Article

Sports Management Knowledge, Competencies, and Skills: Focus Groups and Women Sports Managers' Perceptions

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Abstract: The purpose of the present mixed-methods study was two-fold: (i) to test the validity of a Sports Management knowledge, competencies, and skills framework developed during the New Miracle project to implement a tailored training program for sports managers; and (ii) to explore the managers' perceived relevance, possess and need for training of knowledge, competencies, and skills. International focus groups with sports managers from four European countries have been organized to test the framework's validity through a clustering and a sorting stage, including consensus agreement (Likert scale 1–6 pt.) and internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) assessment. Then, sports managers' perceived relevance, possession, and need for training of knowledge competencies and skills items was assessed through an online rating (Likert scale 1–6 pt; $p \leq 0.05$). Findings showed good validity, internal consistency, and a high consensus agreement in relation to the proposed competency framework and the crucial role of soft skills in the sports management profession. Furthermore, participants highlighted transversal and specific items in relation to Entry, Middle, and Senior managerial positions. A perceived lack of possess of several items emerged, especially belonging to the technical and knowledge spheres, leading to the practical implications regarding the need to design sound educational programs based on attendees' specific career stages, educational backgrounds, and training needs.

Keywords: sports managers; focus groups; relevant knowledge; competencies; skills; need for training

1. Introduction

Sports management (SM) is a well-established professional and educational domain, experiencing exponential growth since the late 70s [1,2]. The need to respond to the growing sports industry's demands for qualified professionals for the management of sports organizations and programs determined the establishment of both formal and non-formal education and training worldwide. Furthermore, international associations (e.g., NASSM, North American Society for Sports Management; EASM, European Association for Sports Management; WASM, World Association for Sports Management; and COSMA, Commission on Sports Management Accreditation) have guaranteed a constructive dialogue between the academic and professional domains, promoted inter-institutional exchanges, and stimulated the debate for the sustainable advancement of this research area [3].

As an academic discipline, over the past decades, several studies have focused on SM's legitimation and recognition [1,2,4–6], highlighting dominant field-related trends to adjust academic and vocational training. In particular, the definition of the SM foundational, relevant knowledge, necessary competencies, and skills (K/C/S), main features of roles and responsibilities in managing and leading sports organizations, and teaching/learning methodologies represented a priority to enhance the whole sector professionalization, SM graduates' preparedness, and employees' performance [7,8]. Note, the kaleidoscopic nature of the sports phenomenon and its impact on several dimensions of society (e.g., educational, health, recreational, cultural, economic, and policy) requires equipping sports managers

with a variety of competencies and skills [7,8]. Furthermore, updated and evidence-based educational and vocational programs are crucial to increase SM employees' efficiency in relation to the organizational missions, goals, strategies, structures, stakeholders, and internal and external environments.
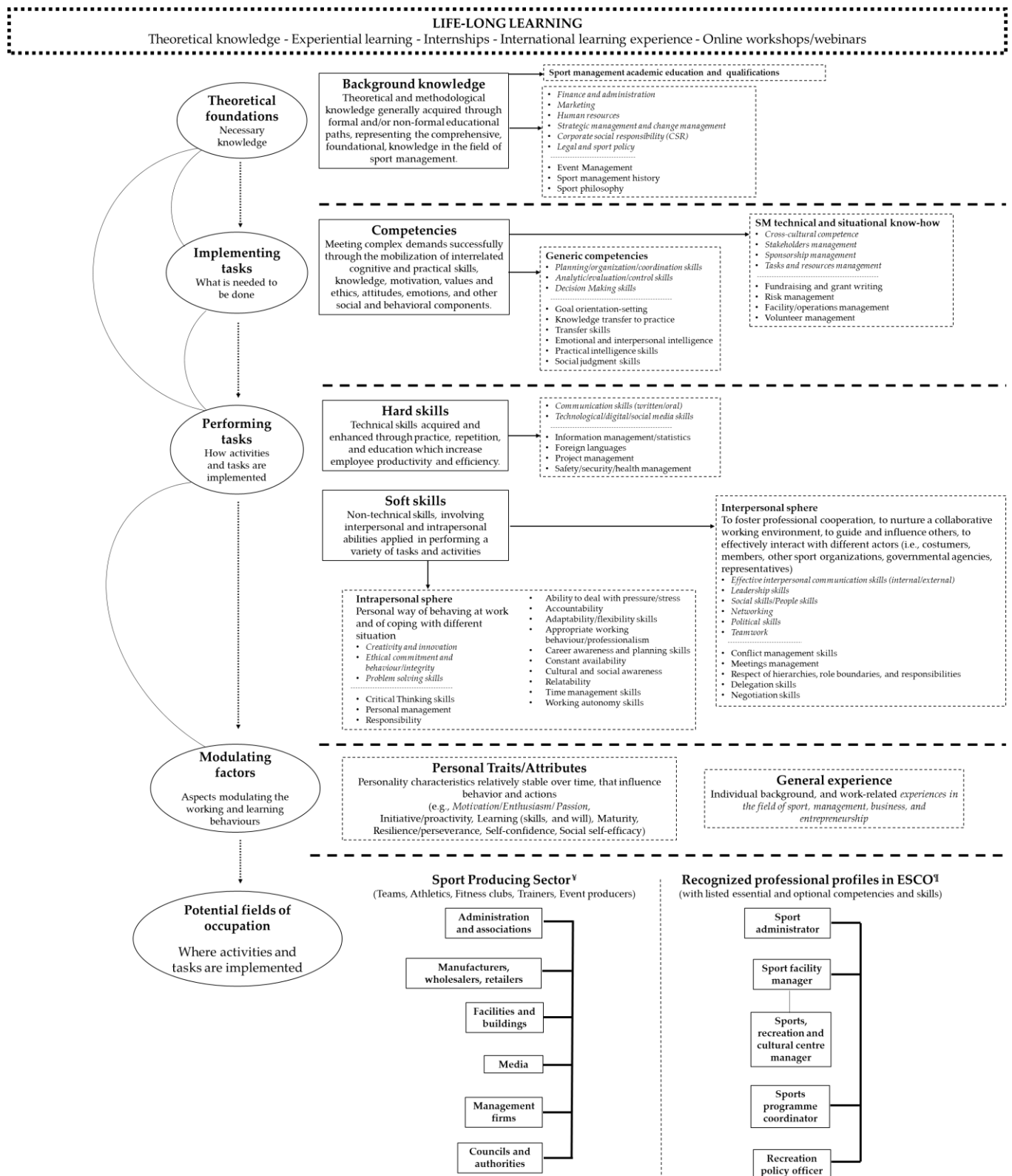
At an international level, sustainability in the sports area represents both a great challenge and an opportunity [9]. In fact, sports are a powerful driver of sustainable development, playing a crucial role in the promotion of inter- and intra-sectorial development, peace, tolerance, respect, equality, health, social inclusion, and education [10]. Furthermore, sports events attract billions of people, becoming a unique platform of convergent interest of several stakeholders (e.g., spectators, athletes, coaches, staff, clubs/associations, fans, managers, leaders, governing bodies, policy institutions, and the actors in the business and media sectors), and the perfect avenue for sport-related entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship [11,12]. To respond to the rapidly changing employability demands in society and to ensure sustainable competitiveness and social fairness, the five-year European Skills Agenda plan has been established [13]. The plan implements the European Pillar of Social Rights launched in 2016 [14,15], which aimed to promote equal opportunities and access to the labor market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion through a list of 20 rights and principles. In this framework, the European Commission stresses the crucial role of education, training, and lifelong learning to promote European citizens' rights to enhance their employment opportunities, especially the youth [16]. Strengthening the core welfare and employment-friendly components of social sustainability should sit at the heart of EU policies [15]. Finally, digital transformation is changing the way we work, learn, and take part in society [13], determining the need to continue updating education and training programs to bridge the existing gap between the demands of the working sector and the graduates'/trainees' preparedness. Thus, independently from the professional sector, innovation and adequate skills development, and a competency-based approach should be incorporated into academic and vocational paths, including the SM [17–28]. Indeed, curricula adjustments should reflect the changes occurring in business and society, which are aligned with industry demands and international policies and recommendations [13,29–31].

In the field of SM, the lack of a distinct competence framework to bridge the gap between employment demands, students' preparedness, and skills development strategies within the higher education system determine a relevant variability of educational curricula within, between, and among national contexts [27]. Another issue is represented by the persistent gender imbalance in executive positions in sports organizations [32–36], which calls for appropriate and sustainable interventions, and educational programs to foster the development of women as leaders and managers, especially evident in the sports sector [37]. In this framework, the European Commission is promoting gender equality through tailored policy recommendations [33,38,39] and financing collaborative partnerships through the ERASMUS+ program. Among them, the European New Miracle project [40] has been co-financed to develop a tailored, evidence-based training program for female sports managers, targeting the development of relevant field-related competencies and skills. Although previous research addressed the need to highlight relevant K/C/S in the field of SM, fragmented information was available. To note, the literature review of Miragaia and Soares [41] addressed SM academic education from 1979 to 2014, focusing on the characteristics of the curricula, the accreditation process, the development of K/C/S, teaching/learning strategies, and professional prospects. The study highlighted business management, marketing, finance and accounting, and computer science as foundational knowledge in the SM to be implemented into application areas pertaining to the sports sociology, law, economics, marketing, and administration fields. Furthermore, the study highlighted the relevance of internships and experiential learning to prepare SM graduates for the industry demands. Conversely, the study of Novà [20] carried out under the European project New Age of Sports Management (NASME) focused on SM experts' opinions to develop a sound competencies and skills model and recommendations towards
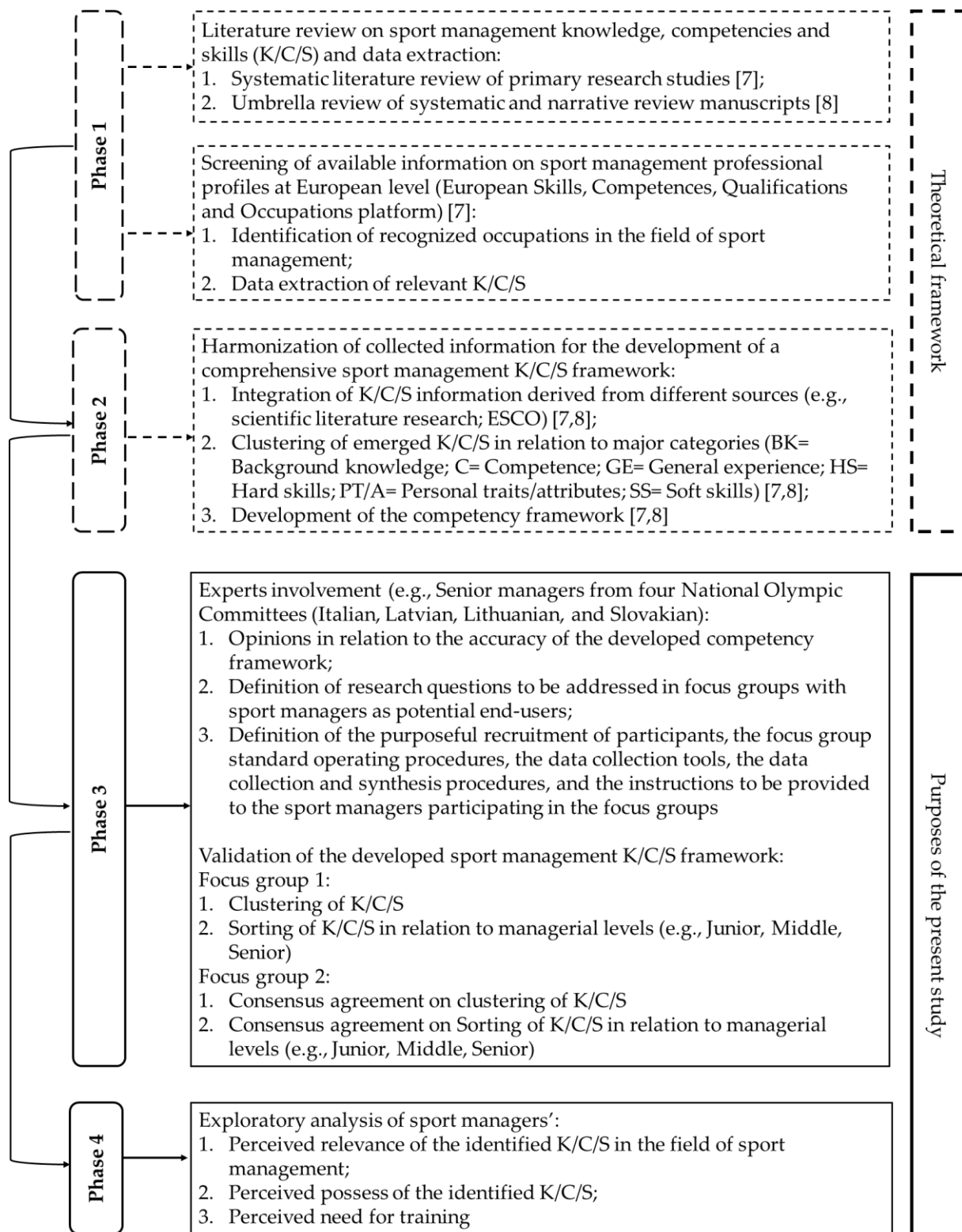
the implementation of a competency-based educational approach to traditional SM academic paths. Finally, the systematic literature review of Santos et al. [42] framed the sports manager's profile in relation to major competencies, roles, and responsibilities. However, to our knowledge, no study comprehensively systematized the relevant evidence-based knowledge in relation to SM K/C/S, taking into consideration different research perspectives (e.g., academic and vocational education, labor market) through a mixed-method (e.g., qualitative and quantitative) research design. This approach was deemed crucial not only to provide an updated, evidence-based list of relevant K/C/S but also to explore the relevance and impact of each component for the sports managers' necessary education and work-related expected performance. Thus, to guide the implementation of effective education and training programs in SM [40], four main phases have been envisioned in the New Miracle project (Figure 2):

- First, sound evidence-based knowledge of essential and complementary SM K/C/S in relation to both higher education and labor market perspectives was established [7,8]. During this phase, a rigorous literature search and quality assessment of manuscripts published during the past decade (e.g., 2012–2022) and retrieved on three main databases (e.g., EBSCOhost, Scopus, and Google Scholar) was performed, whose outcomes are presented in a systematic literature review on primary research articles [7] and an umbrella review of systematic and narrative review studies [8];
- Second, the collected information has been harmonized to develop a novel comprehensive SM K/C/S framework, including 70 items extracted and harmonized from the included manuscripts in the systematic [7] and umbrella [8] literature reviews and from the ESCO platform (Figure 1 and Appendix A);
- Third, a participatory approach collecting the views of senior sports managers and potential end-users was deemed relevant to test the soundness of the proposed SM K/C/S framework; and
- Fourth, an exploratory analysis of end-users' perceived relevance, possess, and need for training in relation to the identified K/C/S was envisioned.

Based on the relevant knowledge background [7,8] developed during the early stages of the New Miracle project, the general purpose of the present study was two-fold: (i) to test the validity of the developed SM K/C/S framework [7,8]; and (ii) to explore the sports managers' perceived relevance, possess and need for training of the identified SM K/C/S. It was hypothesized that the eminence-based findings could be used as an effective tool for SM curricula implementation at higher education and sports organization levels.

LIFE-LONG LEARNING
Theoretical knowledge - Experiential learning - Internships - International learning experience - Online workshops/webinars

Theoretical foundations
Necessary knowledge

Background knowledge
Theoretical and methodological knowledge generally acquired through formal and/or non-formal educational paths, representing the comprehensive, foundational, knowledge in the field of sport management.

Sport management academic education and qualifications
- *Finance and administration*
- *Marketing*
- *Human resources*
- *Strategic management and change management*
- *Corporate social responsibility (CSR)*
- *Legal and sport policy*
- Event Management
- Sport management history
- Sport philosophy

Implementing tasks
What is needed to be done

Competencies
Meeting complex demands successfully through the mobilization of interrelated cognitive and practical skills, knowledge, motivation, values and ethics, attitudes, emotions, and other social and behavioral components.

Generic competencies
- *Planning/organization/coordination skills*
- *Analytic/evaluation/control skills*
- *Decision Making skills*
- Goal orientation-setting
- Knowledge transfer to practice
- Transfer skills
- Emotional and interpersonal intelligence
- Practical intelligence skills
- Social judgment skills

SM technical and situational know-how
- *Cross-cultural competence*
- *Stakeholders management*
- *Sponsorship management*
- *Tasks and resources management*
- Fundraising and grant writing
- Risk management
- Facility/operations management
- Volunteer management

Performing tasks
How activities and tasks are implemented

Hard skills
Technical skills acquired and enhanced through practice, repetition, and education which increase employee productivity and efficiency.

- *Communication skills (written/oral)*
- *Technological/digital/social media skills*
- Information management/statistics
- Foreign languages
- Project management
- Safety/security/health management

Soft skills
Non-technical skills, involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities applied in performing a variety of tasks and activities

Interpersonal sphere
To foster professional cooperation, to nurture a collaborative working environment, to guide and influence others, to effectively interact with different actors (i.e., costumers, members, other sport organizations, governmental agencies, representatives)
- *Effective interpersonal communication skills (internal/external)*
- *Leadership skills*
- *Social skills/People skills*
- *Networking*
- *Political skills*
- *Teamwork*
- Conflict management skills
- Meetings management
- Respect of hierarchies, role boundaries, and responsibilities
- Delegation skills
- Negotiation skills

Intrapersonal sphere
Personal way of behaving at work and of coping with different situation
- *Creativity and innovation*
- *Ethical commitment and behaviour/integrity*
- *Problem solving skills*
- Critical Thinking skills
- Personal management
- Responsibility

- Ability to deal with pressure/stress
- Accountability
- Adaptability/flexibility skills
- Appropriate working behaviour/professionalism
- Career awareness and planning skills
- Constant availability
- Cultural and social awareness
- Relatability
- Time management skills
- Working autonomy skills

Modulating factors
Aspects modulating the working and learning behaviours

Personal Traits/Attributes
Personality characteristics relatively stable over time, that influence behavior and actions
(e.g., *Motivation/Enthusiasm/ Passion*, Initiative/proactivity, Learning (skills, and will), Maturity, Resilience/perseverance, Self-confidence, Social self-efficacy)

General experience
Individual background, and work-related *experiences in the field of sport, management, business, and entrepreneurship*

Potential fields of occupation
Where activities and tasks are implemented

Sport Producing Sector[¥]
(Teams, Athletics, Fitness clubs, Trainers, Event producers)

- Administration and associations
- Manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers
- Facilities and buildings
- Media
- Management firms
- Councils and authorities

Recognized professional profiles in ESCO[¶]
(with listed essential and optional competencies and skills)

- Sport administrator
- Sport facility manager
- Sports, recreation and cultural centre manager
- Sports programme coordinator
- Recreation policy officer

Figure 1. Sports management developed competency framework. Note: modified from [7,8]. ¥ Adapted from the modified version of the "Sports Activity Model" ([12] = Woratschek et al., 2014). ¶ Professional occupations retrieved from the ESCO platform ([31] = European Skills, Competencies, Qualifications and Occupations).

Phase 1

Literature review on sport management knowledge, competencies and skills (K/C/S) and data extraction:
1. Systematic literature review of primary research studies [7];
2. Umbrella review of systematic and narrative review manuscripts [8]

Screening of available information on sport management professional profiles at European level (European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations platform) [7]:
1. Identification of recognized occupations in the field of sport management;
2. Data extraction of relevant K/C/S

Phase 2

Harmonization of collected information for the development of a comprehensive sport management K/C/S framework:
1. Integration of K/C/S information derived from different sources (e.g., scientific literature research; ESCO) [7,8];
2. Clustering of emerged K/C/S in relation to major categories (BK= Background knowledge; C= Competence; GE= General experience; HS= Hard skills; PT/A= Personal traits/attributes; SS= Soft skills) [7,8];
3. Development of the competency framework [7,8]

Theoretical framework

Phase 3

Experts involvement (e.g., Senior managers from four National Olympic Committees (Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Slovakian):
1. Opinions in relation to the accuracy of the developed competency framework;
2. Definition of research questions to be addressed in focus groups with sport managers as potential end-users;
3. Definition of the purposeful recruitment of participants, the focus group standard operating procedures, the data collection tools, the data collection and synthesis procedures, and the instructions to be provided to the sport managers participating in the focus groups

Validation of the developed sport management K/C/S framework:
Focus group 1:
1. Clustering of K/C/S
2. Sorting of K/C/S in relation to managerial levels (e.g., Junior, Middle, Senior)
Focus group 2:
1. Consensus agreement on clustering of K/C/S
2. Consensus agreement on Sorting of K/C/S in relation to managerial levels (e.g., Junior, Middle, Senior)

Phase 4

Exploratory analysis of sport managers':
1. Perceived relevance of the identified K/C/S in the field of sport management;
2. Perceived possess of the identified K/C/S;
3. Perceived need for training

Purposes of the present study

Figure 2. The New Miracle project study design. Note: [7] = Guidotti et al. (2023), systematic literature review; [8] = Guidotti et al. (2023), Umbrella review.

2. Materials and Methods

The present study was performed under the Erasmus+ Sports Collaborative Partnership "Women—new leader's empowerment in sports and physical education industry—New

Miracle" co-financed by the European Commission (Project number: 622391-EPP-1-2020-1-LT-SPO-SCP), and approved by the University of Rome Foro Italico IRB (CAR 156/2023).

2.1. Study Design

To test the validity of the developed SM K/C/S framework [7,8], a mixed-method research design was considered (Figure 2). In particular, the focus group and survey methodologies were deemed appropriate to explore the views of Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Slovakian sports managers involved in the New Miracle project [41,42]. In considering the kaleidoscopic nature of the SM field, an ethnographic research approach was considered crucial [43], with potential end-users of the developed SM K/C/S framework involved in both a participative (e.g., focus groups) and an individual (e.g., survey) phase. Furthermore, the validation of the framework encompassed a progressive-constructive approach, with each phase underpinning the following one. First, six senior sports managers of the Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Slovakian Olympic Committees identified user-friendly descriptors for having a common understanding of meanings and contexts of the items to be investigated, agreed purposeful recruitment of participants, the standard operating procedures, the data collection tools, and data synthesis procedures. Three research questions were formulated:

1. Are sports managers aware of the main five layers of the necessary education and training to operate in the sports industry (e.g., BK = Background, foundational necessary knowledge; C = Competencies for tasks management and performance, modulated by previous personal and working experiences; HS = Hard skills, representing the technical know-how; PT/A = Personal traits/attributes, modulating sports managers' working behavior and performance; SS = Soft skills, representing intra- and inter-personal non-technical skills enhancing employees' working relationships), which could guide their education/training choices and behaviors in a lifelong learning perspective?
2. Do sports managers perceive the relevance of K/C/S in relation to the three main managerial levels (e.g., Entry, Middle, Senior), which could guide their educational focus and needs in relation to their current career stage? and
3. Do sports managers perceive the relevancy, possess, and need of training for the identified K/C/S for their professional career in this field?

Then, European women sports managers (enrolled in the New Miracles project) as potential end-users were involved in two international focus groups to validate the developed SM K/C/S framework through clustering and a sorting stage. Finally, sports managers were invited to provide their perceived relevance, possess, and need for training of K/C/S to highlight their specific educational needs through the use of the SM competency framework.

The present design ensured eight quality criteria [44,45]: (i) relevance of the topic, based on SM recent research [7,8]; (ii) rigor, with clearly defined guidelines for the conduction of international focus groups with sports managers involved in the New Miracle project; (iii) sincerity, based on a collaborative, truthful cooperation between experts involved in the project for the identification of research questions, the conduction of the focus groups with no interferences with participants' feedbacks and an objective approach to analyze the collected data; (iv) credibility, considering multiple insights and opinions derived from small-groups' activities implemented during the focus groups; (v) resonance, with the involvement of experts and potential end-users of the SM K/C/S framework for a sound implementation of education and training pathways in this filed; (vi) significant contribution, based on the potential relevance of the present findings in fostering the debate on SM curricula implementation and future research in this exciting area; (vii) ethical, based on the Declaration of Helsinki criteria, and certified by the approval of the European Commission and the University of Rome Foro Italico IRB; and (viii) meaningful coherence, through the involvement of different stakeholders (e.g., scholars, experts SM professionals, sports managers participating in the project) in ensuring the coherence between the research aims, procedures, outcomes, and interpretation of findings.

2.2. Procedures and Data Collection Tools

In agreement with the GDPR national regulation, the four European project partners performed the recruitment of women sports managers and SM Master's students. The participants were provided with the necessary information regarding the planned project activities, relative timeline, expected efforts, and involvement, and the voluntary nature of their participation, with the possibility of dropping out at any time for any reason. Participants provided their written informed consent by registering to an electronic platform [40], which allowed exclusive access to a tailored SM online stand-alone digital educational resource, self-directed in nature, freely and openly available in the form of Reusable Learning Objects, based on small, independent, reusable, aggregation-ready educational units [46]. Whilst all the participants were also offered free access to four national training sessions and a dedicated mentoring program, each partner country selected a representative national sample of six managers to participate in two international focus groups (e.g., Bratislava, Slovakia: February 2023; Riga, Latvia: April 2023). Finally, the registered participants have been invited to complete an online survey on their perceptions regarding the level of relevance, possess, and need for training of SM K/C/S.

2.2.1. International Focus Groups

Before each focus group, participants (6 European women sports managers from four participating countries in the New Miracle project) were provided with a 10 min presentation regarding the SM K/C/S items, the purpose and expected outcomes of the focus group, and standard operating procedures. During the 2-hr focus groups, the participants' engaged in two tasks: (i) the clustering of the proposed items ($n = 71$); (ii) the sorting of the items with respect to their relevance for three main sports managerial levels (i.e., Entry, Middle, Senior), each lasting 40 min followed by a 10 min plenary discussion. To ensure the highest possible degree of interaction and exchange of ideas between sports managers from different nationalities, educational backgrounds, professional standing, and working contexts, the 24 attendees were randomly assigned to six 4-member subgroups. Furthermore, a member of the New Miracle Team, an expert in the field of research and in European projects in the field of SM, acted as a facilitator. At the end of the focus group, a final 10–15 min plenary discussion was organized to stimulate further insights and to offer concluding remarks.

For the clustering task, during the first focus group (Bratislava, February 2023), participants were asked to classify the K/C/S items in relation to the five major clusters (i.e., BK, C, HS, PT/A, SS), allowing them to address each item to a maximum of two clusters. Then, data were transcribed, aggregated, and processed to structure the second phase of the clustering stage. During the second focus group (Riga, April 2023), based on the findings from the first international focus group, the sub-groups were asked to discuss the list of items assigned to each cluster and expressed their consensus agreement on a 6-pt Likert type scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 6 (completely agree).

For the sorting task, during the first focus group, the subgroups were required to collectively sort a maximum of 15 top-relevant K/C/S items for Entry, Middle, and Senior sports managerial levels. Then, data were transcribed, aggregated, and processed to structure the second phase of the sorting stage. During the second focus group, based on the findings from the first international focus group, the subgroups were provided the overall list of items assigned to each managerial level and expressed their consensus agreement on a 6-pt Likert type scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 6 (completely agree).

2.2.2. Survey

To collect comprehensive information regarding sports managers' perceived relevance, possess, and need for training of SM K/C/S, all the participants in the New Miracle project were invited to fill in an anonymous survey specifically designed to gather participants' perceived relevance, possess, and need for training of each identified K/C/S [7,8] through the rating of each item on a 6-pt Likert type scale, ranging from 1 (extremely low- relevance;

possess; need for training) to 6 (extremely high- relevance; possess; need for training). To increase the response rate, a reminder was sent after one week, for a total of two weeks of data collection (i.e., end of data collection: mid-May 2023). Each item was presented on an individual page, with the relative descriptor and the rating scales. Specifically, BK, C, HS, and interpersonal SS items have been rated in relation to their relevance, possess, and need for training, whereas items belonging to the personal sphere (e.g., personal traits and intrapersonal SS) have been rated only in relation to their relevance and possess. Demographic information (e.g., age, nationality, managerial level, working position) was also collected.

2.3. Participants

Overall, 80 women sports managers registered to participate in the New Miracle project. Table 1 reports the demographic characteristics of the participants in the focus groups and the survey (response rate: 45%). To note, participants represented different managerial positions and organizations within the different national contexts (for example, Head of a sports organization and/or department, Secretary general of a sports federation, National team coach in a women's sport, managers or leaders of a sports club, project managers, social media manager, marketing managers, specialist of sports projects and events, and SM graduate students within professional entry-level programs in a sports organization).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the samples participating in the focus groups and in the survey of the study.

		Focus Groups		Survey	
	Variable	(*n*)	(%)	(*n*)	(%)
Country	Italy	6	25.0	16	44.4
	Latvia	6	25.0	3	8.3
	Lithuania	6	25.0	7	19.4
	Slovakia	6	25.0	10	27.8
Age	≤30 years (Younger)	11	45.8	14	38.9
	>30 years (Older)	13	54.2	22	61.1
Level	Entry	8	33.3	13	36.1
	Middle	10	41.7	14	38.9
	Senior	6	25.0	9	25.0

2.4. Data Analysis

2.4.1. Validation of the Framework: Clustering and Sorting Data Analysis

Regarding the first phase of the clustering stage (focus group 1), collected data from the six small groups were transcribed and aggregated to compute frequencies of occurrence (%) in relation to recorded clusters for each considered item. Furthermore, a 20% cutoff value for the cluster's eligibility has been applied. Afterward, collected data in relation to small groups' clustering consensus agreement in relation to the clusters' structure (focus group 2) were aggregated, and descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) for each K/C/S item were computed.

Regarding the first phase of the sorting stage (focus group 1), collected data from the six small groups (e.g., top-15 sorted items for each considered managerial level) were transcribed and aggregated to compute frequencies of occurrence (n) in relation to each sorted items and relative assigned major cluster. Afterward, collected data in relation to small groups' sorting consensus agreement for each managerial level (focus group 2) were aggregated, and descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) for each considered K/C/S item was computed, also in relation to transversality and specificity of K/C/S with respect to the considered managerial levels.

For both the clustering and sorting consensus agreement phases, data were also processed for reliability estimates. In particular, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed

to assess the reliability of (i) the clusters' structure, including all the items that emerged for each proposed main category (BK = Background knowledge; C = Competence; HS = Hard skills; PT/A = Personal traits/attributes; SS = Soft skills); and (ii) the competency framework emerged for each managerial level, including all the relative sorted items. According to the literature [47], a good internal consistency derives from Cronbach's alpha coefficients between 0.8 and 0.9. Items loading on two clusters and/or different managerial levels were used in computing composite scores for both clusters and/or levels.

2.4.2. Rating of the Relevance, Possess, and Need for Training: Survey Data Analysis

Regarding the individual rating of perceived relevance, possession, and need for training of relevant SM K/C/S, collected data was organized in relation to respondents' nationality, age, and managerial level. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were computed for individual items and clusters (e.g., grouping items into adjusted major categories identified through the clustering stage, including BK, C, HS, interpersonal SS, and IND (intrapersonal SS and PT)).

Age (i.e., Younger, $\leq$30 years vs. Older, >30 years) and managerial level (i.e., Entry vs. Middle vs. Senior) were considered independent variables to promote a specific scenario of the perceived relevance, possess, and need for training of SM K/C/S. First, a chi-square test verified unequal sample sizes ($p \leq 0.05$) between groups relative to the frequency of occurrence of respondents' age and managerial level. Second, the normality of the distribution has been tested (Shapiro–Wilk test, $p > 0.05$) to guide the statistical approach.

The analysis was performed taking into consideration the following aspects: (i) effects of age and managerial level on individual items responses in relation to the perceived relevance, possess, and need for training of K/C/S; (ii) correlations between variables to assess the intertwined relationships between perceived relevance, possess, and need for training of K/C/S; (iii) effects of age and managerial level on clusters' composite scores in relation to the perceived relevance, possess and need for training of K/C/S; and (iv) correlations between clusters to assess the intertwined relationships between perceived relevance, possess, and need for training of K/C/S grouped as main categories. Being individual items' responses not normally distributed ($p \leq 0.05$), a not parametric statical approach has been applied to evaluate differences ($p \leq 0.05$) between the groups (e.g., age: Mann–Whitney U test; Managerial level: Kruskal–Wallis one-way ANOVA, and Mann–Whitney U test in case differences were observed) in relation to the perceived relevance, possess and need for training of SM K/C/S. Furthermore, the relationships between individual items' features (relevance-possess; relevance-need for training; possess-need for training) have also been evaluated (e.g., Spearman's rank correlation coefficient: cutoff value ≥ 0.7, $p \leq 0.01$). Conversely, clusters' scores resulted normally distributed ($p > 0.05$), leading to a parametric approach (e.g., one-way ANOVA, $p \leq 0.05$) for Age and Level (Bonferroni post hoc in case differences were observed); Pearson's correlation coefficient: cutoff value ≥ 0.7, $p \leq 0.01$).

Finally, a bivariate go-zone plot was used to show the relationship between the mean ratings of the perceived possession and the relevance of the items.

All statistical analyses were conducted in SPSS (26.0; SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL, USA).

3. Results

3.1. Clustering

Table 2 presents the findings relative to the clustering of the first focus group, with 80% of the items (n = 57) loading to more than one cluster (First: 78–50%; Second: 22–50%). Personality (PT) and intra- and inter-personal soft skills (SS) were associated with 22 items; C resulted associated with BK (n = 11 items), SS (n = 10 items), and HS (n = 7 items). The remaining 13 items (20%) loaded on a single cluster mostly represent PT (n = 7), followed by BK (n = 3), C (n = 2), and SS (n = 1).

Table 2. Focus group 1. Distribution and frequency of occurrence of items assigned to clusters.

Items	Assigned Clusters		Frequency of Occurrence (%)				
	First	Second	SS	HS	C	BK	PT
Ability to deal with pressure/stress	SS	PT	62.5				37.5
Accountability/responsibility	PT	SS	33.3		11.1		55.6
Adaptability/flexibility skills	SS	PT	36.4		18.2		45.5
Analytical skills	C	HS		44.4	55.6		
Appropriate working behavior/professionalism skills	SS	PT	75.0				25.0
Business and entrepreneurship	C	K		10.0	40.0	40.0	10.0
Career awareness and planning skills	SS	C	62.5		37.5		
Communication skills (written/oral)	HS	C		66.7	33.3		
Conflict management skills	SS	C	50.0		50.0		
Constant availability	SS	PT	60.0				40.0
Controlling skills	C	·	14.3	14.3	71.4		
Corporate social responsibility	K	·			14.3	85.7	
Creativity and innovation skills	PT	SS	28.6				71.4
Critical thinking	SS	·	87.5		12.5		
Cross-cultural competence	C	K			70.0	30.0	
Cultural and social awareness	SS	PT	50.0		10.0		40.0
Decision making skills	C	SS	25.0		75.0		
Delegation skills	SS	PT	50.0		10.0		40.0
Education, qualification, academic achievement	K	HS		42.9		57.1	
Effective interpersonal communication skills (internal/external)	SS	PT	70.0				30.0
Emotional and interpersonal intelligence skills	SS	PT	50.0				50.0
Ethical commitment and behavior/integrity	SS	PT	54.5				45.5
Evaluation skills	C	K		11.1	44.4	44.4	
Event management	C	K			55.6	44.4	
Facility/operations management	C	K			77.8	22.2	
Finance and administration management	K	HS		50.0		50.0	
Foreign languages	K	HS		42.9	14.3	42.9	
Fundraising and grant writing	C	K			50.0	50.0	
General work-related experience	C	SS	42.9	14.3	42.9		
Goal orientation-setting skills	C	SS	37.5		62.5		
Human resources management	K	HS		30.0	10.0	60.0	
Information management	C	HS		44.4	55.6		
Initiative/proactivity	PT	SS	28.6				71.4
Knowledge transfer to practice skills	C	·	16.7		66.7	16.7	
Leadership skills	SS	PT	54.5				45.5
Learning (skills and will)	PT	·	12.5	12.5		12.5	62.5
Legal knowledge and sports law	K	HS		33.3		66.7	
Marketing knowledge	K	C		12.5	25.0	62.5	
Maturity	PT	·	14.3				85.7
Meetings management	C	SS	25.0	12.5	50.0	12.5	
Motivation/enthusiasm/passion	PT	·	14.3				85.7
Negotiation skills	SS	PT	50.0		10.0		40.0
Networking	SS	PT	55.6				44.4
Personal management	SS	PT	44.4		11.1		44.4
Planning/organization/coordination skills	C	HS		28.6	71.4		
Political skills	SS	C	55.6		33.3	11.1	
Practical intelligence skills	C	SS	25.0		62.5		12.5
Problem solving skills	C	SS	25.0		62.5		12.5
Project management	C	HS		37.5	50.0	12.5	
Relatability	SS	PT	50.0		12.5		37.5
Research skills	HS	K		42.9	14.3	42.9	
Resilience/perseverance	PT	·	14.3				85.7
Respect of hierarchies, role boundaries, and responsibilities	SS	PT	50.0				50.0
Risk management	C	K		11.1	44.4	44.4	
Safety/security/health management	C	HS		33.3	55.6	11.1	
Self-confidence	PT	·	14.3				85.7
Social judgment skills	PT	·	14.3				85.7
Social self-efficacy	PT	·	14.3				85.7
Social skills/people skills	SS	PT	50.0				50.0
Sponsorship management	C	K			75.0	25.0	
Sports history and philosophy	K	·				100.0	
Sports participation/involvement/knowledge	K	·		16.7		83.3	
Stakeholder management	C	SS	28.6		57.1	14.3	
Strategic management and ability to manage change	K	C			25.0	75.0	
Tasks and resources management	C	HS		25.0	75.0		
Teamwork	SS	PT	55.6				44.4

Table 2. *Cont.*

Items	Assigned Clusters		Frequency of Occurrence (%)				
	First	Second	SS	HS	C	BK	PT
Technological/digital/social media skills	HS	K		71.4		28.6	
Time management skills	SS	PT	71.4				28.6
Transferable skills	C	.			85.7	14.3	
Volunteer management	C	K			57.1	42.9	
Working autonomy skills	SS	PT	50.0		10.0		40.0

Note: Data are presented as registered frequency of occurrence (%) and clustering outcomes (Clusters: BK = Background knowledge; C = Competence; HS = Hard skills; PT/A = Personal traits/attributes; SS = Soft skills) from the Focus Group-1. Cutoff value for cluster eligibility: $\geq$20%.

The second focus group presented a high consensus agreement (Table 3), with 54% of items ($n = 38$) scoring > 5 pt, 41% ($n = 29$) between 5.0 and 4.0 pt, and only two items (e.g., Cross-cultural competence, and Human resources management) 4.0 pt. The reliability estimates reported good values for the internal consistency of the clusters' framework, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.80 for C, 0.81 for BK and HS, 0.82 for SS, and 0.84 for PT.

Table 3. Focus group 2. Consensus agreement scores (pt.) in relation to the clustering of relevant SM K/C/S items.

Assigned Clusters	Item	Mean		SD
BK	History of sports and sports philosophy	6.0	$\pm$	0.0
PT & SS	Ability to deal with pressure/stress	5.8	$\pm$	0.4
PT & SS	Teamwork	5.8	$\pm$	0.4
C & HS	Information management	5.7	$\pm$	0.5
C	Knowledge transfer to practice	5.7	$\pm$	0.8
BK & HS	Legal knowledge and sports law	5.7	$\pm$	0.8
C & HS	Tasks and resources management	5.7	$\pm$	0.5
C	Transferable skills	5.7	$\pm$	0.5
PT & SS	Adaptability/flexibility skills	5.7	$\pm$	0.5
PT & SS	Effective interpersonal communication skills	5.7	$\pm$	0.5
BK & HS	Education, qualification, academic achievement	5.5	$\pm$	0.8
BK & HS	Finance and administration management	5.5	$\pm$	0.8
BK & HS	Research skills	5.5	$\pm$	0.8
C & HS	Communication skills (written/oral)	5.5	$\pm$	0.5
PT & SS	Accountability/responsibility	5.5	$\pm$	0.8
PT & SS	Initiative/proactivity	5.5	$\pm$	0.5
PT	Motivation/enthusiasm/passion	5.5	$\pm$	0.8
PT & SS	Respect of hierarchies, role boundaries, and responsibilities	5.5	$\pm$	0.8
PT & SS	Delegation skills	5.5	$\pm$	0.5
PT	Resilience/perseverance	5.5	$\pm$	0.8
PT	Self-confidence	5.5	$\pm$	0.8
C	Controlling skills	5.3	$\pm$	0.8
C & SS	Decision-making skills	5.3	$\pm$	0.8
BK & HS	Foreign languages	5.3	$\pm$	1.2
C & HS	Safety/security/health management	5.3	$\pm$	0.8
BK & C	Sponsorship management	5.3	$\pm$	0.8
PT & SS	Appropriate working behavior/professionalism	5.3	$\pm$	0.8
PT	Social self-efficacy	5.3	$\pm$	0.5
PT & SS	Networking	5.3	$\pm$	0.8
C & HS	Analytical skills	5.2	$\pm$	1.0
BK & C	Marketing	5.2	$\pm$	1.2
BK & C	Risk management	5.2	$\pm$	1.0
PT & SS	Creativity and innovation	5.2	$\pm$	1.0
PT & SS	Emotional and interpersonal intelligence	5.2	$\pm$	0.8
PT & SS	Leadership skills	5.2	$\pm$	1.2
PT & SS	Negotiation skills	5.2	$\pm$	0.8

Table 3. *Cont.*

Assigned Clusters	Item	Mean		SD
PT	Maturity	5.2	±	1.0
PT & SS	Relatability	5.2	±	1.0
BK & C	Facility/operations management	5.0	±	0.9
BK & C	Fundraising and grant writing	5.0	±	0.9
C & SS	Goal orientation-setting	5.0	±	0.6
C & SS	Meetings management	5.0	±	1.3
C & HS	Project management	5.0	±	0.9
C & SS	Problem solving	5.0	±	1.1
BK & C	Strategic management and ability to manage change	5.0	±	1.3
BK & HS	Technological/digital/social media skills	5.0	±	1.5
C & SS	Career awareness and planning	5.0	±	0.9
SS	Critical thinking	5.0	±	1.1
PT & SS	Ethical behavior/integrity	5.0	±	0.9
PT & SS	Time management	5.0	±	0.6
PT & SS	Working autonomy	5.0	±	0.6
BK & C	Business and entrepreneurship	4.8	±	1.5
BK	Specific knowledge of the sports context	4.8	±	1.6
PT	Learning (skills and will)	4.8	±	1.3
PT	Social judgment skills	4.8	±	0.8
PT & SS	Personal management	4.7	±	1.0
C & SS	Conflict management skills	4.5	±	1.6
BK & C	Evaluation skills	4.5	±	1.0
C & SS	General work-related experience	4.5	±	1.0
C & HS	Planning/organization/coordination skills	4.5	±	0.8
C & SS	Political skills	4.3	±	1.2
BK & C	Event management	4.3	±	1.2
BK & C	Volunteer management	4.3	±	1.6
PT & SS	Constant availability	4.3	±	1.0
BK	Corporate Social Responsibility	4.2	±	1.2
C & SS	Practical intelligence	4.0	±	1.4
C & SS	Stakeholder management	4.0	±	0.6
C & SS	Cross-cultural competence	3.8	±	1.5
BK & C	Human resources management	3.7	±	1.6

Note: data are expressed as mean and standard deviation of recorded agreement scores (pt.) from the Focus Group-2. Clusters: BK = Background knowledge; C = Competence; HS = Hard skills; PT/A = Personal traits/attributes; SS = Soft skills.

3.2. Sorting

Table 4 and Supplementary Material S1 show the 15 top relevant items sorted by each of the six subgroups of the first focus group (total items: $n = 90$) in relation to the Entry, Middle, and Senior managerial levels. A different distribution of clusters emerged, with the highest number of items emerging for the Middle level ($n = 48$), whereas the Entry and Senior level accounted for 37 and 38 items, respectively. For the 37 items of the Entry level, a general inter-subgroup consistency emerged with a prevalence of a generalized (and less specialized) BK ($n = 4$) and educational attainment, complemented by diversified SS ($n = 18$), C ($n = 7$), and HS ($n = 5$). Most of the subgroups (range: 6–5) sorted learning (skills and will), motivation/enthusiasm/passion, education, qualification, academic achievement, and Adaptability/flexibility skills. A general inter-subgroup consistency was present for the Senior level, with a required theoretical knowledge (BK) complemented by multifaceted SS ($n = 14$) and C ($n = 13$), with all the groups sorting Strategic management and ability to manage change, political skills, and leadership skills ($n = 6$). A different picture emerged for the 48 items of the Middle level, with four sorting for three items only (e.g., analytical skills, project management, problem-solving skills) and 17 items receiving a single sort. In general, a low intergroup consistency was present, with a specialized BK and a variety of C ($n = 18$) and SS ($n = 16$) sorted items.

Table 4. Focus group 1. Summary of 15 top relevant items sorted in relation to the Entry, Middle, and Senior managerial levels.

Recorded Items for Level	Major Clusters	Items (n)	Items with ≥ 3 Citations		
Entry *n* = 37	BK	4	Learning (skills and will)	Initiative, proactivity	Personal management
	C	7	Motivation, enthusiasm, passion	Appropriate working behavior, professionalism skills	Respect for hierarchies, role boundaries, and responsibilities
	HS	5	Education, qualification, academic achievement	Communication skills (written/oral)	Social skills/people skills
	PT	3	Adaptability, flexibility skills	Accountability, responsibility	Teamwork
	SS	18	Technological, digital, social media skills	Creativity and innovation skills	Working autonomy skills
Middle *n* = 48	BK	8	Analytical skills	Human resources	
	C	18	Project management	Controlling skills	
	HS	4	Problem solving skills	Time management skills	
	PT	2	Event management		
	SS	16	Finance and administration		
Senior *n* = 38	BK	8	Strategic management and change management	Planning, organization, coordination skills	Motivation, enthusiasm, passion
	C	13	Political skills	Ability to deal with pressure/stress	Conflict management skills
	HS	2	Leadership skills	Accountability, responsibility	Critical thinking
	PT	1	Finance and administration	Decision-making skills	Networking
	SS	14	Human resources	Risk management	Teamwork

Note: Clusters: BK = Background knowledge; C = Competence; HS = Hard skills; PT = Personal traits; SS = Soft skills.

For all the managerial levels, the second focus group presented a high consensus agreement emerged (e.g., Entry = 4.6 ± 1.2 pt; Middle = 5.3 ± 0.9 pt; Senior = 5.6 ± 0.8 pt), substantiated by high Cronbach's alpha values (Entry = 0.933; Middle = 0.969; Senior = 0.966) for internal consistency (Supplementary Material S2 and Tables 5 and 6). For the Entry level, only three items scored < 4pt (e.g., Cross-cultural competence, Volunteer management, Human resources), whereas 10 items accounted for a score ≥ 5pt. For the Middle level, the majority of the items (*n* = 36) scored ≥ 5pts, with Teamwork, Appropriate working behavior/professionalism skills, Communication skills (written/oral), Leadership skills, Foreign languages, Information management, ability to deal with pressure/stress, Adaptability/flexibility skills, Effective interpersonal communication skills (internal/external), Social skills/people skills showing the highest consensus (range: 5.8–5.7pts.). Additionally, Senior level, the majority of items (*n* = 37) scored ≥ 5pt, with Strategic management and ability to manage change, sports knowledge, decision-making skills, appropriate working behavior/professionalism skills, risk management, foreign languages, accountability/responsibility, ethical behavior/integrity, planning/organization/coordination skills, controlling skills, problem-solving skills, leadership skills, ability to deal with pressure/stress, conflict management skills, critical thinking, networking, teamwork, and adaptability/flexibility skills items scoring the highest consensus (5.9–5.8 pts).

The transversality and specificity of the K/C/S items in relation to the managerial levels are reported in Tables 5 and 6, respectively. In particular, 19 items were included at all levels, especially representing the SS cluster (*n* = 11). Further, 10 items were included in both the Entry and Middle levels, whereas 16 items were present at the Middle and Senior levels. Finally, 12 items were included at one level only, with a prevalence of the Entry one (*n* = 7).

Table 5. Focus group 2. Presence of the K/C/S items in two or more managerial levels.

Major Cluster—Item	Managerial Levels								
	Entry (pt.)			Middle (pt.)			Senior (pt.)		
BK—Human resources	3.4	±	1.4	4.6	±	1.3	4.8	±	1.5
BK—Marketing	4.6	±	1.0	4.8	±	1.2	5.6	±	0.5
BK—Sports knowledge	5.0	±	0.9	5.1	±	1.0	5.9	±	0.3
C—Evaluation skills	4.2	±	1.0	5.1	±	0.8	5.5	±	1.4
C—Practical intelligence skills	4.5	±	1.3	5.2	±	0.7	5.6	±	0.9
HS—Communication skills (written/oral)	4.6	±	0.8	5.8	±	0.4	5.7	±	0.6
HS—Foreign languages	5.3	±	1.0	5.7	±	0.6	5.8	±	0.6
PT—Motivation/enthusiasm/passion	5.7	±	0.9	5.2	±	0.8	5.6	±	0.9
SS—Ability to deal with pressure/stress	4.5	±	0.9	5.7	±	0.5	5.8	±	0.6
SS—Accountability/responsibility	4.8	±	1.2	5.6	±	0.7	5.8	±	0.6
SS—Adaptability/flexibility skills	4.8	±	0.8	5.7	±	0.6	5.8	±	0.4
SS—Appropriate working behavior/professionalism skills	5.2	±	0.9	5.8	±	0.4	5.9	±	0.3
SS—Creativity and innovation skills	4.5	±	1.4	5.4	±	0.7	5.0	±	1.0
SS—Critical thinking	4.2	±	0.9	5.3	±	0.6	5.8	±	0.8
SS—Emotional and interpersonal intelligence skills	4.4	±	0.9	5.4	±	0.8	5.1	±	1.0
SS—Ethical behavior/integrity	4.6	±	0.9	5.5	±	0.8	5.8	±	0.4
SS—Networking	4.2	±	1.1	5.6	±	0.8	5.8	±	0.6
SS—Social skills/people skills	4.9	±	1.0	5.7	±	0.5	5.4	±	0.5
SS—Teamwork	5.5	±	1.0	5.8	±	0.4	5.8	±	0.6
BK—Education, qualification, academic achievement	5.0	±	1.3	5.5	±	0.9			
C—General work-related experience	4.6	±	1.4	5.2	±	0.9			
C—Knowledge transfer to practice skills	4.4	±	1.3	5.2	±	1.1			
C—Volunteer management	3.5	±	1.3	5.2	±	0.7			
HS—Information management	5.0	±	1.3	5.7	±	0.5			
HS—Research skills	4.7	±	1.5	5.3	±	0.6			
PT—Initiative/proactivity	5.3	±	0.9	5.2	±	0.6			
SS—Effective interpersonal communication skills	4.8	±	1.1	5.7	±	0.6			
SS—Time management skills	5.1	±	1.0	5.5	±	0.7			
SS—Working autonomy skills	4.8	±	1.0	5.2	±	0.8			
C—Goal orientation-setting skills	4.5	±	1.3				5.7	±	0.9
BK—Business and entrepreneurship				4.8	±	1.1	5.6	±	0.5
BK—Event management				4.9	±	1.3	5.6	±	0.5
BK—Finance and administration				4.9	±	1.1	5.7	±	0.6
BK—Legal knowledge and sports law				4.8	±	1.1	5.7	±	0.5
C—Analytical skills				4.9	±	1.2	5.6	±	1.4
C—Controlling skills				5.0	±	0.9	5.8	±	0.4
C—Decision making skills				5.2	±	0.8	5.9	±	0.3
C—Planning/organization/coordination skills				5.2	±	0.6	5.8	±	0.6
C—Problem solving skills				5.1	±	1.0	5.8	±	0.6
C—Project management				5.2	±	1.1	5.3	±	0.9
C—Risk management				5.0	±	0.8	5.8	±	0.4
C—Stakeholder management				4.8	±	0.8	5.7	±	0.9
C—Tasks and resources management				5.2	±	0.9	5.5	±	0.7
C—Transferable skills				4.8	±	0.9	5.4	±	0.9
SS—Conflict management skills				5.4	±	0.5	5.8	±	0.8
SS—Leadership skills				5.8	±	0.4	5.8	±	0.8

Note: data are expressed as mean and standard deviation of recorded agreement scores (pt.) from the Focus Group-2. Clusters: BK = Background knowledge; C = Competence; HS = Hard skills; PT = Personal traits; SS = Soft skills.

Table 6. Focus group 2. Presence of the K/C/S items in only one of the managerial levels.

Item	Level	Score (pt.)		
C—Cross-cultural competence	Entry	3.8	±	0.7
HS—Technological/digital/social media skills	Entry	4.7	±	1.0
PT—Learning (skills and will)	Entry	4.5	±	1.0
SS—Career awareness and planning skills	Entry	4.3	±	0.8
SS—Meetings management	Entry	4.5	±	1.3
SS—Personal management	Entry	4.2	±	1.2
SS—Respect of hierarchies, roles, and responsibilities	Entry	5.2	±	1.0
C—Facility/operations management	Middle	4.9	±	1.0
C—Fundraising and grant writing	Middle	4.8	±	1.1
C—Sponsorship management	Middle	4.7	±	1.0
BK—Strategic management and ability to manage change	Senior	5.9	±	0.3
SS—Political skills	Senior	5.5	±	0.9

Note: data are expressed as mean and standard deviation of recorded agreement scores (pt.) from the Focus Group-2. Clusters: BK = Background knowledge; C = Competence; HS = Hard skills; PT = Personal traits; SS = Soft skills.

3.3. Survey

3.3.1. Individual Items

Supplementary Material S3 presents the analysis of individual items' perceived relevance, possess, and need for training in relation to age and managerial level. For age, no difference emerged between the subgroups in relation to the perceived need for training. For possess, younger managers reported the highest values for effective interpersonal communication skills (Younger: 4.8 ± 0.4; Older: 4.3 ± 0.8; $p = 0.018$) and knowledge of sports history and philosophy (Younger: 4.1 ± 0.8; Older: 3.2 ± 1.3; $p = 0.018$), whereas older managers showed the highest values for Negotiation skills (Younger: 3.8 ± 1.4; Older: 4.8 ± 1.1; $p = 0.036$). For relevance, older managers showed the highest values for maturity (Younger: 4 ± 1.1; Older: 4.9 ± 0.9; $p = 0.043$) and critical thinking (Younger: 4.1 ± 1.1; Older: 4.9 ± 0.8; $p = 0.047$). Regarding the managerial level, no difference was found between the Middle and Senior subgroups. The Entry group showed no difference with respect to the other two subgroups, only for need for training. Regarding the possess, the Entry subgroup reported higher values for analytical skills (Entry: 5.2 ± 0.8; Middle: $4.3 \pm 0.$; $p = 0.031$), Leadership skills (Entry: 4.5 ± 0.5; Middle: 3.4 ± 1.2; $p = 0.048$), and meetings management (Entry: 4.7 ± 1.2; Middle: 3.6 ± 0.9; $p = 0.027$) with respect to their Middle-level counterparts. Furthermore, with respect to the Senior subgroup, the Entry managers showed a higher perceived relevance (Entry: 4.5 ± 0.9; Senior: 3.3 ± 1.0; $p = 0.034$) and possessed (Entry: 4.0 ± 1.2; Senior: 2.8 ± 0.7; $p = 0.021$) of Sports History and Philosophy.

The correlation between the relevance, possess, and need for training of the individual items are summarized in Table 7 and presented in Supplementary Material S4. Significant correlations emerged for 9 items between the R and P domains of items 6, 7, 14, 46, 52, 53, 54, 57, and 58, with coefficients ranging from 0.703 (item 52) to 0.836 (item 6). No correlation was found for NT.

3.3.2. Findings from the Analysis of Clusters Scores

No differences for age and managerial level emerged for the scores of the relevance, possess, and need for training (Table 8). In this case, SS and PT items have been clustered in a single Individual factor (IND). When considering the whole sample, the lowest scores for possess accounted for BK and HS, whereas the highest for IND. Whilst the highest need for training emerged for BK, the opposite was found for HS.

Table 7. Summary of significant correlations emerged between individual items' features (see also Supplementary Material S3).

Label	Items	Significant Correlations ($p \leq 0.01$)		
		R-P	**R-NT**	**P-NT**
Controlling skills	Item 6	0.836 *		
Cross-cultural competence	Item 7	0.714 *		
Foreign languages	Item 14	0.774 *		
Education, qualification, academic achievement	Item 46	0.772 *	NA	NA
Learning (skills and will)	Item 52	0.703 *	NA	NA
Motivation/enthusiasm/passion	Item 53	0.750 *	NA	NA
Personal management	Item 54	0.794 *	NA	NA
Sports knowledge	Item 57	0.744 *	NA	NA
Teamwork	Item 58	0.804 *	NA	NA

Note: * = significant correlation ($p \leq 0.01$); NA = no NT scores have been collected.

Table 8. Means and standard deviations of major clusters scores for perceived relevance, possess, and need for training in relation to age and managerial level of the participants.

Cluster		Overall			Age							Level					
					Younger			Older			Entry			Middle			Senior
BK	R	4.5	±	0.8	4.7	±	0.7	4.4	±	0.9	4.6	±	0.6	4.6	±	1.0	4.2	±	0.9
	P	3.7	±	0.9	4.0	±	0.9	3.6	±	0.9	3.9	±	1.0	3.6	±	0.8	3.8	±	0.8
	NT	4.8	±	0.9	4.8	±	0.9	4.7	±	1.0	4.9	±	1.1	4.6	±	0.9	4.8	±	0.7
C	R	4.7	±	0.8	4.7	±	0.8	4.6	±	0.8	4.8	±	0.8	4.7	±	0.7	4.5	±	0.9
	P	4.2	±	0.7	4.3	±	0.8	4.2	±	0.7	4.4	±	0.9	4.0	±	0.6	4.4	±	0.6
	NT	4.6	±	0.9	4.8	±	0.9	4.6	±	0.8	4.9	±	1.0	4.5	±	0.8	4.6	±	0.7
HS	R	4.5	±	0.9	4.5	±	0.9	4.5	±	1.0	4.3	±	0.7	4.8	±	1.0	4.5	±	1.1
	P	3.9	±	0.9	3.9	±	0.8	4.0	±	0.9	3.8	±	1.0	3.9	±	0.7	4.3	±	1.0
	NT	4.5	±	1.0	4.6	±	1.1	4.5	±	0.9	4.7	±	1.1	4.3	±	1.0	4.7	±	0.7
IND	R	4.4	±	0.8	4.2	±	1.0	4.6	±	0.7	4.3	±	1.1	4.6	±	0.6	4.4	±	0.7
	P	4.5	±	0.8	4.3	±	1.0	4.7	±	0.7	4.4	±	1.1	4.6	±	0.6	4.6	±	0.7
	NT	4.7	±	0.9	4.7	±	0.9	4.7	±	0.9	4.9	±	0.9	4.6	±	0.8	4.6	±	0.9

Note: data are expressed as mean and standard deviation of recorded agreement scores (pt.) from the Focus Group-2. Clusters: BK = Background knowledge; C = Competence; HS = Hard skills; IND = Individual sphere, including SS and PT. P = Possess; R = Relevance; NT = Need for training. Only items for which NT scores were collected were used to calculate composite clusters' scores.

Significant correlations between clusters are shown in Table 9. Coefficients ranged from 0.712 (C/P-BK/P) and 0.917 C/NT-BK/NT), with significant relationships emerging between all clusters of the NT domains. For BK, both R and P of BK resulted correlated with their respective domain in the C and HS clusters. A significant relation emerged between HS and C's R domain, and one intra-cluster correlation emerged for the IND cluster only (IND/P-R).

3.3.3. Bivariate Go-Zones

Figure 3 presents the graphic representation of the possess (y-axis) of K/C/S items and their relevance (x-axis), separated into four quadrants based on the interception of their mean scores. The top left quadrant (I) represents the highest perceived possess, with the lowest perceived relevance; the top right quadrant (II) represents high levels of both perceived relevance and possess; the bottom left quadrant (III) represents low levels of both perceived relevance and possess; and the bottom right quadrant (IV) represents the highest perceived relevance, with lowest perceived possess. In quadrant IV, 23 items were highlighted as the priorities for SM education, mostly representing the HS and C domains. A similar representation of items was found for quadrant II (23 items), mostly representing the IND (SS and PT/A) and C domains, and quadrant III (21 items), with

IND being mostly represented (11 items). Conversely, only three items (e.g., academic achievements, emotional and interpersonal intelligence, and working autonomy) were included in quadrant I.

Table 9. Correlations matrix in relation to the perceived relevance, possess, and need for training of items grouped in major clusters.

Variables		Variables											
		IND_R	IND_P	IND_NT	C_R	C_P	C_NT	HS_R	HS_P	HS_NT	BK_R	BK_P	BK_NT
IND_R	CC		0.873 **										
	p		0.000										
IND_NT	CC						0.844 **			0.755 **			0.816 **
	p						0.000			0.000			0.000
C_R	CC							0.733 **			0.830 **		
	p							0.000			0.000		
C_P	CC											0.712 **	
	p											0.000	
C_NT	CC									0.865 **			0.917 **
	p									0.000			0.000
HS_R	CC										0.774 **		
	p										0.000		
HS_P	CC											0.775 **	
	p											0.000	
HS_NT	CC												0.815 **
	p												0.000

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
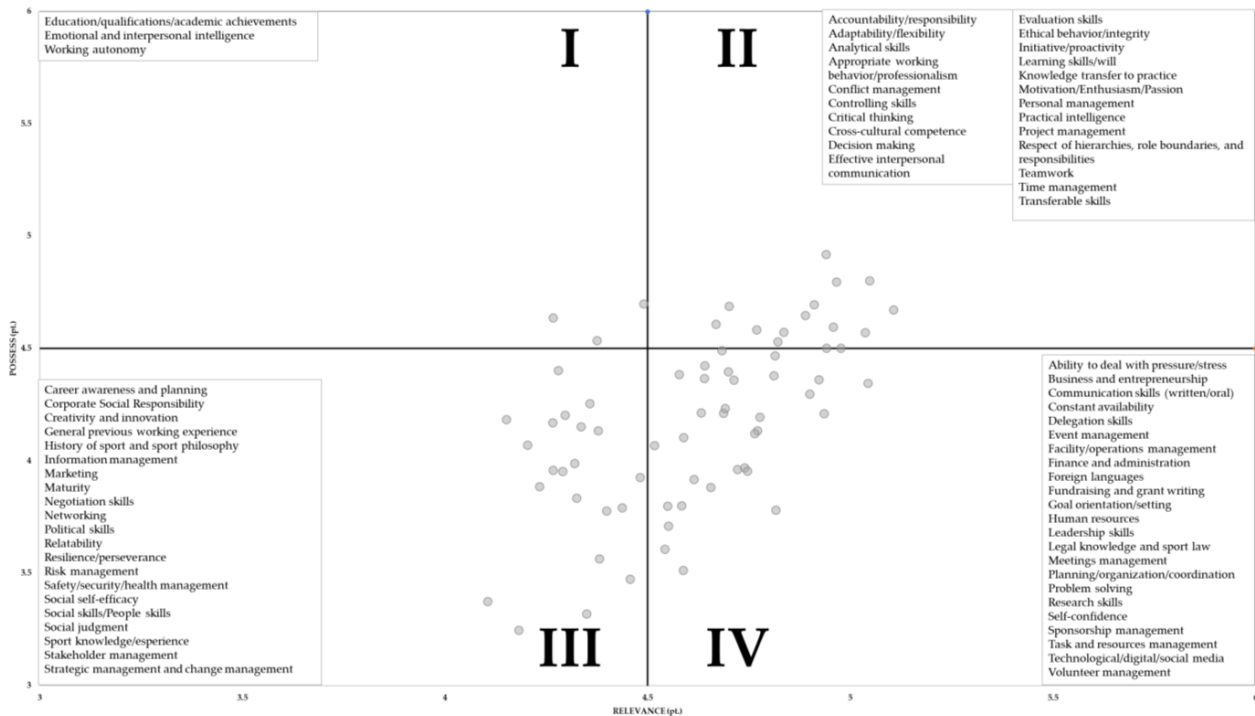
Figure 3. Go zones in relation to the perceived relevance and possess of SM K/C/S. **Note:** Quadrant (**I**): the highest perceived possess, and the lowest perceived relevance; Quadrant (**II**): high levels of both perceived relevance and possess; Quadrant (**III**): low levels of both perceived relevance and possess; Quadrant (**IV**): the highest perceived relevance, and the lowest perceived possess.

4. Discussion

The main objectives of the present study were to validate the developed SM K/C/S framework [7,8] by means of the views of potential end-users, and to assess sports managers' perceived relevance, possess, and need for training of the multi-domain items included in the model. The main findings generally showed good validity and internal consistency of the framework resulting in both the clustering and the sorting stages [47]. In particular, the high Cronbach's alpha coeffiencies emerged for both the clusters and managerial levels' item structures highlighted the relevance of previous findings [7,8] and a general link between research evidence and perceptions of participants in the present study in relation to the necessary components of an SM academic and/or vocational education. Furthermore, data sustained the multifaced nature of the SM field and the intertwined relationships between its different K/C/S domains, urging academic and vocational institutions to construct curricula based on the specific needs of managers in relation to their prospective, actual, and potential career advancements. Hence, future sports managers and current employees of sports organizations need not only solid theoretical knowledge [1,41] but also quality experiential learning [19,48,49] to practice competencies and skills crucial for employees' performance and productivity in the sports industry. In this respect, the developed and validated SM K/C/S framework captured the specific lack of possess and need for training of the sports managers sample involved in the present study, which would be addressed through a training program adjustment before the end of the New Miracle project. Therefore, the evaluation and monitoring of the students and/or attendees' possess and need for training of relevant SM K/C/S should be envisioned by academic and/or vocational service providers to meet both participants' training needs and to link the demands of the labor market to employees' preparedness [18,20,23,24,50].

Whilst the main aspects resulted in transversal among different managerial levels, specific needs emerged for the Entry, Middle, and Senior managers. These findings also advise sports managers to focus on specific knowledge gaps to be complemented through tailored educational programs for coping with their current professional level or adequately preparing to potential career transitions. Hence, a life-long learning SM education should be encouraged in sports managers at different career stages. In particular, academic and vocational education paths should encompass adapted, updated, and tailored training opportunities to complement, integrate, and refine the actual educational level of sports managers. In considering the perceived relevance and need for education of SM K/C/S, the generally lower level of perceived possess also confirms the need for a life-long learning approach in the SM profession. Therefore, the proposed SM K/C/S framework [7,8] could be considered a flexible and useful tool for guiding the implementation of academic and vocational paths of future and current sports managers in different settings.

Regarding the first research question, the participants in this study showed substantial awareness of the multifaceted nature of the SM field, assigning most of the K/C/S items to more than one cluster (e.g., BK, C, HS, SS, PT/A). This finding is supported by both the high consensus agreement and the good internal consistency of the clusters' structure [47]. In considering the dynamic nature of the sports labor market, the labeling of competencies and skills within static categories seems not realistic. Employees are asked to be theoretically prepared but also flexible and dynamic in identifying problems, effectively interacting with the environment and entourage, and activating their knowledge to formulate adequate solutions for problem-solving [18,19,51]. In line with the literature [18,19,24,26,27,51–55], in this study, the strong link between theoretical knowledge, practical know-how, and actual task implementation emerged, with the sports managers highlighting the need for practical, innovative, creative, and efficient performances in different tasks and activities in relation to specific environments of sports organizations, sports media, sports commercial, or policy sectors [22]. Formal and non-formal education should prepare sports managers for the contingent labor market demands [56], incorporating relevant and updated theoretical aspects [1,2,4] and stimulating students and trainees to acquire the necessary competencies and skills through different types of learning and teaching methodologies [23,25,51–54]

according to the European strategies on education and learning [30,55]. Internationalization of curricula and internship opportunities from inter-institutional cooperation between the sports industry and educational providers can ensure trainees the acquisition of the necessary know-how, which could enhance the employability of managers in the globalized sports context [17,25–27,53,57–59].

Regarding the managers' perceptions of different relevant K/C/S in relation to the three main managerial levels, the participative nature of the sorting generated both transversal and specific characteristics of SM K/C/S, substantiated by the high collective consensus agreement for the emerged managerial competency models and the excellent internal consistency. Whilst high motivation, integrity, professionalism, formal academic achievements, respect for hierarchies and roles, and soft and technical skills were required for Entry level managers [18,19,60], Senior managers were expected to show strategic management, managing change, decision-making, risk management, planning and control skills, problem and conflict solving, networking, and leadership skills [55,61–66]. Conversely, soft skills are central for all managerial levels to ensure working effectiveness because non-technical skills are highly valued in extremely competitive working environments, where most employees or candidates might possess comparable knowledge and qualifications [60]. Additionally, sports knowledge and experience are important for all the considered managerial levels, confirming the distinctiveness of the SM field with respect to other business domains [1]. This result should also be considered from a gender perspective because all the participants in the present study were women. In fact, the generally highest men's participation in sports as athletes, coaches, administrators, and fans leads to the assumption that men 'naturally' have a higher sports knowledge and are better qualified to be stronger leaders than women [67]. To counteract the traditional male hegemony characterizing sports governance, a deep knowledge of the sports field becomes even more relevant for aspirant women leaders and managers, who also suffer the gender stereotype of having no young children, being well educated, being ready for flexible schedules, have previous high-level job experiences, and behave 'properly' according to gendered norms [67,68]. Actually, sports organizations should evaluate the preparedness, efficiency, and productivity of their managers and encourage their professional qualification through a lifelong learning perspective, independently from gender [20,21,37,42,49,59,60,67–74]. In this respect, the developed SM K/C/S framework [7,8] could be a useful and valid tool for the assessment of actual knowledge and proficiency levels of managers and guide their further education for a perspective career. The framework could be useful also to foster a debate on SM curricula adjustments from educational and practitioner perspectives.

Regarding the third research question, sports managers perceived a lack of possess of several items, especially those belonging to the technical and knowledge spheres, such as sponsorship management, human resources, business and entrepreneurship, finance and administration, fundraising and grant writing, Information management, marketing, legal knowledge and sports law, research skills, risk management, safety/security/health management, stakeholder management, strategic management and ability to manage change, volunteer management, corporate social responsibility, history of sports and sports philosophy. Most of these aspects represent the foundation of the SM professional practice and training [1,2,41,74–77], traditionally embedded within formal and non-formal education. Additionally, leadership and political soft skills were perceived as relevant aspects that should be embedded in their vocational training [37,61,63,65,78–81]. In considering that the participants in this study voluntarily engaged in a non-formal SM educational course tailored to ameliorate their future professional prospects, considerable attention should be given to the knowledge gaps that they emphasized in relation to the different managerial levels to constrict sound educational programs based on attendees' specific career stage, educational background and training needs.

5. Conclusions

The present study contributed to enriching the existing knowledge in relation to relevant SM K/C/S and in fostering the debate in this dynamic research area. In particular, the validation of the developed SM K/C/S framework [7,8] with a sample of potential end-users (e.g., women sports managers) provided evidence-based information to foresee curricula adjustments and future research.

Linking the present findings with previous research carried out under the New Miracle project [7,8], several practical implications could be disclosed. First, SM education should be considered a lifelong learning process by both the sports industry's employees and employers. In particular, the present findings highlighted both main transversal and complementary K/C/S in relation to the different managerial levels. Furthermore, different operational settings and levels of professionalization of sports organizations should be taken into account by sports managers seeking to ameliorate their competence and prospective career advancement and/or mobility. Finally, different career stages and transitions, and situational and/or contextual contingency at the micro (individual), meso (organizational), macro (national context), and global (international context) levels represent powerful drivers of both employees' educational needs and employers' demands of qualified professionals. In this respect, tailored and flexible academic and/or vocational paths should be envisioned by educational service providers to align training needs with the educational offer.

The second practical implication pertains to the need for educational service providers to integrate and certify different types of learning (e.g., formal, non-formal, and informal) within SM curricula, which calls for updated and adapted pedagogical approaches. In fact, the present findings highlighted the intertwined relationships between the different SM competency domains, stressing the urgency to consider constructing solid theoretical knowledge in parallel with competencies and skills development in students/trainees, in line with the dynamic nature of this labor market sector. Furthermore, the centrality of soft skills within the sports industry should be considered in programs' implementation, calling for participative and interactive teaching/learning approaches and the involvement of companies and sports organizations to offer quality internship opportunities to SM students to facilitate their transition into the labor market.

The third practical implication pertains to the globalized nature of the SM field, with major sports events and business, entrepreneurship, and intrapreneurship-related activities spanning all over the globe. This aspect calls for educational service providers to consider the internationalization of curricula and to foster the mobility and interaction of students and trainees across national borders. Note that the European Commission plays a relevant role in this area through the co-financing of international projects in the field of SM (for example, the European project New Age of Sports Management, NASME; the strengthening of good governance in the European sports community by providing women with necessary competencies in order to support gender balance and equality in decision-making in sports structures, SUCCESS; the Miracle and New Miracle projects).

Although the present study fostered the debate in the SM competencies and skills areas, some limitations may have influenced the results, particularly related to the limited number of countries involved in the new Miracle project and the absence of men managers within the experimental sample. Thus, future research encompassing extensive data collection, including a gender representation of both men and women managers, different types of sports organizations, and national contexts, are strongly encouraged to further explore the impact of the SM K/C/S framework and its validity within different educational, professional, and national settings.

Appendix A

List of items included in the sport management knowledge, competencies and skills framework [7,8].

Label	Items
Political skills	Item 1
Analytical skills	Item 2
Business and entrepreneurship	Item 3
Communication skills (written/oral)	Item 4
Conflict management skills	Item 5
Controlling skills	Item 6
Cross-cultural competence	Item 7
Decision Making skills	Item 8
Effective interpersonal communication skills	Item 9
Evaluation skills	Item 10
Event management	Item 11
Facility/operations management	Item 12
Finance and administration	Item 13
Foreign languages	Item 14
Fundraising and grant writing	Item 15
Goal orientation-setting	Item 16
Human resources	Item 17
Information management	Item 18
Leadership skills	Item 19
Legal knowledge and sport law	Item 20
Marketing	Item 21
Meetings management	Item 22
Networking	Item 23
Planning/organization/coordination skills	Item 24
Project management	Item 25
Problem solving	Item 26

Label	Items
Research skills	Item 27
Risk management	Item 28
Safety/security/health management	Item 29
Social skills/People skills	Item 30
Sponsorship management	Item 31
Stakeholder management	Item 32
Strategic management and ability to manage change	Item 33
Tasks and resources management	Item 34
Technological/digital/social media skills	Item 35
Volunteer management	Item 36
Corporate Social Responsibility	Item 37
History of sport and sport philosophy	Item 38
Ability to deal with pressure/stress	Item 39
Accountability/responsibility	Item 40
Adaptability/flexibility skills	Item 41
Appropriate working behavior/professionalism	Item 42
Career awareness and planning	Item 43
Creativity and innovation	Item 44
Critical Thinking	Item 45
Education, qualification, academic achievement	Item 46
Emotional and interpersonal intelligence	Item 47
Ethical behavior/integrity	Item 48
General previous work-related experience	Item 49
Initiative/proactivity	Item 50
Knowledge transfer to practice	Item 51
Learning (skills and will)	Item 52
Motivation/enthusiasm/Passion	Item 53
Personal management	Item 54
Practical intelligence	Item 55
Respect of hierarchies, role boundaries, and responsibilities	Item 56
Sport participation/involvement/knowledge	Item 57
Teamwork	Item 58
Time management	Item 59
Transferable skills	Item 60
Working autonomy	Item 61
Constant availability	Item 62
Delegation skills	Item 63
Negotiation skills	Item 64
Maturity	Item 65
Relatability	Item 66
Resilience/perseverance	Item 67
Self-confidence	Item 68
Social judgment skills	Item 69
Social self-efficacy	Item 70

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