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## Soft and Hard Skills in the Management of Physical Activity and Sports: An Empirical Study in Ibero-America



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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to identify the key soft and hard skills that shape the professional profile of physical activity and sports managers in Ibero-American contexts, providing criteria to strengthen professional training and sector-wide professionalization.

**Methods and Materials:** A mixed-method descriptive design was employed using a non-probabilistic convenience sample of 233 managers from Mexico, Colombia, and Spain. Data were collected through a 16-item questionnaire, which underwent psychometric validation using Fleiss' kappa coefficient to assess inter-rater agreement and Cronbach's alpha to estimate internal consistency. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted using SPSS and ATLAS.ti, respectively.

**Findings:** The findings revealed that 75% of the identified competencies correspond to soft (human) skills, with assertive communication, leadership, empathy, and teamwork emerging as the most prominent. Among hard skills, resource management, planning, organization, and time management were most frequently emphasized. Overall, the results indicate a hybrid managerial profile in which the balanced integration of soft and hard skills enhances both operational effectiveness and strategic capacity.

**Conclusion:** Effective management in physical activity and sport requires a comprehensive professional profile that integrates socio-emotional and technical competencies. These findings provide empirical evidence to inform educational curricula, training policies, and professional development initiatives across Ibero-America, thereby promoting innovation and sustainability within sports organizations.

**Keywords:** *Sports manager; soft skills; hard skills; physical activity management; sports management; managerial competencies; professionalization.*

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## 1. Introduction

Management skills constitute a decisive and differentiating factor for organizational success, as they facilitate the achievement of goals and objectives aligned with an organization's mission and vision. Their relevance lies in their direct impact on productivity and their capacity to foster a positive and effective work environment. In this context, managers—depending on their hierarchical level—must demonstrate competencies that enable them to respond effectively to the responsibilities entrusted to them. As pointed out by Vera-Sacón et al. (1), managerial skills represent distinctive competencies that allow executives to guide, coordinate, and motivate their teams, ensuring the achievement of organizational objectives and strengthening competitiveness in dynamic and changing environments. These skills are structured around three fundamental dimensions, according to Katz's model: technical, human, and conceptual. Moreover, managerial skills are recognized as a strategic resource for organizational competitiveness, as they drive innovation, productivity, and sustainability while supporting effective strategic management and decision-making (2). Recent evidence further indicates that strengthening these competencies is positively associated with more effective decision-making in university production units; in other words, the refinement of managerial skills leads to improved decision quality (3).

In this regard, the literature consistently confirms that the development of soft skills is a determining factor in managerial practice. A recent systematic review concludes that competencies such as communication, teamwork, empathy, and conflict resolution are closely linked to managerial leadership, enhancing managers' ability to motivate their teams, positively influence the institutional climate, and improve organizational outcomes (4). Additionally, research has demonstrated that the combination of verbal and visual instructions results in more stable and effective learning among young athletes (5), underscoring the strategic value of communication skills in training processes and reinforcing their role as an essential component of management. Similarly, Arazi et al. (6) confirmed that innovative educational programs based on virtual networks increase student participation in physical activities, highlighting the importance of integrating digital and communication skills into sports management.

Managers in the fields of physical activity and sport require not only technical knowledge but also a broad set of competencies to respond to the challenges of globalization

and the growing demand for organizational sustainability. In this sense, Guidotti et al. (7), drawing on European professional profiles, propose a harmonized framework that incorporates both soft and hard skills as essential components of sports manager training in order to address global professional demands. Along the same lines, Salas Parada et al. (8) define soft skills as those related to behavior, interpersonal interaction, and emotional management, while hard skills refer to the technical and intellectual knowledge acquired through academic training and required for professional performance. Likewise, Martín Agüero et al. (9) emphasize the need for a versatile professional profile capable of integrating administrative, strategic, and adaptive processes in response to complex contexts through transversal managerial and operational skills. Furthermore, the systematic review conducted by Getnet (10) demonstrates that the human, technical, and conceptual skills of sports managers have a direct impact on organizational sustainability and competitiveness. In this regard, García-Fernández et al. (11) highlight innovation and adaptability to dynamic environments as decisive factors in enhancing the performance and competitive advantage of sports clubs. Skills such as decision-making, communication, leadership, and financial management are essential for promoting innovation, improving service quality, and advancing the professionalization of the sector. Similarly, Kearney et al. (12) argue that successful management in the 21st century depends on the balanced integration of hard and soft skills. They emphasize that competencies such as communication, leadership, teamwork, and emotional intelligence are indispensable, and that traditional management functions such as time and scope management combine both technical and socio-emotional components. They also stress the importance of active and experiential learning methodologies in vocational training to strengthen these competencies. With regard to defining the professional profile, Carranza-Bautista et al. (13) assert that skills constitute a fundamental axis of the physical activity and sports manager's profile, as they are integrated with knowledge, values, and personal attributes that ensure competent performance. Among the most relevant competencies are leadership, assertive communication, planning, empathy, and problem-solving, which are complemented by human and financial resource management, teamwork, and organizational abilities. Together, these elements consolidate a professional profile capable of responding effectively across different hierarchical levels and organizational contexts. In line with

this perspective, Carranza-Bautista et al. (14) emphasize that these skills are not isolated elements but essential components of the professional profile, whose integration enables managers to perform effectively in global and multidisciplinary environments. They also propose a validated competency framework to guide the design of university training programs and professional development initiatives, thereby reinforcing the professionalization of the sector. Similarly, Guidotti et al. (15), based on an integrative literature review, confirm that competencies such as leadership, finance, marketing, and interpersonal communication are critical for the sustainability and competitiveness of sports organizations, proposing a harmonized framework of knowledge, competencies, and skills to serve as a reference for the training of future managers.

Despite these advances, the lack of a clear and widely accepted definition of the competencies required for physical activity and sports managers remains a significant barrier to professionalization. Moreover, the diversification of roles and functions within the sector has led to a lack of homogeneity, hindering the consolidation of a standardized competency framework and making it difficult for managers to consciously and systematically recognize and apply these skills in their professional practice (16). This challenge is further intensified by the increasing complexity of professional scenarios and the existing gap in specialized academic training, as relatively few professionals possess formal education in sports management despite acknowledging its importance for enhancing managerial competence and leadership (17). Therefore, the objective of this study is to identify the main soft and hard skills across the technical, human, and conceptual dimensions—that can unify criteria for strengthening the professional training of managers in physical and sports activities, thereby

consolidating a comprehensive profile capable of responding to the demands of global, multidisciplinary, and continuously evolving environments.

## 2. Methods and Materials

This research is framed within a descriptive mixed-methods approach, which systematically integrates quantitative and qualitative data to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. This methodological choice responds to the need to address the research object from a holistic perspective, in line with the proposal of Acosta Faneite (18), who emphasizes that mixed methods enable the examination of complex problems through complementary data collection and analysis techniques. On the one hand, the study adopts a qualitative exploratory scope, which is particularly appropriate given the absence of a consolidated theoretical background and the need for an initial in-depth examination of the phenomenon. As pointed out by Ramos-Galarza (19), this type of research allows underexplored phenomena to be investigated through the emergence of meanings and interpretations, thereby providing conceptual foundations for subsequent studies. On the other hand, the quantitative component incorporates rigorous procedures to ensure the validity and reliability of the applied instrument, including assessments of content, construct, and criterion validity, as well as internal consistency analyses using coefficients such as Cronbach's alpha and inter-rater agreement measures. As highlighted by Bolarinwa (20), the systematic application of these procedures ensures that the questionnaires employed measure the proposed dimensions both consistently and accurately, thereby reinforcing the psychometric robustness of the study (Figure 1).

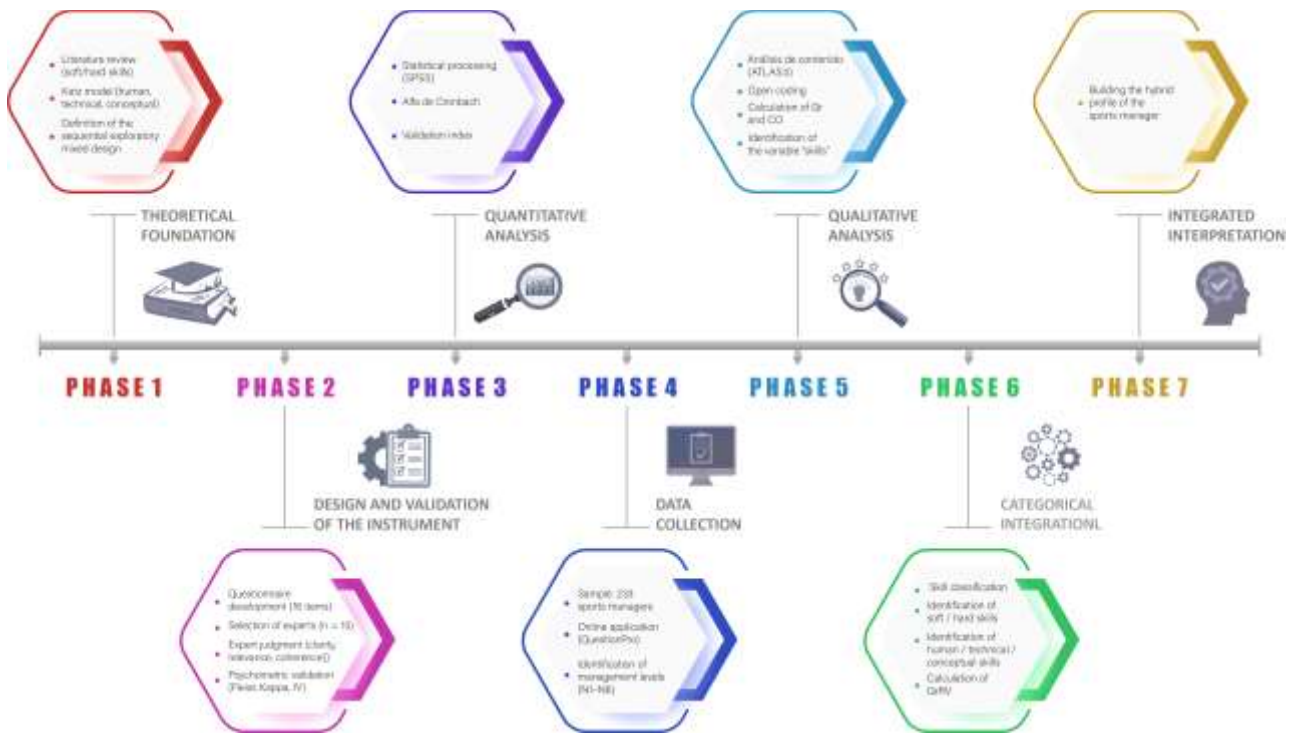


Figure 1. Flow chart of the study phases.

2.1 Sample

This study employed a non-probability convenience sampling technique, which allows for the selection of participants who are readily accessible and available to the researcher (21). This methodological choice was appropriate given the difficulty of accessing the entire target population and the need to recruit active sports managers across different Ibero-American countries. As noted by Piate et al. (22), convenience sampling is commonly used in exploratory research due to its practicality, speed, and cost-effectiveness, although it does not ensure statistical representativeness. The target population consisted of sports

managers from Mexico, Colombia, and Spain, based on the classification of management levels proposed by Carranza-Bautista (23). A total sample of 233 participants was obtained and distributed as follows: 81 from Colombia, 72 from Mexico, 74 from Spain, and 6 from other countries. Of the total sample, 166 participants were men (71.24%) and 67 were women (28.76%). Sports Management was the predominant specialization among both genders, followed by Coaching and Physical Education. Additionally, the majority of participants held university and postgraduate degrees, ensuring the relevance and quality of their contributions to the analysis of competencies and professional profiles in sports management (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sociodemographic and academic characteristics of the sample.

Gender	f - %	Country f - %				Specialty f - %						
		Colombia	Mexico	Spain	Other	SM	PE	C	OA	A	SS	P
Male	166 (71.24)	52 (31.33)	51 (30.72)	59 (35.54)	4 (2.41)	92 (55.42)	14 (8.43)	31 (18.67)	5 (3.01)	20 (12.05)	0 (0)	4 (2.41)
Female	67 (28.76)	29 (43.28)	21 (31.34)	15 (22.39)	2 (2.99)	40 (59.70)	10 (14.93)	8 (11.94)	4 (5.97)	3 (4.48)	1 (1.49)	1 (1.49)
Total	233	81	72	74	6	132	24	39	9	23	1	5

Note: The figure shows the distribution of the sample of sports managers (N=233) by gender, country, and specialty. F = absolute frequency; % = percentage per row (relative to the total number of men or women, as appropriate). Abbreviations: SM = Sports Management; PE = Physical Education; C = Coaching; OA = Other Areas; A = Administration; SS = Sports Science; P = Psychology. Percentages rounded to two decimal places.

## 2.2 Instrument and Procedure

The instrument designed and employed in this study was a structured questionnaire consisting of 16 items, developed in accordance with the specific objectives of the research. The questionnaire was administered online using the QuestionPro platform. Its structure included six demographic questions with closed-ended response options, as well as items organized into three analytical dimensions: one multiple-choice item related to management levels, four open-ended items addressing the holistic components of competencies, and five open-ended items focused on the professional profile. The questionnaire underwent a content validation process involving 10 expert judges, aimed at calculating the validation index (VI) for each item and for each dimension overall, as well as determining the groundedness of the relative variable code (GrRV) for each item. This process followed established criteria of relevance, clarity, adequacy of information, and consistency with the dimension being evaluated (24). To ensure methodological rigor, statistical analyses based on expert judgments were conducted. In particular, Fleiss's Kappa coefficient ( $\kappa$ ) was applied to assess the level of agreement among the judges regarding the evaluation of the items. Subsequently, internal consistency was examined using Cronbach's alpha coefficient ( $\alpha$ ). This combined qualitative and quantitative validation procedure strengthened the psychometric robustness of the instrument and ensured its suitability for analyzing the competencies and professional profiles of sports managers.

## 2.3 Data Analysis

For data analysis, a validation matrix processed in Microsoft Excel was used to calculate the validation index (VI) for each item, each dimension, and the instrument as a whole, as well as the groundedness of the relative variable code (GrRV). The data were subsequently analyzed using SPSS software, applying Fleiss's Kappa coefficient ( $\kappa$ ) to assess inter-rater agreement and Cronbach's alpha coefficient ( $\alpha$ ) to evaluate the internal consistency of the instrument. In addition, the questionnaire responses were qualitatively analyzed using ATLAS.ti software (version 8.4.5) through a content analysis approach. This process enabled the identification of groundedness (Gr) levels, the development of codes (C), and the examination of co-occurrences (CO) as indicators of the relationships among variables and categories. The integration of quantitative and

qualitative analytical procedures ensured both content validity and reliability, thereby reinforcing the psychometric robustness of the instrument used in the study. Finally, all figures and graphs presented in this article were created by the authors. Adobe Illustrator software (version 2025) was used for their design, ensuring the originality, clarity, and visual quality of the graphical materials.

## 3. Results

Overall, analysis of the validation matrix processed in Excel enabled the calculation of the validation index (VI) by item, by dimension, and for the instrument as a whole. The overall VI reached .884, with values of .871 for the management levels dimension, .908 for holistic components, and .898 for the job profile dimension, reflecting favorable to very favorable evaluations (13). Subsequent data processing using SPSS software allowed for the calculation of Fleiss's Kappa coefficient ( $\kappa$ ) to assess inter-rater agreement among the expert judges. The results indicated an overall  $\kappa$  value of 0.791, corresponding to a good level of agreement, with coefficients of 0.662 for management levels (good), 0.899 for holistic components (very good), and 0.843 for job profile (very good), according to the interpretation criteria proposed by Landis and Koch and reiterated by (25).

In addition, Cronbach's alpha coefficient ( $\alpha$ ) demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with an overall  $\alpha$  of .949. By dimension,  $\alpha$  values were .926 for management levels, .961 for holistic components, and .955 for job profile, confirming the high reliability of the instrument (26). The questionnaire was also subjected to qualitative analysis using ATLAS.ti software (version 8.4.5) through a content analysis approach. This process yielded a total of 3,728 citations, 489 codes, an overall groundedness (Gr) of 8,997, and 7,367 co-occurrences (CO) among the study variables.






With respect to the skills variable, expert evaluation produced a VI of .933 (very good). A total of 207 codes were identified, with 1,203 co-occurrences and a cumulative groundedness (Gr) of 5,388. Analysis of the absolute frequencies of the groundedness of the relative variable code (GrRV) revealed a central core of competencies consisting of assertive communication (120), leadership (95), teamwork (62), resource management (59), empathy (58), and problem-solving (50). At a secondary level, competencies such as organization, planning, public relations, time management, and negotiation were identified. Other skills—including analytical thinking, creativity, technology management, proactivity, adaptability, and

active listening—although less frequent, were found to provide complementary capacities that support innovation, adaptability, and sustainability in the management of physical activity and sports organizations.

When competencies were differentiated according to their soft or hard nature, the results indicated a clear predominance of soft skills, which accounted for 75% of the total. Among these, negotiation (76.47%), emotional intelligence (51.72%), assertive communication (48%), and empathy (36.48%) showed the highest relative frequencies in direct association with the variable. In contrast, the most prominent hard skills were time management (54.90%), resource management (39.86%), and organization (28.03%), all of which are closely linked to technical processes essential for operational efficiency (see Table 2).

Finally, analysis across the conceptual, technical, and human dimensions revealed that human skills constituted the dominant category, with twelve competencies associated with leadership, teamwork, flexibility, and active listening, reinforcing the central role of social interaction in sports management. Technical skills were primarily related to resource management, organization, and technology management, while conceptual skills contributed to the managerial profile through planning, decision-making, analytical thinking, and problem-solving. Overall, the findings confirm that the professional profile of sports managers is predominantly shaped by soft human skills, complemented by technical and conceptual competencies that enhance strategic capacity and operational performance.

**Table 2.** 20 Skills of the physical activity or sports manager distributed by nature (soft and hard) and by dimension (human, technical and conceptual).

No.	Skills	Nature Skill		Dimension			GrRV
							
		Soft	Hard	Human	Technique	Conceptual	
1	Negotiation	X		X			76.47%
2	Time Management		X		X		54.90%
3	Emotional Intelligence	X		X			51.72%
4	Assertive Communication	X		X			48.00%
5	Flexibility	X		X			46.67%
6	Creativity	X				X	46.51%
7	Technology Management		X		X		43.18%
8	Teamwork	X		X			42.47%
9	Public Relations	X		X			41.67%
10	Resource Management		X		X		39.86%
11	Empathy	X		X			36.48%
12	Analytical thinking	X				X	36.36%
13	Proactive	X		X			34.88%
14	Listening	X		X			34.38%
15	Problem solving	X				X	32.68%
16	Leadership	X		X			32.42%
17	Decision Making	X				X	28.57%
18	Organization		X		X		28.03%
19	Adaptability	X		X			25.00%
20	Planning		X			X	15.38%

Note: The GrRV column reflects the degree of relative embeddedness obtained in the analysis directly with the skills variable, which allows for assessing the semantic weight of each skill within the manager's profile.

The analysis of competencies by sports management level, based on a sample of 233 managers distributed across the six hierarchical levels proposed by Carranza-Bautista et al. (13), reveals a progression consistent with the operational, tactical, and strategic management model. The

results indicate that the highest concentration of co-occurrences occurs at Level 2 (31.76%), followed by Level 5 (20.17%) and Level 4 (19.74%). This distribution highlights the critical role of these stages in the professional

development and organizational performance of sports managers (see Table 3).

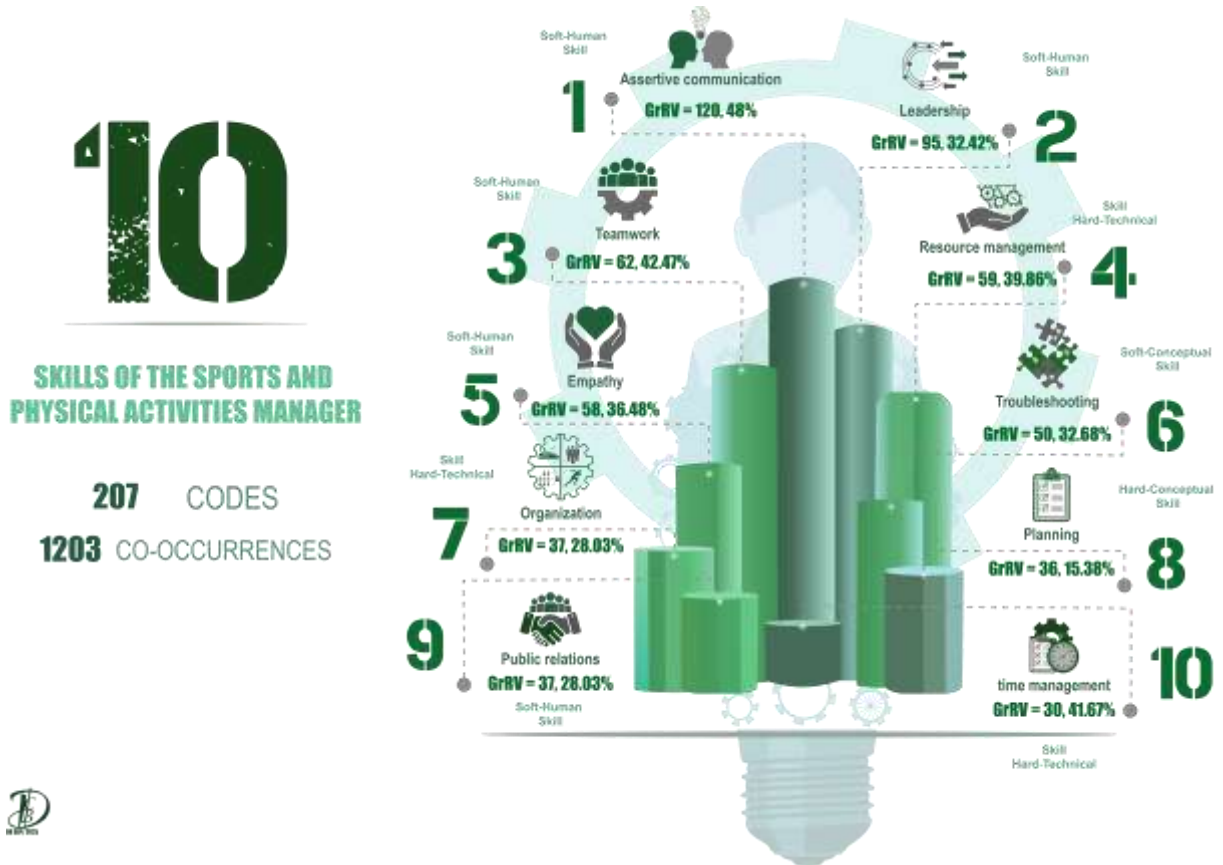
**Table 3.** Skills of the physical activity and sports manager: co-occurrences and percentages by management level

Distribution of the sample of physical activity managers by management level		22	74	16	46	47	28						
		9.44%	31.76%	6.87%	19.74%	20.17%	12.02%						
No.	Skills	LEVEL 1		LEVEL 2		LEVEL 3		LEVEL 4		LEVEL 5		LEVEL 6	
1	Assertive Communication	10	1.35%	46	6.21%	8	1.08%	22	2.97%	25	3.37%	9	1.21%
2	Leadership	8	1.08%	27	3.64%	6	0.81%	16	2.16%	23	3.10%	15	2.02%
3	Teamwork	5	0.67%	17	2.29%	6	0.81%	12	1.62%	14	1.89%	8	1.08%
4	Resource Management	7	0.94%	17	2.29%	1	1.35%	8	1.08%	9	1.21%	7	0.94%
5	Empathy	6	0.81%	17	2.29%	3	0.40%	12	1.62%	12	1.62%	8	1.08%
6	Problem Solving	3	0.40%	12	1.62%	9	1.21%	7	0.94%	12	1.62%	7	0.94%
7	Organization	2	0.27%	15	2.02%	3	0.40%	5	0.67%	8	1.08%	4	0.54%
8	Planning	2	0.27%	18	2.43%	1	0.13%	7	0.94%	6	0.81%	2	0.27%
9	Public Relations	2	0.27%	14	1.89%	1	0.13%	4	0.54%	8	1.08%	1	0.13%
10	Time Management	2	0.27%	12	1.62%	2	0.27%	4	0.54%	6	0.81%	2	0.27%
11	Negotiation	1	0.13%	6	0.81%	4	0.54%	2	0.27%	6	0.81%	7	0.94%
13	Analytical Thinking	1	0.13%	9	1.21%	0	0.00%	3	0.40%	5	0.67%	2	0.27%
12	Creativity	1	0.13%	10	1.35%	2	0.27%	4	0.54%	2	0.27%	1	0.13%
14	Technologies	0	0.00%	4	0.54%	1	0.13%	4	0.54%	5	0.67%	5	0.67%
15	Emotional Intelligence	1	0.13%	6	0.81%	0	0.00%	3	0.40%	3	0.40%	2	0.27%
16	Proactive	3	0.40%	5	0.67%	0	0.00%	2	0.27%	5	0.67%	0	0.00%
17	Flexibility	2	0.27%	8	1.08%	0	0.00%	2	0.27%	1	0.13%	1	0.13%
18	Decision making	0	0.00%	6	0.81%	1	0.13%	3	0.40%	3	0.40%	1	0.13%
19	Adaptability	0	0.00%	5	0.67%	0	0.00%	4	0.54%	4	0.54%	0	0.00%
20	Listening	0	0.00%	6	0.81%	0	0.00%	1	0.13%	4	0.54%	0	0.00%
Level of co-occurrences		56		260		57		125		161		82	

Note: The management levels are interpreted according to Carranza-Bautista et al. (13): Level 1 focuses on the direct provision of services and rehabilitation; Level 2 on basic planning and facility management; Level 3 on administrative and resource coordination; Level 4 on the specialized professionalization of sports programs; Level 5 on the strategic direction of national associations and organizations; and Level 6 on senior international management, with governance and forward-looking planning functions.

At the operational levels (Levels 1 and 2), soft skills centered on direct interaction with users and work teams predominate. Assertive communication, leadership, empathy, and teamwork emerge as key competencies for ensuring effective instruction, support, and problem-solving in short-term and immediate operational contexts. At the tactical levels (Levels 3 and 4), a diversification of competencies is observed, with greater emphasis placed on resource management, problem-solving, and planning. This pattern confirms the need for analytical, organizational, and coordination skills within intermediate management structures. At this stage, managers assume specialized and

professional leadership roles that involve designing proposals, organizing processes, and managing projects with institutional impact. Finally, at the strategic and senior management levels (Levels 5 and 6), competencies related to institutional leadership and international governance become consolidated. Leadership, negotiation, decision-making, and the effective use of technologies stand out as essential skills. These competencies are critical for the formulation of strategic plans, the design of public policies, international engagement, and the long-term sustainability of sports systems.



**Figure 2.** Essential skills in the management of physical and sports activities based on the analysis of the relative rooting of the variable

Note: The figure summarizes the ten key skills of the sports manager according to their relative embeddedness (RSI), highlighting the centrality of soft-human skills (communication, leadership, teamwork), complemented by technical and conceptual skills that make up a comprehensive profile in sports management.

From another perspective, presents a graphical analysis of the ten principal skills identified among physical activity and sports managers. The figure highlights the central role of assertive communication, leadership, and teamwork as dominant axes, complemented by operational competencies such as resource management, organization, and planning. The visual configuration reveals a dynamic balance between soft, human-centered skills and hard, technical skills, thereby confirming the need for a hybrid professional profile that integrates effective social interaction, operational efficiency, and strategic vision. Furthermore, the relative weight assigned to each skill indicates that while communication and leadership constitute core elements of the managerial profile, other competencies such as problem-solving, empathy, and time management—are equally critical for ensuring sustainable and effective management processes within sports organizations. In this regard, not

only ranks the identified skills but also offers a comparative framework for examining the interaction among technical, conceptual, and human dimensions, thereby providing an empirical reference to support the design of training programs and organizational strategies in the field of sports management.

4. Discussion

To compare the findings of this study with the specialized literature, a comparative synthesis of recent research examining sports manager competencies from multiple perspectives is presented. This review situates the results within a broader analytical framework and makes it possible to identify convergences as well as distinctive contributions in relation to existing competency models developed in Europe, Latin America, and other global contexts.

Table 4. Comparative synthesis of key skills and competencies of sport managers in literature and in this study.

Author / Year	Focus	Highlighted Skills	Competences Noted Impact
Guidotti et al. (2023) (7)	(2023) Systematic review of European profiles (ESCO)	Interpersonal communication, leadership, teamwork, digital skills, ethics, problem-solving, innovation.	Harmonized framework of soft and hard skills to respond to global and sustainable environments.
Martín Agüero & Montero Quesada (2020) (9)	Administrative and strategic management in sports, physical, and recreational activities.	Planning, organization, execution, command, control, management of human, financial, and material resources, adaptation to social and technological changes.	Versatile and strategic profile to ensure quality, efficiency, and social relevance in diverse contexts.
Getnet Admit (2023) (10)	Systematic review of professional roles and competencies.	Decision-making, leadership, communication, negotiation, financial management, public relations, diversity management; categories: personal, interpersonal, informational, action-related.	Defining skills for sustainability, competitiveness, and innovation; without them, service quality and the professionalization of the sector are limited.
Carranza-Bautista & Valcarce-Torrente (2024) (13)	Design, validation, and assessment of sports manager competencies in Ibero America. university training and professionalization plans in sports management.	Leadership, assertive communication, planning, resource management, empathy, problem-solving; integrated into technical, human, and conceptual dimensions.	Validated proposal of competencies to guide university training and professionalization plans in sports management.
Carranza-Bautista, Valcarce-Torrente, Amaya-Sánchez & Rojas-Núñez (2024) (14)	Multidimensional analysis of competencies and professional profiles of sports managers.	Strategic, operational, and socio-emotional competencies: financial management, marketing, leadership, teamwork, interpersonal communication, strategic planning and direction.	Definition of key profiles and competencies that strengthen manager professionalization and offer a comparative framework in global and multidisciplinary environments.
Current study (2025)	Mixed analysis of 233 sports managers in Mexico, Colombia, and Spain; Psychometric validation and qualitative analysis.	Assertive communication, leadership, teamwork, resource management, empathy, and problem-solving are central to this approach, complemented by organization, planning, public relations, and time management.	Empirical evidence from Latin America confirms the prevalence of soft human skills (75%) and their interaction with technical and conceptual competencies, creating a comprehensive and sustainable profile for sports management.

Comparative evidence indicates that the competencies identified in this study—particularly assertive communication, leadership, empathy, and resource management—are closely aligned with the international

frameworks proposed by Guidotti et al. (7) and Getnet (10), as well as with the competency profiles validated by Carranza-Bautista et al. (13). Accordingly, the findings not only confirm the central role of soft human skills in sports

management but also provide empirical evidence for their contextualization within Latin American settings, thereby consolidating a comprehensive managerial profile capable of responding to the demands of sustainability, innovation, and professionalization in the sector. The results further demonstrate that the management of physical activity and sports requires a hybrid professional profile in which hard and soft skills are strategically integrated. Álvarez Contreras et al. (2) emphasize that such integration promotes innovation and organizational sustainability, while Amán Morales et al. (3) confirm its positive impact on decision-making effectiveness in university environments. Likewise, Kearney et al. (12) highlight that active and experiential methodologies facilitate the simultaneous development of technical competencies (e.g., planning, financial management, and technology use) and socio-emotional competencies (e.g., leadership, negotiation, and teamwork), thereby preparing managers to operate effectively in global and multidisciplinary contexts. The findings of the present study reinforce this perspective by showing that, although soft skills predominate, their interaction with technical and conceptual competencies strengthens professionalization, operational efficiency, and the strategic capacity of sports managers.

Despite these advances, sports management continues to face a persistent gap between academic training and the competencies demanded by professional practice. As previously noted, the absence of a standardized competency framework limits professionalization and generates disparities in service quality (16). In this regard, Sesinando et al. (17) report that many managers lack specialized training in management. The findings of this study further underscore this challenge by revealing that, although soft skills such as communication, leadership, and empathy are highly prevalent, their systematic integration with technical and conceptual competencies remains limited. This highlights the need for more coherent and practice-oriented training programs aligned with the real demands of the sports sector.

## 5. Conclusion

This study fulfilled its general objective by identifying the main soft and hard skills that constitute the professional profile of physical activity and sports managers across the technical, human, and conceptual dimensions. The results reveal a clear predominance of soft, human-centered skills, which account for 75% of the total competencies identified,

with assertive communication, leadership, and empathy emerging as core pillars for ensuring effective and sustainable social interaction processes. These competencies are complemented by technical and conceptual skills, resulting in a comprehensive and versatile managerial profile. Moreover, the findings confirm the concerns raised in the literature regarding the gap between academic training and the competencies required for professional practice. Although managers acknowledge the importance of integrating technical and conceptual competencies with socio-emotional skills, difficulties persist in systematically incorporating this integration into training processes. This situation underscores the need to design more coherent educational programs that are closely aligned with the real and evolving demands of the sports sector, in order to ensure both professionalization and service quality. Overall, the study confirms that effective management of physical activity and sports organizations requires a hybrid professional profile in which soft skills provide cohesion, influence, and leadership, while hard skills ensure operational efficiency and strategic planning. The psychometric validation of the instrument supports the robustness and credibility of the findings and offers an empirical reference applicable to Ibero-American contexts. In conclusion, the balanced integration of hard and soft skills emerges as a strategic factor for innovation, sustainability, and professionalization in sports management, providing valuable guidance for both university education and ongoing professional development in the field.

The study used non-probability convenience sampling, which allowed access to sport managers from Mexico, Colombia, and Spain at different hierarchical levels following (23) typology. However, this methodological strategy has clear limitations: the sample is not representative of all Ibero-American managers and may be biased toward those with greater accessibility or willingness to participate. Furthermore, although the inclusion of three countries provides cultural and organizational diversity, it does not guarantee homogeneity or full comparability across national contexts. Furthermore, the distribution of participants across the six management levels was uneven, making it difficult to draw solid inferences for each hierarchical stratum. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory and contextualized evidence, rather than as conclusions generalizable to the entire population of sport managers in Ibero-America. Even with these limitations, the results offer a relevant empirical reference that can guide future research using probabilistic

designs and larger samples to validate and extend the findings presented. Furthermore, future research could expand representativeness through probability sampling in more Ibero-American countries, analyze the longitudinal evolution of skills, and conduct international comparative studies.

### Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed substantially to the conception of the study. DC. B. and MV. T. contributed to the study design, theoretical framework, data collection, and data analysis and interpretation. O. FÁ. and GH. C. participated in the theoretical framework and in the analysis and interpretation of the data. All authors contributed to the writing of the manuscript and its critical revision, approved the final version of the manuscript, and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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