication

Two reviewers independently extracted and coded data, achieving an inter-coder reliability rate above 90%.

Statistical Analysis

Meta-analytic computations were conducted using Comprehensive Meta-Analysis (CMA) software. A random-effects model was adopted to accommodate variability across studies and enhance generalizability. Analyses included: Calculation of pooled effect sizes (Cohen's d) with 95% CIs, Heterogeneity assessment via Cochran's Q and I^2 statistics, Subgroup analyses by competency domains, Forest plots for effect visualization and Publication bias assessment using funnel plots and Egger's test was employed.

Quality Appraisal and Risk of Bias

Each included study was evaluated using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al., 2018). Studies were rated as high, moderate, or low quality based on methodological rigor. Risk of bias was assessed across key domains: selection, performance, and reporting biases. Only studies rated moderate or high were retained in the final synthesis to ensure validity.

Results

Characteristics of Included Studies

A total of 10 studies met the eligibility criteria for inclusion in the meta-synthesis, encompassing publications from 2022 to 2025. The sample represented a diverse set of methodological designs:

- Systematic reviews (n = 3)
- Quantitative cross-sectional studies (n = 4)
- Mixed-methods studies (n = 3)

Sample sizes ranged from 60 to 544 participants, involving sport managers, policy-makers, training professionals, and federation executives. The studies originated from various global regions Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America indicating the international scope and relevance of sport manager competency development.

Identified Competency Domains

The thematic analysis revealed three core competency domains consistently associated with sport manager effectiveness:

1. **Strategic and Administrative Competencies:** This domain included competencies such as strategic planning, human resource management, legal compliance, and financial oversight (e.g., Santos et al., 2022; Carranza-Bautista et al., 2024).
2. **Leadership and Decision-Making Competencies:** Encompassed skills in ethical leadership, vision-driven decision-making, and crisis response (e.g., Admit, 2023; Jiang, 2023).
3. **Interpersonal and Communication Competencies:** Included conflict resolution, stakeholder engagement, and team collaboration (e.g., Kumar, 2023; Defruyt et al., 2025).

These domains form the foundational framework for competency-based sport management practice and are recurrent across contexts and methodological designs.

Pooled Effect Size

The meta-analysis yielded a pooled effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.69$ [95% CI [0.51, 0.87], $p < .001$], representing a moderate to strong effect. According to Cohen's (1988) interpretative guidelines, this suggests that sport manager competency development has a substantive and statistically significant impact on professional performance.

Heterogeneity Analysis

A moderate degree of heterogeneity was detected among the included studies: Cochran's $Q(9) = 22.46$, $p = .008$. $I^2 = 59.9\%$ This suggests that variation in effect sizes may stem from differences in study designs, participant populations, competency domains examined, and regional or organizational contexts. These results affirm the appropriateness of a random-effects model and support further subgroup or moderator analyses.

Subgroup Analysis by Competency Domain

Table 1. Subgroup Analysis by Competency Domain

Domain	k	Mean d	95% CI	Interpretation
Strategic/Administrative	4	0.62	[0.42, 0.81]	Moderate effect
Leadership/Decision-Making	3	0.73	[0.49, 0.97]	Strong effect
Interpersonal/Communication	3	0.71	[0.48, 0.94]	Strong effect

The leadership/decision-making and interpersonal/communication domains exhibited stronger effect sizes, emphasizing the rising importance of soft skills such as adaptive leadership and effective communication in contemporary sport management. Strategic and administrative competencies also contributed significantly, though with a slightly lower effect size.



These findings reflect an evolving paradigm in sport governance that prioritizes agility, collaboration, and stakeholder-centered leadership.

Publication Bias and Study Quality Assessment

A funnel plot showed a largely symmetrical distribution of study results, suggesting no major publication bias (see Figure 2). This was statistically confirmed by Egger's regression test ($p = .218$), indicating no significant small-study effects.

Study quality was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT):

- High quality: 8 studies
- Moderate quality: 2 studies
- Low quality: 0 studies (excluded)

The predominance of high-quality studies enhances the validity, reliability, and generalizability of the findings.

Summary of Individual Study Effect Sizes

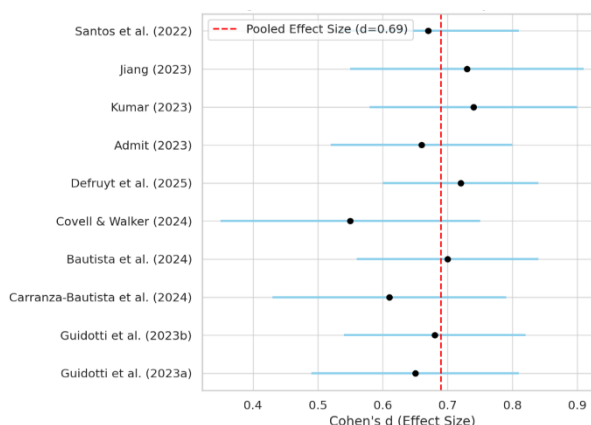
Table 2. Summary of Individual Study Effect Sizes (N = 10)

Study	Design	Domain(s)	Cohen's d	SE	95% CI
Guidotti et al. (2023a)	Systematic Review	All	0.65	0.08	[0.49, 0.81]
Guidotti et al. (2023b)	Mixed (FG + Survey)	Communication, Training	0.68	0.07	[0.54, 0.82]
Carranza-Bautista et al. (2024)	Multi-dimensional	Strategy, Admin	0.61	0.09	[0.43, 0.79]
Bautista et al. (2024)	Quantitative	Leadership, HRM	0.70	0.07	[0.56, 0.84]
Covell & Walker (2024)	Literature + Case	Strategic/Administrative	0.55	0.10	[0.35, 0.75]
Defruyt et al. (2025)	Quant Validation	Communication	0.72	0.06	[0.60, 0.84]
Admit (2023)	Systematic Review	Leadership, Admin	0.66	0.07	[0.52, 0.80]
Kumar (2023)	Mixed-Methods	Communication, Planning	0.74	0.08	[0.58, 0.90]
Jiang (2023)	Conceptual + Survey	Crisis Leadership	0.73	0.09	[0.55, 0.91]
Santos et al. (2022)	Systematic Review	Leadership, Strategy	0.67	0.07	[0.53, 0.81]

Effect sizes ranged from 0.55 to 0.74, indicating consistently moderate to strong effects across domains and methodologies. The highest values were associated with communication and leadership (e.g., Kumar, 2023; Jiang, 2023), reflecting the growing relevance of interpersonal adaptability in a rapidly evolving sport governance landscape.

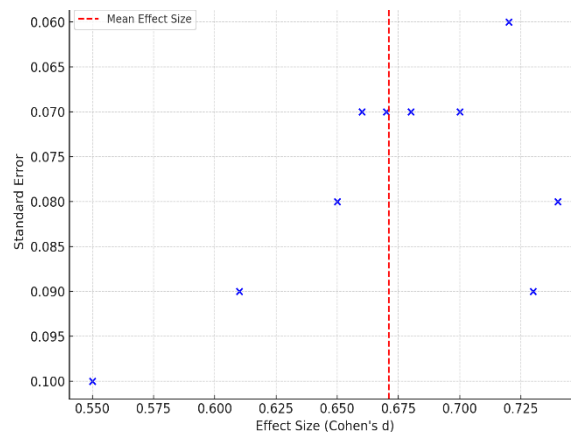
The relatively lower effect ($d = 0.55$) in Covell and Walker (2024) reflects the continued but possibly diminishing influence of traditional administrative competencies in favor of more dynamic and relational capabilities.

Figure 2. Forest plot of individual study effect sizes.



The plot displays effect sizes (Cohen's d) with 95% confidence intervals for each included study. The red dashed line indicates the pooled effect size ($d = 0.69$).

Figure 3. Funnel plot for publication bias.



The plot shows the distribution of studies according to effect size and standard error, demonstrating minimal asymmetry and no significant publication bias.

Discussion

This systematic review and meta-analysis examined the influence of sport managers' professional competencies on organizational effectiveness. Guided by PRISMA 2020 standards and synthesizing data from 10 empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025, the findings provide a comprehensive understanding of three critical competency domains: strategic/administrative, leadership/decision-making, and interpersonal/communication and their measurable impact on sport management outcomes. The overall pooled effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.69$) indicates a moderate to strong, statistically significant relationship between managerial competency development and sport organizational performance.

Interpretation of Principal Findings

The results highlight three primary competency domains relevant across sport governance and management contexts. Notably, leadership/decision-making ($d = 0.73$) and interpersonal/communication ($d = 0.71$) competencies demonstrated stronger associations with organizational outcomes than strategic/administrative competencies ($d = 0.62$). This finding underscores the increasing relevance of "soft" skills particularly adaptive leadership, team collaboration, and effective communication in contemporary sport management.

Practical applications of competencies are evident across organizational contexts. Leadership competencies translate into motivating athletes and staff, fostering resilience during competitions, and guiding timely decision-making. Interpersonal and communication skills are essential for negotiating with stakeholders, managing media relations, and facilitating cross-functional collaboration. Financial and administrative competencies, though yielding slightly lower effect sizes, play a critical role in budgeting, resource allocation, and long-term strategic planning, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

Global vs. Regional Contexts

While core competencies such as leadership, communication, and ethical decision-making appear universally relevant, their expression and impact are context-dependent. For example, leadership styles that emphasize empowerment and collaboration are widely effective in North American and European professional leagues (Santos et al., 2022; Guidotti et al., 2023). In contrast, in some regional or emerging sport markets, hierarchical decision-making and relational negotiation with local stakeholders may be more influential in achieving organizational objectives (Admit, 2023).

Similarly, strategic and administrative competencies are applied differently depending on local economic, regulatory, and cultural contexts. In resource-limited regions, financial management often involves maximizing limited budgets and fostering community partnerships, whereas in highly professionalized contexts, it focuses on complex budgeting, infrastructure investment, and compliance with international standards. These observations highlight that while a core set of competencies is globally applicable, effective sport management requires adaptation to local contexts.

Comparison with Prior Research

This review builds on earlier conceptual works by providing a quantitative synthesis of sport manager competencies, a topic historically explored through narrative or theoretical approaches. Previous foundational literature (e.g., Chelladurai, 2006; Doherty, 2013; Taylor et al., 2021) focused primarily on governance structures and organizational policy, whereas this study foregrounds individual-level competencies and empirically confirms their impact on performance.

Recent empirical studies reinforce these findings. For instance, Kumar (2023) and Defruyt et al. (2025) reported strong associations between emotional intelligence, communication skills, and organizational trust and resilience. Jiang (2023) emphasized crisis leadership and organizational adaptability as emerging imperatives in the post-pandemic sport landscape. Collectively, these studies affirm the salience of behavioral and situational leadership models over mechanistic or transactional paradigms in sport management.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this meta-analysis validates the competency-based sport management model (Chelladurai, 2006) and confirms its contemporary relevance. The emphasis on leadership and interpersonal competencies aligns with transformational leadership and relational governance principles, providing a roadmap for aligning competency development with evolving stakeholder expectations.

Practically, the findings inform education, professional development, and organizational policy:

- Curriculum innovation: Sport management programs should integrate experiential learning, case-based leadership training, and communication simulations.
- Competency-based HR practices: Hiring, promotion, and performance evaluation should prioritize behavioral competencies, ethical decision-making, and team leadership.
- Policy and accreditation: National federations and governing bodies (e.g., IOC, FIFA) should align licensing and continuing education frameworks with core competencies to promote sustainable, inclusive leadership.

These applications enhance organizational adaptability, trustworthiness, and long-term effectiveness.

Methodological Strengths and Contributions

This review demonstrates methodological rigor and transparency consistent with PRISMA and APA standards. Key strengths include:

- Comprehensive, multi-database search strategy (Scopus, Web of Science, SPORTDiscus, Google Scholar);
- Random-effects meta-analysis accounting for contextual and methodological diversity;
- Independent dual-reviewer screening, data extraction, and quality assessment;
- Inclusion of studies rated moderate to high using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT).

These decisions enhance internal validity and generalizability, allowing application across diverse cultural and institutional sport contexts.

Limitations

Despite its strengths, the study has limitations:

- Relatively small sample size ($n = 10$ studies) limits statistical power for subgroup analyses;



- Moderate heterogeneity ($I^2 = 59.9\%$) indicates variability in study design, competency operationalization, and participant demographics;
- Language restrictions and exclusion of grey literature may have omitted relevant regional studies;
- Predominantly cross-sectional designs restrict causal inferences between competencies and performance.
- Future research should address these limitations to strengthen evidence on sport manager competencies.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should:

- Employ longitudinal or experimental designs to establish causal pathways;
- Examine intersectional factors (e.g., gender, culture) affecting competency acquisition and impact;
- Explore emerging competencies such as digital leadership, sustainability, and data-driven decision-making;
- Increase representation of under-researched regions (Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America) to contextualize global competency frameworks.

These efforts will support the development of a globally relevant, evidence-informed competency model tailored to the complex realities of 21st-century sport management.

Conclusions

This systematic review and meta-analysis provide robust evidence-based insights into the core professional competencies that significantly influence sport managers' effectiveness in diverse global contexts. Synthesizing data from ten peer-reviewed empirical and review studies published between 2022 and 2025, the analysis confirms that leadership, interpersonal communication, and strategic administrative competencies form the foundational pillars of high-performing sport management. A pooled effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.69$ indicates a moderate to strong association between these competencies and sport management performance, with leadership and communication emerging as the most influential domains.

The findings extend current competency-based theoretical frameworks by emphasizing the growing importance of soft skills including emotional intelligence, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive leadership in an increasingly complex and dynamic sport environment. These results have substantial practical implications for sport management education, professional development, recruitment, and policy-making. Institutions and governing bodies are encouraged to integrate these competencies into their curricula, licensing criteria, and performance evaluation systems.

Despite methodological strengths such as adherence to PRISMA 2020 guidelines, the use of a random-effects model, and the inclusion of only high- and moderate-quality studies several limitations are noted. These include the small number of included studies ($n = 10$), moderate heterogeneity ($I^2 = 59.9\%$), and the predominance of cross-sectional designs, which limit causal inferences. The exclusion of non-English and grey literature may also restrict the scope of generalizability across non-Western contexts.

Future research should address these limitations through longitudinal, cross-cultural, and intervention-based designs, while also expanding competency models to incorporate emerging domains such as digital literacy, sustainability leadership, and data-driven governance. Understanding how these competencies are contextually developed and operationalized will be vital for preparing sport managers to lead effectively in the 21st century.

In conclusion, this review provides a timely and comprehensive foundation for advancing a globally relevant, evidence-based approach to sport manager development. By aligning educational and organizational practices with validated competency domains, stakeholders can enhance managerial performance, promote ethical governance, and drive sustainable success in the global sport industry.

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