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To cite this article: Brent D. Oja & Géraldine Zeimers (13 Feb 2025): The paradoxical nature of passion among sport employees: exploring the intersection of harmony and obsession in the sport industry, European Sport Management Quarterly, DOI: [10.1080/16184742.2025.2461053](https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2025.2461053)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2025.2461053>



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Published online: 13 Feb 2025.



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The paradoxical nature of passion among sport employees: exploring the intersection of harmony and obsession in the sport industry

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ABSTRACT

Research Question: This study is focused on passion among sport employees and asks the research question, ‘How do harmonious and obsessive passion interact to influence sport employees’ motivation to work?’ The study uses Self-Determination Theory and qualitative data to offer a deeper understanding of sport employee work passion.

Research Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted to generate meanings pertaining to passion in the sport industry. In total, 17 full-time sport employees from North America participated in the study.

Results and Findings: By analyzing the experiences of participants we were able to identify the composition of sport work passion. Specifically, passion is conceptualized as a continuum including both harmonious and obsessive passion. The study informs how passion is paradoxical in that it can result in both positive and negative outcomes for sport employees and organizations. These negative outcomes are proposed to be amplified when obsessive passion becomes dominant. This study positions passion as a nuanced construct because of its potential to support generative outcomes for sport employees (e.g. positive emotional states and productivity) and organizations (e.g. retention of employees), but conversely, passion, if left unregulated, may produce negative outcomes such as mental exhaustion.

Implications: The results of the study provide a better understanding of the complexities of passion in the sport workplace by describing the confluence of motivation and emotions among sport employees, and the challenges for sport managers in utilizing their employees’ passion.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 March 2024

Accepted 25 January 2025

KEYWORDS

Organizational behavior; emotions; human resource management; motivation; identification

The paradoxical nature of passion among sport employees

Dating back to Stewart and Smith’s (1999) writings about the power of emotions, researchers and practitioners have invoked passion to explain why sport individuals’ – ranging

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from employees, fans, coaches, athletes, and volunteers – behaviors defy reason-based explanations, such as an unwavering belief in a dream season and an uncommon intensity of engagement. During the 2022 FIFA World Cup, the Football Unites the World Campaign used the word ‘passion’ to illustrate the power of football to bring people together and the emotional attachment to the sport. Furthermore, emotions and passion are also relevant for sport employees. Todd and Kent (2009) argued ‘the emotional significance of group membership to sport employees yields benefits’ (p. 186), and later Gammelsæter (2021) specifically linked sport employees’ motivations and passion.

We argue examining the outcomes of sport’s inherent emotional intensity on the management of organizations is complex and challenging as well as in need of further investigation given the relative dearth of research concerning emotions among sport employees (e.g. Lee & Chelladurai, 2018; Swanson & Kent, 2015, 2017; Todd & Harris, 2009; Todd & Kent, 2009; Zeimers & Shilbury, 2022). To this point, scholars have largely focused instead on general applications of emotions in the sport industry. Studies have revealed that working in the sport industry has been notorious for employees driven by their desire and joy for working in sport and willingness to pursue their vocation at all costs leading to unhealthy job commitment levels like workaholism (Taylor et al., 2019) and burnout (Lee & Chelladurai, 2018). Shaped by a culture of ‘win at all costs’, sport’s unique setting has contributed to creating a perpetual environment of unhealthy expectations and behaviors (Huml et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2019).

Despite the widespread, and sometimes colloquial, reference to passion, its composition, intensity and implications have not been systematically studied in the sport management literature (Zeimers & Shilbury, 2022) and specifically in the sport workplace. Scholars have only recently begun to study the specific influence of motivation-based passion in the sport workplace (e.g. Anagnostopoulos et al., 2016; Kim, Oja, et al., 2023; Swanson & Kent, 2017). One of the more remarkable findings in the literature was from Swanson and Kent (2017) where obsessive passion had positive relationships with commitment, job satisfaction, and job involvement among professional sport employees. This result was unexpected given that obsessive passion was presumed to have predominantly detrimental consequences. Hence, the need for a deeper understanding of passion in the sport workplace is evident given these seemingly contradictory results in comparison to non-sport workplaces (e.g. Curran et al., 2015; Moeller et al., 2015; Pollack et al., 2020).

We seek to explore the potential paradoxical influence of passion in the sport workplace. Passion could reinforce unhealthy behaviors (e.g. over-engagement), and yet play a central role in generating positive outcomes among sport employees. Considering sport employees are expected to over-engage at work (e.g. Huml et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2019), ascertaining how employees regulate the intensity of their passion for working in sport may enable improved sport employee retention. Thus, we posit that one’s passion for working in sport is a multifaceted motivational condition that could contribute to providing the self-regulation needed to withstand workaholism and eventually burnout (Birkeland et al., 2018; Vallerand et al., 2003), but also constitutes a controlled condition whereby sport employees are unable to resist their passion for working in sport, which may potentially lead to burnout (i.e. a psychological state resulting from prolonged exposure to job-related stress; Birkeland et al., 2018) and then turnover (Taylor et al., 2019). We seek to elucidate the complexity of passion among sport employees given its apparent influence on both detrimental (e.g. burnout; Curran et al., 2015; Lee & Chelladurai, 2018; Pollack

et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2019) and desirable (e.g. well-being; Curran et al., 2015; Pollack et al., 2020; Winand et al., 2023; Zeimers et al., 2022) outcomes.

In light of the seemingly paradoxical nature of passion in the sport workplace, this study contributes to the body of knowledge by unpacking the complexities of sport employee work passion. Our understanding of passion is built on the principles of self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002) because passion is a motivational construct (Vallerand, 2008). Furthermore, we have chosen to utilize and critically analyze Vallerand et al.'s (2003) dualistic framework of passion. The dual model of passion is prevalent in sport management literature (e.g. Kim, Oja, et al., 2023; Schuetz et al., 2022; Swanson & Kent, 2017), congruent with passion in a work setting (Pollack et al., 2020), and has notable limitations that require further examination (i.e. the prevailing dichotomous perspective of two exclusive constructs as opposed to harmonious passion being a precursor to obsessive passion; Moeller et al., 2015; Wang & Yang, 2007; Zeimers et al., 2022). Furthermore, the use of qualitative methods offers a unique perspective by gathering nuanced, deep, and rich accounts of individuals' experiences (e.g. *how* sport employees regulate the intensity of their passion and its consequences), which contrasts the predominant quantitative focus on passion among sport employees (e.g. Kim, Oja, et al., 2023; Swanson & Kent, 2017).

Literature review

Passion at work

Central to the current study is the construct of work passion, defined as 'an individual's emotional and persistent state of desire based on cognitive and affective work appraisals' (Perrewé et al., 2014, p. 146). Its core premise proposes that passion for work provides employees with the perseverance and drive to achieve work goals and sustain positive feelings from work (Pollack et al., 2020). Work passion literature in sport management has been dominated by the dualistic model of passion (i.e. Vallerand et al., 2003). This form of passion is viewed as a strong inclination toward an activity that people like, that they find important and identify with, and in which they invest significant time and energy (Vallerand et al., 2003). This model considers that passion for work not only includes an affective component (strong liking or love for work) but also an internalization component (work is internalized into a person's identity; Pollack et al., 2020). The internalization process can be autonomous or controlled, which eventually leads to two forms of work passion: harmonious (associated with autonomous internalization; adaptive) and obsessive (associated with controlled internalization; maladaptive). Harmonious passion (HP) is commonly viewed as the more desirable form of passion. Extant studies have provided evidence of the positive consequences of HP on employees like positive emotions and well-being (see Curran et al., 2015; Pollack et al., 2020). Conversely, obsessive passion (OP) has largely been found to produce negative outcomes among employees like loss of control, negative emotions and ill-being (Curran et al., 2015; Pollack et al., 2020). Those with OP experience a strong desire to partake in a given activity (e.g. work or leisure) and love the activity to a degree that they struggle to remove themselves, but the consistent engagement with the activity can eventually lead to burnout (Curran et al., 2015; Moeller et al., 2015; Pollack et al., 2020; Vallerand et al., 2003).

While the dualistic model emphasizes the contrast between HP and OP, scholars (e.g. Moeller et al., 2015; Wang & Yang, 2007; Zeimers et al., 2022) have argued that these forms of passion should not necessarily be viewed as a dichotomy but rather along a continuum, which challenges the common view that these forms of passion are experienced separately (Vallerand et al., 2003). Moeller et al. (2015) put forth that individuals experience both HP and OP in the aggregate. These scholars found that some individuals experience high HP and high OP, while others may experience low HP and low OP. They concluded that this may occur because motives to engage in an activity develop and/or change over time (e.g. HP becoming more obsessive). The implication of this work is that, as Moeller et al. put it, ‘these findings do not support that a high level of HP is a generally desirable experience, as it often comes accompanied by high levels of OP’ (2015, p. 144). In other words, HP can be viewed as a requirement of OP (Wang & Yang, 2007), which signals an integration of both forms of passion and that OP should not be viewed as a sole harbinger of maladaptive behaviors but rather that HP and OP can work in tandem to produce negative outcomes such as burnout (Moeller et al., 2015).

Passion at work in the sport industry

Sport work passion has received attention with studies exploring the benefits of passion in diverse work settings and positions such as employees in charitable foundations (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2016), paid personnel in municipal sport organizations (Papadimitriou et al., 2017) or paid personnel in professional sport franchises (Swanson & Kent, 2017) and collegiate sport organizations (Schuetz et al., 2022). Anagnostopoulos et al. (2016) is a notable study that examined several antecedents of passion such as the type of work activity, demographic variables (gender, age, education and organizational size), employment position and previous job experience. Their results showed that a low level of obsessive passion was influenced by employees’ experience in the industry and level of management positions. Scholars in sport management have also studied the positive outcomes of passion influencing workplace attitudes and behavior (e.g. Kim, Oja, et al., 2023; Kim, Zvosec, et al., 2023; Oja et al., 2019; Papadimitriou et al., 2017; Schuetz et al., 2022; Swanson & Kent, 2017). Yet, many of these advances have relied upon Vallerand et al.’s (2003) dualistic model of passion. Given that scholars (e.g. Moeller et al., 2015; Wang & Yang, 2007) have argued that a purely dichotomous conceptualization of passion is overly simplified, and Swanson and Kent’s (2017) finding that OP led to positive outcomes, there is a lack of knowledge in sport management literature pertaining to the nuance of how passion is experienced by sport employees. Ergo, this study engages with that nuance to examine how the intensity and duration of work passion among sport employees change and the resulting influence on outcomes of work passion.

One’s identity also plays a central role in developing passion. Curran et al. (2015) and Vallerand et al. (2003) explained that passion emerges when activities become self-defining and thus part of one’s identity. That is, passion is dependent upon a specific activity (e.g. working in sport) and cannot be experienced through ‘anything and everything.’ Rather, passion results from engaging in activities that are personally valued and meaningful. Sport employees’ identities may be distinctively aligned with sport (Oja et al., 2015; Swanson & Kent, 2015; Todd & Kent, 2009). Oja et al. (2020, 2023) regarded sport employees’ identities as a combination of a collective enhancement from team/

organization success and having an affinity for sport. The affinity for sport dimension, a representation of similarity between group and individual based on a mutual love for sport and competition, underscores how sport is a deeply ingrained concept that plays a central role in how sport employees view themselves (Oja et al., 2020). Sport employees have elaborated on their affinity for sport by stressing the fulfillment and joy they acquire from working in sport (Oja et al., 2023). This identification (i.e. affinity for sport) enables one's passion for working in sport, as it represents how the activities associated with working in sport become self-defining, which creates the motivation and passion to partake in such activities (Curran et al., 2015; Vallerand et al., 2003).

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in self-determination theory (SDT). The theory prioritizes human growth by postulating that individuals strive to develop a better sense of self, and as a result are likely to experience a higher sense of well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2002). According to the theory, we are motivated by controlled (i.e. forced) or autonomous (i.e. free action) stimuli, although the latter is a stronger mechanism to produce growth-based outcomes such as psychological well-being (Deci et al., 2017). A critical element of the theory is one's ability to act autonomously and seek opportunities for growth by engaging in activities that are personally meaningful. Participating in meaningful activities is a stimulant for personal development and growth because they afford the opportunity for employees to align their identities with their behaviors (Deci et al., 2017). Indeed, passion is exemplified by significant hours of engagement (Curran et al., 2015; Pollack et al., 2020; Vallerand et al., 2003) and is a motivational experience (Curran et al., 2015). Consequently, SDT helps to explain how work passion occurs in that those who are motivated by their work are more likely to be passionate about their work because they recognize the symmetry between their sense of self and the meaning of their work (Deci et al., 2017; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2002; Vallerand, 2008). Moreover, SDT provides a theoretical base to better understand the intersection of HP and OP among sport employees.

Methodology

This study was crafted with the philosophical beliefs of the constructivism/interpretivism paradigm (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). Accordingly, we followed the ontology of relativism (i.e. multiple interpretations of reality) and a transactional/subjectivist epistemology (i.e. knowledge is co-created based on interactions between researchers and participants and past experiences; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In line with these beliefs, we used a phenomenological methodology within the framework of hermeneutics (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) to evaluate the phenomenon of passion in sport workplaces. A phenomenological approach is appropriate as it enables the development of meanings regarding what is yet to be sufficiently understood (i.e. passion in the sport workplace; Munhall, 2007). More specifically, phenomenology supports the affirmations of and challenges to norms (van Manen, 1990), which lends itself to examining the previously established dichotomous view of passion. To examine the motivational experiences of sport employees, the researchers used Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology (Laverty,

2003), which contends that prior knowledge of a phenomenon is inescapable, and its utilization adds valuable nuance (Crotty, 1998). Furthermore, hermeneutic phenomenology consists of a description of a phenomenon and the researchers' interpretation of the meanings offered by the participants (van Manen, 1990). In this way, the researchers co-constructed the meaning of passion in the sport workplace with the participants.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather detailed narratives of how sport employees experienced passion in their workplaces (Kvale, 1996). In total, 17 full-time sport employees were interviewed to sufficiently interpret their lived experiences within sport workplaces (Creswell, 2013). Interviews were conducted once Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted. The semi-structured interview format enabled follow-up questions that sparked a conversational tone between interviewer and interviewee. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were transcribed upon completion with personal identifiers removed. Data collection was stopped based on an interpretive judgement that the purpose of the study had been fulfilled (Braun & Clarke, 2021a) and when adequate 'experientially rich accounts ... of powerful experiential examples or anecdotes' (p. 353) had been collected (van Manen, 2016).

Participants

Participants were selected with purposeful and snowball sampling techniques. The researchers purposefully selected seven known participants based on their status as full-time sport employees and affiliation with various entities detailed below. These participants were also asked to provide contact information for other individuals who met the qualification standards for the study (i.e. snowball sampling). To protect the anonymity of participants, their demographics are provided in aggregate (Morse, 2008). Participants worked in various departments of sport organizations (e.g. event management, sales, compliance, human resources and marketing). Among the 17 participants, all worked for their current organization for at least five years, with some participants in the early stages of their careers and others near retirement, six were female and all participants worked in the American sport setting (nine in the collegiate setting and eight in professional leagues), and 15 different sport organizations were represented. Seven participants were considered insiders (i.e. previously known to the researchers; participants 1,2,4,6,7,8,9) and the remaining ten were outsiders or unknown to the researchers. Including both insiders and outsiders is advantageous as insiders provide additional rapport and depth, and outsiders help to avoid favoritism by serving as a 'checking mechanism' (Taylor, 2011, p. 15).

Instrument

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with the use of an interview guide that consisted of thematic (related to theory) and dynamic questions (e.g. probing questions; Kvale, 1996). The concepts of HP and OP were discussed with participants before and during the interviews to provide them with a general background. Thematic questions within the interview guide included: 'Do you consider yourself passionate about your work?', 'Does

your level of passion for your job resemble an obsession or is it more harmonious or neither? How so?,' 'What is your life like during and outside of your sport's season?,' and 'Is your mood influenced by the teams' performances? What about by your coworkers? Please explain.' These questions used the tenets of SDT and passion theory (i.e. HP and OP) to engender a comprehensive understanding of the experience of passion, participants' own views of HP and OP and the manifestation of passion via its outcomes. The thematic questions facilitated dynamic follow-up questions that helped the researchers gather thick and rich descriptions of participants' emotional experiences in the sport workplace.

Researcher positionality

Author One is a former sport employee and has relevant past work experiences that supported the 'critical representation of ourselves within our research' (Misener & Doherty, 2009, p. 466). Author One used self-reflexivity to gain a nuanced understanding of the meanings participants placed on their emotional and motivational experiences in the sport workplace (Rich & Misener, 2017). Moreover, Author One's use of self-reflexivity enabled their voice throughout the study, which supported the credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Kerwin & Hoeber, 2015). Author One's prior experience with emotions and motivations in the sport workplace also aided the interpretation of the participants' experiences (van Manen, 1990).

Trustworthiness

In line with our ontological and epistemological views, the trustworthiness of this study followed a relativist approach, which runs counter to commonly used practices that are more closely aligned with positivist views (Burke, 2017). Thus, we utilized Tracy's (2010) guidelines and recommendations for ensuring quality qualitative research within relativist frameworks, which includes criteria such as (a) presenting a worthy topic, as well as demonstrating (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) methodological coherence and (h) following ethical guidelines. This paper is a worthy topic given it addresses the critical issue of how sport employees' motivations and passion are experienced. We offer rich rigor with our data collection and analysis procedures as well as a detailed description of the theoretical constructs in the study. Sincerity is supported by our acknowledgement of Author One's positionality and self-reflexivity. Credibility was enhanced with thick descriptions and tacit knowledge gathered from the interviews. Resonance can be found in our detailed description of the phenomenon, which enables transferability and comparisons with different contexts. We propose a significant contribution by exploring the nuance of passion among sport employees and how it has both positive and negative outcomes. Methodological coherence is demonstrated with our methods that align with our philosophical beliefs. Lastly, we strictly followed IRB ethical guidelines.

Data analysis

This study utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c) reflexive thematic analysis to explore sport employees' passion in the sport workplace. In

accordance with thematic analysis, both deductive and inductive perspectives were utilized (Braun & Clarke, 2012), although the study used a primarily inductive approach by developing codes and themes from the raw data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The deductive element of the process was a product of the thematic interview questions (Kvale, 1996) as they reflected previously established theories concerning passion (e.g. HP and OP).

Reflexive thematic analysis is 'a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79) and relies on the subjective and active interpretations of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This flexible method calls for continuous and repeated use of the various phases to identify and interpret the meaning of themes from the data. In line with our philosophical beliefs, this analysis is not meant to evoke notions of 'truth' but rather a subjective interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021c). As part of this procedure, the authors engaged and familiarized themselves with the transcribed interviews with multiple readings. We generated an initial set of codes based on our engagement with the data (e.g. wins and losses affect emotions, passion prevents burnout, poor working conditions are 'worth it'), and we revisited the data and revised the codes (e.g. winning teams mean happier workplaces, passion for working in sport promotes anti-social behaviors, and working in sport provides fulfillment). The codes were grouped into initial or candidate themes based on central organizing concepts (e.g. the utility of emotions in the sport workplace and the changing experiences of passionate sport employees). These initial themes were reviewed and the relationships between codes and themes as well as the overall data set were assessed with the principles of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity to ensure the final themes had meaningful coherence and clear and identifiable distinctions (e.g. exploring divergent passion experiences in the first theme, the prioritization of passion in the second theme, and the challenges of controlling the intensity of passion in the third theme). We also selected 'vivid, compelling extract examples' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87) to highlight the nature of the themes and to prepare the final report.

Results

Sport employee work passion's multiple facets

Participants' experiences with passion fluctuated depending on the circumstances of day-to-day activities and interactions and whether or not the teams they were responsible for assisting were in their competition season. Participant 14, when describing how they experienced passion throughout the year, explained that they could lessen the intensity of their passion,

Once I hit the offseason, I can kind of turn an off switch on, where I can punch a clock and work 8 to 5 and turn things off when I am not here. But in those high-volume months, my life pretty much revolves around this place.

As exemplified by Participant 14, when the job demanded significant investment, participants were able to use their passion to provide significant efforts. Yet, participants were able to scale back their engagement with work when the job did not require as much dedication.

Working in sport also meant compartmentalizing passion after wins and losses. For instance, wins helped to bring employees together. Participant 9 noted how colleagues in the workplace affected their own experience: 'Everybody is happy. Even the body

language walking around the office [is improved]. When you win, a lot of that stress is gone.' Winning also made for a safer and more pleasant work experience. Participant 12 clarified,

The overall aura of the office is good when we're in first or second place. Things are happier overall. I would say it's definitely a better place to work when you're not in last place. My life is so much better when everyone is happy, the vibes in the office are good, management is happy. There's no tension, people aren't stressed.

These circumstances impacted participants' passion for working in sport because performing work activities with co-workers in a safe environment allowed them to enjoy each other's company. Collectively, participants' passion was supported by opportunities to have numerous interactions with co-workers and personally meaningful experiences that facilitated a love for activities pertaining to working in sport. These anecdotes inform that participants were able to freely engage with their passion when they were able to surround themselves with supportive co-workers in a positive environment.

Passion was also impacted by challenges in the sport working environment. Participant 4 explained their experiences after difficult losses and how it was difficult to engage with their passion and instead strictly focused on completing work tasks,

You could just tell some [employees] didn't really want to be there anymore; they did what they needed to do. I could definitely tell there was a shift in energy, more of 'let's get this over with'.

Team losses complicated interactions with coaches as they were more likely to be on edge given their relationship between winning and their job security. Participant 1 remarked, 'If you lost a game, you would want to be nowhere near that coaching staff.' These circumstances made it challenging to engage in one's passion for working in sport because participants would avoid personal interactions, which harmed their ability to connect with other members of the organization.

The results within the first theme inform not only that sport employees' work passion is multifaceted in that participants felt the intensity of their passion for working in sport change based on different circumstances. More so, the results also point to how these changes to the intensity of one's passion occur. When sport employees were able to engage in positive aspects of working in sport, such as being a part of a winning organization, this led to an environment that intensified employees' passion for working in sport. Yet, difficult losses had the opposite effect by abating the intensity of their passion for working in sport. This result is instructive as it offers affirmation of passion being a dynamic construct with contrasting experiences depending on the degree of intensity the participants could engage with their passion. Moreover, these results demonstrate that one's work-related passions are impacted by the environment.

Decisions leading to prioritizing work

Participants felt a strong passion for working in sport. Participant 13 referred to their passion for working in sport as their '55th chromosome' and that they 'have one of the coolest jobs in America. I don't make a lot of money, but I love what I do.' This passion was powerful in that it helped participants get through their grueling work schedules as described by Participant 15, 'You're working 80 hours a week, every single week of the season and you're exhausted and it's miserable, but as soon as you get to gameday,

it's all worth it.' Moreover, passion was viewed as critical to survive workplace challenges as exemplified by Participant 14,

Anybody that works in sport has to have some sort of passion ... I think any job you do [in sport] you have to be passionate about it, because otherwise the daily responsibilities of your job can really wear you down. So, if you are not passionate about it, it just becomes another job you are going to get worn out doing.

Thus, having a strong passion was sometimes viewed as a positive resource for sport employees.

However, having such a strong passion for working in sport came with significant repercussions for participants. Participants' engagement with their passion for their work led to going above and beyond their official work duties because of their innate enjoyment of being involved with sport. Some participants' passion for working in sport resulted in difficult choices when they worked beyond their set hours. At one level was Participant 15 who had to decide where to sleep when they voluntarily found themselves at work late at night,

I've contemplated sleeping here some nights. When you're here Friday night, you have a Saturday game and you'd have to be here on Saturday at six thirty in the morning and you don't leave work until 10 or 11. You're like, well why am I going home? I should just stay here.

Those participants who chose to remain at work beyond set work hours often did so because their work was aligned with their passion. Other participants offered more overt examples of how they decided to dedicate more time to work than required. These participants prioritized their work over other interests. Notably, this prioritization of their passion for work included a willingness to quickly respond to the changing needs of their sport organizations. Participant 14 exemplified how some participants changed their schedules as needed and thus prioritized their work over their personal life,

Sport is not a 9 to 5 job. Things come up on the fly ... things happen quickly and if you can't quickly adapt to change, you won't survive. I think I've just adapted to the change and realized that from April to August my life revolves around the [team].

However, participants recognized that prioritization of work could have adverse consequences, but it was still difficult to extricate themselves from this 'obsessive' degree of passion. Participant 10 detailed how working in sport is self-driven and how they used to prioritize their work by engaging in their passion for sport and also acknowledged the danger of doing so,

A lot of times in my career I've lived at the stadium because I didn't want to fail. I always want to be on top of things, and sometimes it could be an obsession. I think the older you get its more of a balance. It's great to be passionate at work, but you also need time with your family. I've seen a lot of people obsessed with work and it unfortunately affected their family life. [When I was younger] I was obsessed and always worked.

Participants' prioritization of work came at a cost to their social lives, but it was also difficult for some to restrain their passion and involvement with their sport organization. This theme describes how engaging in one's passion for working in sport can result in a prioritization of work over personal priorities and importantly denotes how this process

occurs by identifying that the prioritization is a consequence of having a strong passion and enjoyment for working in sport.

The complexities of controlling passion

Although having a strong passion for working in sport was viewed as an important resource, the previous theme identified how such a degree of passion could produce outcomes that were reflective of a prioritization of work over personal interests (e.g. time with family or friends). However, participants were also able to control their passion for working in sport. Participant 3 recognized their passion for working in sport as a lifestyle but also noted the importance of balance, 'It's really a lifestyle that connects to my top interests in life, but you have to balance the personal and professional the best you can and roll them together to have a good lifestyle.' Being able to control one's passion was also advantageous for Participant 14 who detailed how they could use their passion to stave off burnout,

We work a lot of hours for not a lot of money and it's easy to get burnt out, if you can't find something you can cling on to become passionate about. For me, it's the emotion behind the game. In the season, I find myself getting less burnt out even though I'm working way more hours. Whereas, in the offseason, our offseason is so long, it drags on. It's easier to dwell on [it], 'man I work so many hours during the season, and I'm so burnt out'.

This result indicates how passion can be used to avoid burnout by tapping into the enjoyment they receive from working in sport and the struggle to avoid feelings of burnout when the link to sport was not direct (i.e. sport competitions not occurring). In this way, having a passion for working in sport could shield participants from the exhaustion of working extended hours. This makes passion a formidable motivational construct as it helped participants resist the stress and significant work demands of working in sport and retain a positive motivational inclination to continue to work in sport. Interestingly, this dynamic was not as powerful during the doldrums of the 'off season' where the effects of having a passion for sport were not as prevalent, which informs that the degree of passion's intensity had contrasting impacts on participants.

Yet, the ability to withdraw from work responsibilities was not a simplistic process. Participants felt compelled to remain engaged in their work responsibilities and disassociating during off-peak seasons or when on vacation required intentional efforts. Participant 15 explained their process,

I kind of always have to be on. I would say it's more of a passion, just because you want it to be perfect. I think it's more of a passion than an obsession for sure. Just because I try to separate work from my personal life and try not to be working all of the time. In the off-season on the weekends, it's my time not working, or not answering emails and looking at my phone when I go on vacation. Obviously, it's hard and I'm always working because those things are always coming up. But that's what you get into when you're working in sports. It's not nine to five, five days a week. You're working seven days a week. It's not set in stone of when your hours are, definitely in the off season it changes a little bit. But you never know what's going to come up. So, I kind of am always immersed in it. But I think it's more of a passion than obsession.

In this passage, the participant acknowledged the difficulty in remaining in control (i.e. always having to be on) and recognized the importance they placed on 'their time' during

the weekends of the off-season. Participant 14, who noted the fluctuation of the intensity of their passion in the first theme, went into greater depth concerning their degree of control over their passion for working in sport,

I think I have a strong work ethic, so I come to work at a certain time, and I stay until the end of the game because I know that there are things that have to be done. But I wouldn't call it an obsession. I think I fall somewhere in the middle of like 'not being motivated/doing bare minimum' and being obsessed in like, 'ok, I have to get there at this exact time.' Honestly maybe in the season it is an obsession ... in the offseason, I just think I have a strong work ethic. But during the season ... I think I might be slightly obsessed.

Participant 14's experiences symbolize how passion in the sport industry is complex and is not static, but that different demands of the profession have contrasting implications for one's engagement with their passion. They also detail how the process of controlling one's passion for working in sport is difficult but achievable. For Participant 11, the process of controlling or managing their passion took time to master as they described going from being obsessed and working constantly to having a more harmonious passion after changing positions.

Now it's a harmony. I got burnt out. Then this job opened up and I got down here and focused on the human capital side of things and it really just completely changed and three years later I'm as passionate as I've ever been. I had no life when I was at my last place. Now three years later, I'm engaged, have a really good outside life and its good.

As evidenced by the experiences of participants, passion could be regulated and controlled but this took practice to adequately prevent negative outcomes associated with obsessive passion.

In sum, elements of participants' work passion were paradoxical. Their passion helped participants manage long and difficult sport seasons, but it also created the potential for a prioritization of working in sport because doing so meant engaging with their passion for sport. This cycle made it difficult for participants to remove themselves from work and make themselves more available for other social responsibilities and personal engagements but served the labor-intensive needs of sport organizations and nurtured participants' passion for working in sport. For those participants who were able to control their passion for working in sport, this process took time to develop.

Discussion

Based on the results, we offer the following propositions for further examination.

Proposition 1 (P1): sport employees experience passion along a continuum of harmony and obsession

Participants detailed how their work passion was derived from a genuine enjoyment for sport but there was an additional distinction in that the degree to which some participants were able to regulate their passion for working in sport varied during the off- and in-seasons. Broadly, participants had experiences akin to both HP and OP. These experiences included a strong enjoyment for working in sport and, at times, feeling in control of how often this engagement occurred (i.e. HP; Pollack et al., 2020).

However, there were other instances where the degree of control was not realized as evidenced by outcomes of OP (e.g. voluntary time at work, or labor while on vacation; Curran et al., 2015; Pollack et al., 2020; Vallerand et al., 2003). In this way, OP, as evidenced by its specific outcomes in sport, signals when employees have ‘gone too far’ and should serve as an indication that greater restraint is needed as they create ‘conflict with other activities in the person’s life’ (Vallerand et al., 2003, p. 757). As Pollack et al. (2020) noted, OP is a result of loving one’s work, but there can be a struggle to disengage from such activities because of the pleasure it offers. For participants, HP and OP were not experienced independently but rather their experiences were ambivalent as they not only vacillated between OP and HP but they were also interconnected.

This description of passion is further demarcated with qualities generally associated with HP enabling outcomes traditionally viewed as reflective of OP. That is, participants explained how it was their love of working in sport that encouraged them to prioritize work over personal interests. The notion that HP empowers OP is similar to arguments made by Moeller et al. (2015) who stated that to experience OP one needs HP. The results of this study support Moeller et al.’s findings that passion should be viewed along a continuum whereby positive and negative effects can be experienced simultaneously and that HP fuels OP. This study provides a nuanced interpretation of the ebb and flow of passion in the sport workplace and demonstrates how the intensity of passion can strengthen and weaken. While Moeller et al. quantitatively explored this phenomenon, this study provides a deeper description of this process by explaining that the love participants had for working in sport created the stimulus to prioritize work over other obligations which resulted in obsessive consequences with little self-regulation where it was difficult for participants to manage their work-life priorities. These findings in the sport workplace also echo Swanson and Kent (2017) who noted that OP has a positive influence on sport workplace outcomes and extend the results of Zeimers et al. (2022) who found that sport directors also experienced positive and negative consequences of passion in terms of sport board dynamics.

This proposition is meant to revisit and advance the dichotomous view of passion (Vallerand et al., 2003) by reinforcing that passion is paradoxical as it has both positive and negative facets (Newman et al., 2021). The categories created by Vallerand et al. (2003) are helpful, but as highlighted here and elsewhere (e.g. Moeller et al., 2015), are perhaps too simplistic and should instead be viewed within a continuum rather than a true dichotomy. Participants held varying degrees of control as opposed to being completely in or out of control, which informs that passion is a complex psychological experience. While negative consequences of passion are often associated with OP, HP may as also have negative consequences (Curran et al., 2015) and OP may have positive impacts (Swanson & Kent, 2017). The results of this study provide further clarity to these relationships by informing that instead of a distinct dichotomy, passion may best be described as complex, whereby positive and negative experiences co-occur.

P2: HP and OP both influence positive sport workplace outcomes

This proposition is grounded in theory that positions passion as a range of experiences (Moeller et al., 2015) and that OP should not be viewed as strictly maladaptive when considering its interplay with HP (Curran et al., 2015; Swanson & Kent, 2017). We propose that sport employee passion involves a genuine love or connection to the activities of

working in sport (akin to HP) and elements of OP, both of which can produce outputs – as evidenced by the results – that support the employee and organization (e.g. productivity and retention) and potentially limit burnout (Curran et al., 2015; Pollack et al., 2020). Specifically, sport work passion is reflective of HP's love for working in sport and it acknowledges the OP tendencies of sport employees who prioritize their work to a degree that meets the needs of their sport organization. Importantly, preventing OP from becoming dominant and retaining a locus of control over work habits remains critical to guard against adverse outcomes. This is further explained by SDT in that employees, who choose when to involve themselves with their work (i.e. autonomous motivation), are more likely to have improved work performance and less burnout (Deci et al., 2017). This can be seen in the current study when participants would self-regulate their degree of involvement with their work tasks. For example, these participants freely engaged in enjoyable work activities (as detailed in Todd & Kent, 2009) despite the demanding schedule but removed themselves from work when they chose to such as emphasizing family time during the offseason or when on vacation, they demonstrated autonomous motivation and HP.

Autonomous motivation (Deci et al., 2017) describes participants' varying experiences with OP, in that some participants experienced less self-regulation to remove themselves from work activities because of the enjoyment the work activities produced, whereas others retained enough self-control to remove themselves from enjoyable work activities and focus on other aspects of their lives. Therefore, autonomy is critical as retaining the self-regulation of one's passion represents the means to maintain an optimal level of motivation, as passion that lacks self-regulation (i.e. controlled motivation) engenders obsessive passion to become dominant. Thus, this study supports previous work that identified autonomy as a key element of SDT that produces improved work performance and less burnout (Deci et al., 2017). Based on SDT and passion literature, and our empirical findings, we put forth that sport employee work passion includes engagement with both HP and OP. When OP does not become dominant, it can help to produce valuable outcomes for organizations (e.g. greater willingness to provide more labor as seen in the current study) and employees (e.g. positive affect and self-efficacy; Pollack et al., 2020). Thus, it may be advantageous when passion intensifies and approaches OP, provided OP does not become a dominant motivating factor. This is especially relevant for the sport industry where some aspects of OP could be useful to fulfill the high labor demands of the industry. Indeed, Swanson and Kent (2017) found numerous positive outcomes that resulted from OP from sport employees. Those sport employees who can sufficiently restrain the obsessive aspects of passion (i.e. not letting OP become dominant) may avoid a turning point where an individual experiences negative outcomes resulting from their passion. Notably, Curran et al. (2015) found that OP in solitary is a negative construct that induces negative experiences (e.g. ill-being). In sum, the results elucidate how sport employee passion may be experienced with elements of both HP and OP and that both can lead to positive outcomes in the sport workplace, if OP does not become dominant.

Practical implications

This qualitative study offers a different perspective on the employee burnout issues that have plagued sport organizations (e.g. Huml et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2019) where

employees' passion for their work drove them to provide additional labor and sacrifice personal time to spend more time at work. Sport employees' own passion can be viewed as one of the causes of this issue. It is consequently crucial for sport employees and managers to guard against over-engagement with the obsessive elements of passion. This 'dark side' of passion is resultant of over-engagement with a given activity leading to burnout (Curran et al., 2015; Moeller et al., 2015; Pollack et al., 2020; Zeimers et al., 2023). Although participants noted their passion helped them avoid burnout, we offer a cautionary warning that too much involvement with OP may lead a sport employee towards negative outcomes by letting their passion burn too bright. Sport employee passion may involve both HP and OP for activities pertaining to working in sport, but in order to protect against negative outcomes, it is vital for sport employees and managers to communicate and manage their passion appropriately to realize the positive and generative outcomes of passion (e.g. well-being, perseverance, job satisfaction, engagement; Curran et al., 2015; Kim, Zvosec, et al., 2023; Moeller et al., 2015; Pollack et al., 2020). Sport managers who are willing to adjust job designs or institutional norms to enable structures that prevent OP from becoming a dominant motivating force and thereby produce a measured sport employee work passion that consists of a love for working in sport and a limited prioritization of work could guard against employee burnout. Successfully managing passion, whether on an individual or leadership basis (e.g. forcing employees to take time away from work, or limiting time in the office) could help to curb employee burnout issues in sport organizations. Lastly, personnel training for employees and administrators could foster a holistic understanding of the benefits and risks of passion in the sport workplace.

Future directions and limitations

We propose two outcomes resulting from sport work passion that require significant future investigation. The first outcome is that sport organizations are likely to gain *enhanced productivity* from employees who prevent OP from dominating their work passion. Future research should be conducted to determine the degree to which passion influences sport employee productivity and whether passion can be used as a rationalization to justify working significant hours. Analyses that include participant daily diaries covering labor provided and time spent at work beyond required hours would add a greater depth to the understanding of passion for sport employee productivity. The second proposed outcome requiring further empirical study is when sport employees control their OP, they are *less likely to experience burnout* and subsequently leave their jobs (Pollack et al., 2020). As such, *retention among sport employees* should see improvement if there is a healthy passion among sport employees. To test for this phenomenon, scholars should utilize intervention strategies to cultivate healthy passion among sport employees and test their efficacy via pre- and post-test analysis. Scholars may also interview sport employees who have completely left the sport industry to better understand the role of passion in influencing burnout and turnover.

While our knowledge concerning the consequences of passion in the sport workplace continues to expand, more work is needed at the individual (e.g. creativity), group (e.g. group cohesion), and organizational (e.g. performance) levels of analysis to fully utilize sport work passion. With the dearth of theoretical frameworks applied in this domain to

date, there are significant opportunities to investigate how other passion models may inform a greater understanding of sport management. Although we argue that passion is distinct in this context and support the dualistic model of passion to undertake research in this domain, we also acknowledge the weaknesses of Vallerand's model (i.e. HP and OP as separate entities) and measurement issues pointed out by Moeller et al. (2015). We, therefore, advocate for the use of different frameworks of passion and the adoption of contemporary sport-focused definitions, models and measurements that could generate new knowledge and overcome these challenges. We echo the call of Zeimers and Shilbury (2022) to explore other passion models in sport management, considering that sport employees are required to work for organizations in a seemingly obsessed industry.

A delimitation of this study is the fact that our empirical findings are based on the cases of sporting organizations from North America. Future research could examine how passion is experienced by sport employees and volunteers in other sporting settings of the industry such as sport disciplines where media scrutiny is less fierce, or those sport teams competing in professional leagues organized according to a promotion and relegation system where the pressure to lose and be relegated is stronger. Other limitations include the lost depth of participants' responses due to word count limits, and the potential for participants to provide socially desirable responses, although measures were taken to guard against this possibility (e.g. confidentiality and follow-up questions).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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