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Psychological Well-Being of Sports Managers: Differences Between Experienced and Future Managers and the Influence of Gender, Age, and Family Status

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ABSTRACT

Background & objective: This study pursued two primary objectives: (1) to compare multidimensional psychological well-being between experienced sports managers and future sports managers, and (2) to examine how gender, age, marital status, and parental status are associated with differences in psychological well-being among experienced sports managers.

Materials and methods: A total of 61 participants (aged 21–60 years; 40 male, 21 female) were enrolled, comprising 28 experienced sports managers (mean managerial experience = 7.57 years) and 33 future sports managers enrolled in Sports Management and Marketing programs. The Well-Being Assessment (Adult – 24 items), a validated instrument assessing eight well-being facets, was administered via an online questionnaire.

Results: Independent samples t-tests revealed significant group differences in Life Satisfaction and Life Evaluation ($t = 2.311$, $p = 0.024$, $d = 0.62$) and Financial Evaluation and Stability ($t = 3.993$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.03$), with experienced managers scoring higher. Mann–Whitney U tests among experienced managers indicated that female managers scored significantly higher than males on Character and Caring ($U = 29.5$, $p = 0.013$, $r = 0.61$) and Financial Evaluation and Stability ($U = 41.5$, $p = 0.031$, $r = 0.51$). Age, marital status, and parental status did not produce statistically significant differences in any well-being facet.

Conclusions: Career progression in sport management appears to consolidate life evaluation and perceived financial security without necessarily transforming eudaimonic dimensions such as meaning, character, or relational well-being. Gender emerged as the most salient sociodemographic correlate of psychological well-being in experienced sports managers, with female managers demonstrating higher prosocial orientation and perceived financial security. These findings highlight the importance of gender-sensitive professional development and organizational support strategies in sport management.

Keywords

sports management; psychological well-being; sports managers; gender differences; eudaimonic well-being; life satisfaction.

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INTRODUCTION

Global and Theoretical Context

Management and leadership occupy a pivotal role in the functioning and performance of sport organizations. The modern conceptualization of management derives from the verb 'to manage,' which in organizational contexts encompasses meanings such as 'to lead,' 'to control,' or 'to govern'. Classical management theory conceptualizes managerial work through a set of core functions. Henri Fayol, one of the early theorists of management in the twentieth century, proposed five basic

functions: planning, organizing, commanding, coordinating, and controlling (Pryor & Taneja, 2010). Subsequent scholars have refined this framework; for instance, Lloyd and Aho (2020) described four key functions—planning, organizing, leading, and controlling. In sport organizations, this complexity is further amplified by performance pressure, public visibility, and the dual need to attend to both athletic and organizational outcomes (Arnold et al., 2015; Hulme et al., 2019).

Within sport organizations, managers bear direct

responsibility for achieving strategic and operational objectives and serve as key integrators of human and material resources. Research has highlighted their role in shaping organizational value through effective deployment of the diversity, competence, and motivation of human resources (Flemming, 2016; Wujarso et al., 2021). Moreover, managers are expected not only to coordinate activities but also to support employees, foster a constructive organizational climate, and manage crises—both internal (e.g., conflicts between athletes or staff) and external (e.g., financial or reputational threats). This broader view of managerial work is consistent with functional approaches to management Lloyd & Aho (2020) and with classic analyses of managerial roles that highlight the leader and disturbance-handler roles as central to supporting staff and responding to crises (Yukl et al., 2019). In this context, managers in sport frequently serve as mediators, trainers, and spokespersons for their clubs or federations, assuming responsibility for communication with media, stakeholders, and the broader community.

Scholars have argued that effective sport managers require a broad set of general competences (e.g., knowledge of sport systems, basic management skills, digital literacy, foreign language proficiency, and a lifelong learning orientation) as well as specific competences (e.g., planning sport services, sport marketing and branding, financial management, crisis management, and media relations) (Sesinando et al., 2022; Wohlfart et al., 2021). In addition, leadership qualities—such as trust in one's team, articulating a clear vision, emotional self-control under pressure, openness to dissent, and encouragement of calculated risk-taking—are considered essential for successful leadership in sport organizations (Adair, 2007; Bhatti et al., 2012).

Critical Examination of Existing Literature

Given this complex role, sport managers are exposed to multiple stressors: high workloads, time pressure, financial constraints, performance expectations, public scrutiny, and the continuous need to balance the demands of athletes, staff, sponsors, and governing bodies (Răducan et al., 2014). Recent research has begun to examine burnout and sleep quality in sports managers, suggesting that chronic occupational stress may undermine both health and the capacity to lead effectively (Predoiu et al., 2024). Other investigations point to the importance of temperament, coping strategies, and emotional intelligence in sport managers, demonstrating how these psychological characteristics shape responses to stress and interpersonal challenges (Bencker et al., 2022; "Temperament and Emotional Intelligence in the Case of Sports Managers," 2021). Against this background, psychological well-being becomes a crucial topic. Psychological well-being refers to people's subjective experience of their mental states—encompassing pleasure, positive affect, life satisfaction, meaning, purpose, and self-acceptance—and to the extent to which they function optimally in personal and social domains (Dhanabhakya & Sarath, 2023). Contemporary frameworks view well-being as a multidimensional construct that integrates not only hedonic aspects (happiness, life satisfaction) but also eudaimonic aspects (meaning, personal growth, relationships, character, and contribution) (Stiefel et al., 2020). For sports managers specifically, life satisfaction and sense of meaning may be linked to long-term commitment to the profession; social support and relationships may buffer occupational stress; while perceived happiness may directly influence motivation, decision-making, and leadership behavior (Tait et al., 2020). Research in

sport organizations further suggests that employees' psychological well-being and psychological resources are associated with job performance, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions (Loghmani et al., 2022). Regarding gender and well-being in sport leadership, the extant literature reveals a nuanced picture. Female professionals in sport and related sectors have been found to display strong relational and prosocial orientations, which are theoretically central to eudaimonic well-being (Avner et al., 2025). However, women in sport management also report experiencing lower job satisfaction or greater strain than male counterparts in contexts characterized by persistent gender inequities and work-family conflict (Stokowski et al., 2018). Regarding age-related trajectories, existing research suggests that well-being does not follow a simple linear pattern across the lifespan but is moderated by life-stage factors and career-related resources (Diener et al., 2018). Marital and parental status have likewise been examined as potential moderators of life satisfaction, with longitudinal evidence suggesting that marriage is associated with short-term improvements in subjective well-being followed by adaptation to previous baseline levels (Mammen et al., 2009).

Identification of Research Gaps

Despite growing scholarly interest in sport managers' professional challenges, empirical research that directly examines their multidimensional psychological well-being remains scarce. Most existing studies in the sport sector focus on job satisfaction, organizational climate, stress, coping strategies, emotional intelligence, or quality of life in specific samples (González-Bravo et al., 2022), and rarely provide systematic comparisons between experienced and future sports managers. Furthermore, the influence of sociodemographic characteristics—particularly gender, age, marital status, and parental status—on well-being within managerial populations in sport has not been systematically investigated using validated, multidimensional measures. This gap is particularly notable given the growing emphasis on sustainable talent management and personnel well-being in sport organizations.

Rationale for the Research

Understanding the psychological well-being of sports managers—both those with established careers and those at the threshold of entering the profession—is critical for several reasons. Empirical evidence linking sport employees' well-being to retention, organizational commitment, and performance underscores the organizational relevance of this question (Kim et al., 2018; Mondt et al., 2024; Swanson et al., 2022). Moreover, identifying sociodemographic correlates of well-being may inform targeted interventions and mentoring programs designed to support at-risk subgroups. The present study therefore adopts a multidimensional framework—the Well-Being Assessment (Adult – 24 items)—to provide a comprehensive portrait of psychological well-being in two distinct populations of sports managers, thereby addressing a recognized empirical gap.

Objectives and Hypotheses

This study pursues two main objectives: (1) to describe and compare the facets of psychological well-being in experienced sports managers and future sports managers, and (2) to examine whether gender, age, marital status, and parental status are associated with well-being differences among experienced sports managers. The following hypotheses were formulated:

H₁: There are significant differences in psychological well-being between experienced sports managers and future sports

managers.

H₂: Gender and age significantly influence the perceived psychological well-being of experienced sports managers.

H₃: Marital status and parental status significantly influence psychological well-being among experienced sports managers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Participants

The study included 61 participants (40 men, 21 women; aged 21–60 years), comprising 28 experienced sports managers and 33 future sports managers. Experienced managers had 3 months to 24 years of managerial experience ($M = 7.57$ years) and were employed in public or private sport organizations. Eligibility required participants to hold a formal managerial position for at least three months, consistent with previous research on sports managers (Duclos-Bastías et al., 2021). Future managers were undergraduate or master's students enrolled in Sports Management and Marketing programs in Bucharest, Romania.

Study Organization and Instrument

Data were collected between November 2024 and April 2025 via an online questionnaire administered through Google Forms (Google LLC, Mountain View, CA, United States). Prior to participation, all respondents received detailed information regarding the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and the full confidentiality of their responses. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced. The instrument used was the Well-Being Assessment (Adult – 24 items), a harmonized measure developed collaboratively by the 100 Million Healthier Lives initiative and the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University (Stiefel et al., 2020). This instrument assesses eight facets of psychological well-being: (1) Life Satisfaction and Life Evaluation, (2) Physical Health, Mental Health, and Physical Function, (3) Meaning and Purpose, (4) Character and Caring, (5) Relationships, (6) Community and Social Support, (7) Financial Evaluation and Stability, and (8) Affect. The instrument comprises 24 items (three per facet). Respondents rate each item on 0–10 response scales (e.g., 0 = Worst possible to 10 = Best possible; 0 = Not at all satisfied to 10 = Completely satisfied; 0 = Strongly disagree to 10 = Strongly agree). Three items are reverse-scored. For each facet, the three corresponding items are summed to yield subscale scores ranging from 0 to 30, with higher scores indicating more favorable well-being. Example items include: “On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?” (Life Satisfaction and Life Evaluation); “In general, how

would you rate your physical health?” (Physical Health, Mental Health, and Physical Function); “I have a sense of direction and purpose in life.” (Meaning and Purpose).

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using Jamovi (Version 2.7; The Jamovi Project, 2025). Data analysis proceeded in several stages. First, descriptive statistics (M , SD , minimum, maximum) were computed for each of the eight well-being facets separately for experienced and future sports managers. Distributional properties were assessed by examining skewness and kurtosis; values generally fell within the ± 1.96 interval, supporting the assumption of approximate normality (George & Mallery, 2010), with the exception of Character and Caring in experienced managers, for which variance remained homogeneous. To test H₁, independent-samples t -tests were used to compare the two groups on each well-being facet. Homogeneity of variances was assessed using Levene's test; when $p > 0.05$, the homogeneity condition was considered met (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2017). Effect sizes were quantified using Cohen's d , interpreted according to conventional benchmarks: 0.2 = small, 0.5 = moderate, 0.8 = large (Predoiu, 2020). To test H₂ and H₃ among experienced sports managers, Mann–Whitney U tests were used due to the relatively small subgroup sample sizes. Comparisons were conducted for: gender (men vs. women), age group (23–40 years vs. 41–60 years), marital status (married vs. unmarried), and parental status (with vs. without children). Effect sizes for U tests were computed as r and interpreted using (Cohen, 1988) benchmarks: $r \approx 0.1$ = small, $r \approx 0.3$ = medium, $r \approx 0.5$ = large. The significance threshold was set at $p < 0.05$. Effect sizes were reported alongside p -values to convey the substantive importance of statistically significant results (Lakens, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (“World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki,” 2013). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation. Data were anonymized and securely stored, with access restricted to the research team. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection.

RESULTS

Group Differences: Experienced vs. Future Sports Managers (H₁)

Independent-samples t -tests revealed that Life Satisfaction and Life Evaluation differed significantly between the two groups ($t = 2.311$, $p = 0.024$, $d = 0.62$; Table 1). Experienced sports managers reported higher life satisfaction ($M = 25.2$, $SD = 3.04$) than future managers ($M = 23.6$, $SD = 2.50$). A large and significant difference was also observed for Financial Evaluation and Stability ($t = 3.993$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.03$), with experienced managers reporting substantially higher perceived financial security ($M = 22.9$, $SD = 4.15$) compared to future managers (M

$= 17.5$, $SD = 5.96$). For the remaining six well-being facets—Physical Health, Mental Health, and Physical Function; Meaning and Purpose; Character and Caring; Relationships; Community and Social Support; and Affect—group differences did not attain statistical significance (all $p > 0.05$), although mean scores consistently tended to be slightly higher in the experienced managers group. These results provide partial support for H₁.

Table 1. Independent-samples t -test results for psychological well-being facets by group (experienced vs. future sports managers).

Well-Being Facet	Levene's F	Levene's p	t	p	Cohen's d
Life Satisfaction and Life Evaluation	1.969	0.166	2.311	0.024*	0.62
Physical Health, Mental Health, and Physical Function	1.896	0.174	0.579	0.565	—
Meaning and Purpose	0.101	0.752	1.579	0.120	—

Character and Caring	4.429	0.060	1.287	0.203	—
Relationships	1.525	0.222	1.268	0.210	—
Community and Social Support	6.031	0.017	1.007	0.318	—
Financial Evaluation and Stability	5.691	0.020	3.993	< .001***	1.03
Affect	0.773	0.383	1.695	0.095	—

Note. Levene's test assesses homogeneity of variances; t-values refer to Student's t-test for independent samples; Cohen's d effect sizes are reported for statistically significant comparisons only. * $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Gender and Age Differences Among Experienced Sports Managers (H₂)

Descriptive analyses indicated that female experienced managers had slightly higher mean scores than male managers across all eight well-being facets. Mann–Whitney U tests revealed two statistically significant gender differences (Table 2). Female managers scored significantly higher than male managers on Character and Caring ($U = 29.5$, $p = 0.013$, $r = 0.61$; $M_{2\text{female}} = 26.9$, $SD = 1.81$; $M_{2\text{male}} = 24.1$, $SD = 3.03$) and on Financial Evaluation and Stability ($U = 41.5$, $p = 0.031$, $r = 0.51$; $M_{2\text{female}} = 25.3$, $SD = 2.18$; $M_{2\text{male}} = 21.7$, $SD = 4.39$). According to (Cohen, 1988) benchmarks, both effect

sizes are large, indicating meaningful gender-related differences in prosocial orientation and perceived financial security among experienced sports managers. No significant age-group differences were detected across the eight well-being facets. However, a marginally significant trend emerged for Character and Caring ($U = 48.5$, $p = 0.051$, $r = 0.45$), with the younger group (23–40 years) scoring higher ($M = 26.1$, $SD = 1.77$) than the older group (41–60 years; $M = 23.2$, $SD = 3.63$). These findings provide only limited support for H₂: gender appears to be a more salient moderator of psychological well-being than age in the investigated sample.

Table 2. Mann–Whitney U test results for psychological well-being among experienced sports managers, by gender and age group.

Well-Being Facet	Variable	Comparison	U	p	Effect Size (r)
Life Satisfaction and Life Evaluation	Gender	Women vs. men	48.5	0.071	–0.43
Physical Health, Mental Health, and Physical Function	Gender	Women vs. men	82.0	0.882	–0.04
Meaning and Purpose	Gender	Women vs. men	67.5	0.384	–0.21
Character and Caring	Gender	Women vs. men	29.5	0.013*	–0.61
Relationships	Gender	Women vs. men	56.0	0.205	–0.30
Community and Social Support	Gender	Women vs. men	54.0	0.168	–0.33
Financial Evaluation and Stability	Gender	Women vs. men	41.5	0.031*	–0.51
Affect	Gender	Women vs. men	82.5	0.901	–0.03
Life Satisfaction and Life Evaluation	Age group	23–40 vs. 41–60	93.0	0.907	–0.03
Physical Health, Mental Health, and Physical Function	Age group	23–40 vs. 41–60	95.0	0.981	0.01
Meaning and Purpose	Age group	23–40 vs. 41–60	92.0	0.869	–0.04
Character and Caring	Age group	23–40 vs. 41–60	48.5	0.051†	–0.45
Relationships	Age group	23–40 vs. 41–60	82.0	0.785	0.07
Community and Social Support	Age group	23–40 vs. 41–60	64.0	0.208	–0.29
Financial Evaluation and Stability	Age group	23–40 vs. 41–60	88.5	0.744	–0.07
Affect	Age group	23–40 vs. 41–60	91.0	0.833	–0.05

Note. Mann–Whitney U tests were conducted among experienced sports managers ($N = 28$). r = effect size. * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.06$ (marginal).

Marital and Parental Status Differences (H₃)

Analyses examining marital status (married vs. unmarried) among experienced sports managers yielded no statistically significant differences in any of the eight well-being facets (all $p > 0.05$; Table 3). Nonetheless, nuanced descriptive tendencies were observed: married managers reported marginally higher scores for Life Satisfaction and Life Evaluation ($M_{2\text{married}} = 25.8$, $SD = 3.21$ vs. $M_{2\text{unmarried}} = 24.5$, $SD = 2.79$) and for Physical Health, Mental Health, and Physical Function ($M_{2\text{married}} = 25.1$, $SD = 3.79$ vs. $M_{2\text{unmarried}} = 24.5$, $SD = 3.80$). Similarly, analyses of parental status (with vs. without

children) did not yield statistically significant differences (all $p > 0.05$; Table 3). Descriptively, managers without children reported slightly higher financial stability ($M_{2\text{without children}} = 23.7$, $SD = 3.84$ vs. $M_{2\text{with children}} = 21.9$, $SD = 4.42$), while managers with children reported slightly higher scores on the Meaning and Purpose facet ($M_{2\text{with children}} = 26.9$, $SD = 3.04$ vs. $M_{2\text{without children}} = 26.1$, $SD = 3.11$), suggesting that parenthood may modestly enhance perceptions of life purpose. Overall, these results do not support H₃, indicating that marital and parental status are not major determinants of psychological well-being in this sample of experienced sports managers.

Table 3. Mann–Whitney U test results for psychological well-being among experienced sports managers, by marital and parental status.

Well-Being Facet	Variable	Comparison	U	p	Effect Size (r)
Life Satisfaction and Life Evaluation	Marital status	Married vs. unmarried	79.0	0.404	0.19
Physical Health, Mental Health, and Physical Function	Marital status	Married vs. unmarried	87.5	0.660	0.10
Meaning and Purpose	Marital status	Married vs. unmarried	93.0	0.852	–0.04
Character and Caring	Marital status	Married vs. unmarried	62.5	0.169	–0.31
Relationships	Marital status	Married vs. unmarried	81.5	0.695	–0.09
Community and Social Support	Marital status	Married vs. unmarried	74.5	0.432	–0.18
Financial Evaluation and Stability	Marital status	Married vs. unmarried	70.0	0.211	–0.28
Affect	Marital status	Married vs. unmarried	80.5	0.444	0.17
Life Satisfaction and Life Evaluation	Parental status	With vs. without children	93.5	0.871	–0.04
Physical Health, Mental Health, and Physical Function	Parental status	With vs. without children	92.0	0.817	–0.05
Meaning and Purpose	Parental status	With vs. without children	90.5	0.762	0.07
Character and Caring	Parental status	With vs. without children	79.0	0.572	–0.13
Relationships	Parental status	With vs. without children	89.5	0.961	–0.01
Community and Social Support	Parental status	With vs. without children	78.0	0.570	–0.13
Financial Evaluation and Stability	Parental status	With vs. without children	69.5	0.202	–0.28
Affect	Parental status	With vs. without children	91.0	0.781	–0.06

Note. Mann–Whitney U tests were conducted among experienced sports managers ($N = 28$). r = effect size. No statistically significant differences were found (all $p > 0.05$).

DISCUSSION

Interpreting the Research Outcomes

The present study examined psychological well-being in experienced sports managers and future sports managers using a validated, multidimensional instrument. Overall, the findings indicated that experienced managers reported significantly higher scores on Life Satisfaction and Life Evaluation and on Financial Evaluation and Stability compared to future managers, whereas differences in the remaining six well-being facets were not statistically significant. These findings provide partial support for H_1 and are consistent with the notion that career progression in sport management may consolidate certain aspects of well-being—particularly global life evaluation and perceived financial security—without necessarily transforming deeper eudaimonic dimensions such as meaning, character, or relationships.

Evaluation in Relation to Antecedent Studies

The higher life satisfaction and financial stability observed among experienced sports managers align partially with prior research on job satisfaction and well-being in the sport sector. Empirical studies on sports managers and sport employees generally suggest moderate levels of job satisfaction, influenced by working conditions, organizational support, and career prospects (Dixon & Warner, 2010; Felipe et al., 2018; Grimaldi et al., 2018). Research with sports managers has also shown that satisfaction levels are not uniformly high, reflecting challenges linked to resources, recognition, and role overload (McLeod et al., 2022). The present findings add nuance by focusing on distinct facets of psychological well-being: the higher life satisfaction and financial security reported by experienced managers suggest that those who remain in managerial roles over time may develop adaptive coping strategies, secure more stable positions, or self-select into environments that better align with their values and competencies. This interpretation is broadly consistent with evidence that sport employees' well-being is shaped by the interaction among job characteristics, leadership, and organizational climate (Kim et al., 2018; Sport Leadership and Wellbeing, 2024; Swanson et al., 2022), for example, demonstrated that servant leadership and teamwork predict multidimensional employee well-being in sport organizations, including life satisfaction and physical health.

The absence of significant differences between experienced and future sports managers on facets such as Meaning and Purpose, Relationships, Community and Social Support, Character and Caring, and Affect is noteworthy. This pattern suggests that students enrolled in sport management and marketing programs may already possess relatively high levels of meaning, relational engagement, and positive affect, possibly reflecting vocational interest and intrinsic motivation for working in sport. This observation resonates with self-determination theory research in sport, which demonstrates that autonomous motivation is closely associated with higher subjective well-being and positive functioning (Antunes et al., 2024; Kouali et al., 2021).

The significant gender-related differences observed in Character and Caring and Financial Evaluation and Stability suggest that female sports managers in the present sample may embody a particularly prosocial leadership orientation and simultaneously perceive higher financial security compared to their male counterparts. These findings resonate with evidence that female professionals in sport and related sectors often display strong relational and prosocial orientations central to

eudaimonic well-being (Pérez-Rivases et al., 2017). The results stand in partial contrast, however, to some research suggesting that women in sport management may experience lower job satisfaction or greater strain than men in contexts where gender inequities and work-family conflict persist (Stokowski et al., 2018). The absence of significant age-related differences in psychological well-being is consistent with broader evidence that age per se exerts a modest independent effect on well-being when occupational and financial factors are considered (Diener et al., 2018). The marginally significant trend for Character and Caring—with younger managers scoring slightly higher—may reflect life-stage dynamics in which earlier career phases are associated with heightened social engagement and prosocial motivation. The absence of significant marital and parental status effects aligns with longitudinal research demonstrating that marriage is associated with short-term well-being increases followed by adaptation to prior baseline levels (Lucas & Clark, 2006). The subtle descriptive trends observed—married managers reporting slightly higher life satisfaction, managers with children reporting slightly higher meaning, and managers without children reporting slightly higher financial stability—are theoretically coherent and merit replication in larger samples.

Implications of the Discoveries

The findings carry several practical implications for sport organizations and professional development programs. First, the lower life satisfaction and financial security reported by future managers underscores the importance of providing career mentoring, transparent promotion pathways, and structured financial guidance to early-career professionals in sport management. Second, the gender differences observed in prosocial orientation and perceived financial security suggest that organizations should invest in gender-sensitive leadership development initiatives that recognize and leverage the distinctive strengths of female managers. Third, the comparable levels of meaning, relationships, and affect between experienced and future managers point to the potential benefits of intentionally cultivating vocational identity, purpose, and relational well-being from the earliest stages of sport management education. For sport organizations, the broader findings highlight the importance of promoting financial stability, transparent career pathways, and supportive leadership cultures, all of which have been linked to retention, organizational commitment, and performance (Anderski et al., 2023; Næss, 2021; Zhang & Koshmanova, 2021).

Limitations of the Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size—particularly for subgroup analyses (e.g., gender, age, marital, and parental status among experienced managers)—was relatively small, reducing statistical power and increasing the risk of Type II errors and unstable effect size estimates (Cohen, 1988; Field, 2018). Future research should recruit larger, more diverse samples spanning different national sport systems and competitive levels. Second, all data were collected via self-report at a single time point, precluding causal inference and potentially introducing common method variance and social desirability bias (Predoiu et al., 2022; Teixidor-Batlle et al., 2021). Longitudinal and mixed-method designs—including daily diary studies or qualitative interviews—would provide richer insight into how psychological well-being fluctuates over time and relates to specific stressors, organizational events, and

career transitions (Frost et al., 2024; Norris et al., 2017). Third, while the Well-Being Assessment (Adult – 24 items) offers a useful multidimensional framework, it may not capture all aspects of well-being particularly salient in sport management, such as work-life balance, former athlete or coach identity, and exposure to public scrutiny or media pressure. The contextual particularities of the Romanian national sport system also limit the generalizability of findings to other cultural or organizational settings. Future research could extend these findings by linking managers' psychological well-being scores to independent assessments of leadership behaviors (e.g., transformational or servant leadership) and to outcomes such as staff satisfaction, team cohesion, and organizational commitment.

Comparison with International Evidence

The predominance of open play observed in the present study broadly agrees with international performance-analysis literature. Studies of elite football in Europe and at major international tournaments consistently indicate that goals are generated through multiple attacking routes but that open-play actions constitute an important, often dominant, component of goal production (Boluda et al., 2021; Gouveia et al., 2023; Li & Zhao, 2021). In the 2018 FIFA World Cup, for example, Boluda et al. (2021) examined 94 goals and demonstrated that open-play scoring patterns were influenced by pitch zones and the number of players involved, emphasizing the contextual and spatial nature of goal production rather than treating all open-play goals as tactically equivalent.

The present findings extend this evidence into an underrepresented population: elite Asian youth national-team competitions. Li and Zhao (2021), analyzing ten seasons across Europe's five major leagues, identified significant differences among leagues in several scoring patterns, including corner kicks, penalties, counterattacks, and throw-ins. Their findings are particularly relevant because they demonstrate that goal-scoring mechanisms are influenced by the competitive environment and tactical culture rather than representing a universal football pattern. The current AFC results similarly show that the dominant mechanism may remain open play while the relative contribution of individual actions varies across competitive contexts and age categories.

The importance of crosses in the present study is also consistent with contemporary international evidence. Gouveia et al. (2023), comparing La Liga and the English Premier League, demonstrated that goal-scoring patterns differed according to both the location and characteristics of attacking actions, reinforcing the idea that wide-area attacks and deliveries should be interpreted within their spatial and tactical context rather than as isolated technical events. The relatively high contribution of crosses in both AFC competitions therefore appears consistent with a broader international pattern, while the stronger relative contribution of forward passes at U-20 level suggests that youth teams may increasingly combine width with vertical progression as tactical organization develops. The age-related interpretation is also supported indirectly by comparative international youth research. Ju et al. (2025) compared U-17, U-20, and senior teams using optical tracking across FIFA competitions and demonstrated that competitive level is associated with differences in technical, tactical, and physical match performance. This evidence supports the broader interpretation that youth-to-senior development involves changes in match behavior, but it does not establish that any single tactical variable follows a simple linear progression with age. Similarly, research on elite Japanese youth players documented age-

related variation in technical match performance across U13–U18, highlighting the importance of developmental stage when interpreting competitive behavior (Goto & Seward, 2019).

There are also important differences between this study and previous international studies. Sarmento et al. (2016), for example, examined 30 matches from the Spanish elite futsal league and found that positional attacks and set pieces accounted for substantial portions of goal production. Futsal differs from outdoor football in pitch dimensions, number of players, restart frequency, tactical constraints, and possession structure; therefore, direct numerical comparison is inappropriate, although the study reinforces the methodological value of classifying the attacking sequence preceding a goal. Likewise, Boluda et al. (2021) incorporated spatial pitch zones and the number of players involved, whereas the present study intentionally focused on the final attacking action. Differences in measurement and analytical granularity can therefore explain why apparently similar studies produce different distributions.

Population and contextual factors are equally important. European domestic leagues involve repeated encounters over a long season, whereas the AFC U-17 and U-20 Asian Cups are short international tournaments involving national teams with different football cultures, preparation periods, squad composition, and tactical philosophies. Cultural and league-specific differences have previously been proposed as potential explanations for variation in scoring patterns across countries (Li & Zhao, 2021). The current results should therefore be interpreted as evidence of goal-scoring patterns within AFC youth tournament contexts, rather than as evidence of a universal Asian youth football model.

Concepts such as intervention dose, training duration, and implementation fidelity are less directly applicable because this investigation was not an intervention study. However, differences in tournament format, match exposure, competitive stage, tactical preparation, and coaching philosophy may function as important contextual modifiers. These factors were not measured in the present analysis and therefore cannot be used to explain causal differences between U-17 and U-20 teams.

Theoretical, Methodological, and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the findings support a view of goal scoring as a multilevel and context-dependent process rather than a single technical outcome. The distinction between open play and set play provides a useful macro-level classification, but the variation within these categories demonstrates that the phase of play alone does not capture the full complexity of attacking behavior. The greater distribution of U-20 goals across crosses, forward passes, and cut-backs suggests that developmental progression may involve increasing flexibility in selecting attacking solutions rather than simply increasing the frequency of one preferred action.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of a complete census of goal events within defined competitions. All 194 goals from the selected tournaments were included, thereby avoiding participant sampling within those competitions. The operational definitions also provide a reproducible framework for classifying goals according to the final attacking action. However, future studies should move beyond single-event notation toward sequential and spatial analysis. The systematic-review literature on football match analysis has emphasized the growing sophistication of descriptive, comparative, and predictive approaches to performance analysis (Sarmento et al.,

2014).

Practically, the findings support differentiated rather than identical tactical priorities across age groups. For U-17 teams, set-play preparation should receive structured attention, particularly penalty-related processes and defensive prevention of dangerous restart situations. For U-20 teams, training may place greater emphasis on integrating crosses, forward passes, and cut-backs into variable attacking sequences. However, these recommendations should be treated as evidence-informed priorities, not prescriptive rules, because the present study measured goals rather than the underlying number or quality of attacking opportunities.

Strengths and Limitations

A major strength is the use of a total-population approach in two major AFC youth tournaments, with all recorded goals included rather than a sample of matches or players. This minimizes selection bias within the defined tournaments. The use of official AFC reports and competition statistics also provides a transparent data source, while ambiguous cases were cross-referenced against official descriptions. Nevertheless, several limitations constrain interpretation. First, the descriptive observational design does not permit causal inference or formal assessment of statistical significance. Second, the unit of analysis was the goal event, meaning that teams and matches contributed unequally depending on scoring frequency. Third, the coding framework captured only the final intentional attacking action immediately preceding the goal. It therefore excludes potentially important preceding possession sequences, defensive organization, pressure, transition context, player positioning, and spatial-temporal interactions. Fourth, potential information and classification bias cannot be completely excluded. Although ambiguous cases were cross-referenced with official AFC descriptions, the manuscript does not report independent double-coding, inter-rater reliability, coder blinding, or an adjudication procedure involving multiple analysts. These omissions create uncertainty regarding measurement reproducibility. Future studies should report training of coders, blinded independent coding, Cohen's kappa or comparable reliability coefficients, and a prespecified coding manual. Fifth, potentially important confounders were

unavailable, including scoreline, match status, tournament stage, opponent strength, playing style, possession context, substitutions, defensive formation, and match location. Missing-data handling is also not explicitly reported. Although all official goals were included, the completeness and consistency of the underlying match records were not independently audited. Sixth, there was no longitudinal follow-up; therefore, the observed U-17/U-20 differences cannot demonstrate developmental change within the same players. Finally, no confidence intervals or uncertainty estimates were reported, and the multiple descriptive categories may encourage overinterpretation of small frequency differences. The findings should consequently be considered descriptive evidence with limited transferability, particularly beyond AFC tournaments.

Future Research

Future research should extend the present framework through multicountry and longitudinal designs. Studies should compare AFC competitions with FIFA U-17/U-20 World Cups and youth competitions from Europe, South America, Africa, and CONCACAF to determine whether the observed Asian patterns are competition-specific or part of broader international trends. Longitudinal research following cohorts from U-17 to U-20 and subsequently to senior football would be especially valuable for distinguishing developmental effects from team, federation, and tournament effects.

Future studies should also investigate mechanisms and moderators, including player maturation, tactical formation, coaching philosophy, national football culture, tournament stage, and opponent strength. Replication across multiple editions of AFC competitions would reduce the influence of tournament-specific variation. Finally, intervention studies should test whether age-specific training based on observed goal-scoring patterns improves attacking efficiency, with sufficiently long follow-up to determine retention and transfer to competition. Where implementation decisions have substantial resource implications, cost-effectiveness and implementation-fidelity analyses should be incorporated so that tactical recommendations can be evaluated not only for performance benefit but also for feasibility and sustainability.

CONCLUSION

The present study explored psychological well-being among experienced sports managers and future sports managers using a comprehensive, multidimensional framework encompassing life evaluation, health, meaning, character, relationships, community support, financial stability, and affect. The findings converge on three principal conclusions. First, career progression in sport management appears to consolidate specific dimensions of psychological well-being—particularly global life satisfaction and perceived financial security—while leaving deeper eudaimonic dimensions such as meaning, character, and relational well-being broadly comparable between experienced and future managers. This pattern suggests that future sports managers already enter the profession with a robust foundation of eudaimonic resources, which is encouraging for the vitality of sport management as a vocation, but also underscores the need for structural conditions—particularly financial stability and clear career advancement opportunities—that allow experienced managers to sustain high well-being over time. Second, gender emerged as a more salient sociodemographic correlate of psychological

well-being than age, marital status, or parental status among experienced managers. Female sports managers reported higher levels of prosocial engagement (Character and Caring) and perceived financial security, pointing to the potential importance of gendered pathways in the development of people-oriented leadership and perceived organizational security in sport organizations. Although based on a relatively small sample, this pattern warrants systematic investigation in future research with larger and more diverse samples. Third, marital and parental status were not major determinants of psychological well-being in experienced sports managers, a finding consistent with broader evidence from happiness and well-being research indicating that relationship and family variables exert modest independent effects once occupational and financial factors are accounted for.

From a practical standpoint, sport organizations and educational programs in sport management are encouraged to (1) implement structured mentoring and financial guidance for early-career managers, (2) develop gender-sensitive leadership programs that recognize the distinctive strengths of female

managers, and (3) cultivate vocational identity and relational well-being from the earliest stages of sport management training. Future investigations should adopt longitudinal designs, expand sample diversity across national contexts, and integrate

objective performance indicators alongside self-reported well-being measures to establish a more complete understanding of the determinants and consequences of psychological well-being in sport management.

DECLARATIONS

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Formal ethical approval was sought and obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection. All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with applicable ethical standards and institutional requirements.

Consent to Participate

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation in the study. Participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable. No identifiable individual data, personal images, or other identifying information are presented in this study.

Author Contributions (CRediT)

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Luca Mihai Grozav: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

Gabriela Szabo: Investigation, Data Curation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

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Davide de Gennaro: Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

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All authors approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and confidentiality considerations but may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to applicable ethical and institutional restrictions.

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