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A Qualitative Study Examining How Passion Impacts Sport Board Functioning

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ABSTRACT

Passion is a highly relevant focus for sport governance researchers as it can have a considerable impact on board functioning. The purpose of this study was to explore how passion impacts board functioning in national and state sport governing bodies in Australia. This phenomenon was analyzed through the eyes of 19 Chairs, who play a central role in managing passion on nonprofit sport boards. Findings showed passion is an important emotional factor impacting sport boards. Passion was found to impact sport board functioning in several beneficial (i.e., on motivation, cohesion, and climate) and disruptive (i.e., on cohesion, conflict, decision-making) ways. This research contributes to passion research by developing knowledge on the group-based outcomes of passion and by highlighting how the context of sport—as a leisure pursuit—shapes how different domains of passion manifest in sport governance through volunteer directors and its impact on board functioning.

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Introduction

Studies across a broad variety of academic disciplines including philosophy, psychology, organizational behavior, and entrepreneurship have highlighted how passion influences individuals (Newman et al., 2021). A sub-field of passion that has attracted growing attention is sport passion (Vallerand, 2015). Thus far, studies have focused on the passion of sport employees (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2016), fans (Vallerand et al., 2008), amateur and elite athletes (Salama-Younes, 2018; Vallerand et al., 2006), coaches (Lafrenière et al., 2011; Winand et al., 2022), and referees (Philippe et al., 2009). More recently, sport passion research has been extended to the governance context (Zeimers & Shilbury, 2020).

Examining passion is highly relevant in governance contexts due to the emotions it generates (Vallerand, 2015), and its potential to impact board functioning (Zeimers & Shilbury, 2020). Emotions matter because they impact the attitudes and behaviors of individuals and groups within organizations (Barsade & Gibson, 2007). Emotions have an impact in the boardroom because “boards are first and foremost groups of human individuals” (He & Huang, 2011, p. 1120). On this premise, Brundin and Nordqvist

(2008) argued “emotions are a natural and important attribute of the ‘inner context’ of the board itself and can play a considerable role in the influence of board members as they interact and contribute to board task performance” (p. 327).

Boards are a crucial feature of the governance of sport organizations. The reasons for sport governance and integrity scandals have been often linked to ineffective board functioning (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015; Hoye & Doherty, 2011). Given the reported unique prevalence of passion in sport (Stewart & Smith, 1999), and other leisure contexts (Curran et al., 2015), there is a strong rationale for investigating how it impacts board functioning (Ferkins et al., 2010; Hoye & Doherty, 2011). Studies have analyzed the impact of passion on active leisure and well-being (Mirehie & Gibson, 2020) and ill-being (Stenseng et al., 2011). Volunteering on the board of a nonprofit sport governing body (SGB) is another type of serious leisure pursuit (Stebbins, 2013) in which passion is frequently associated with shaping motivations to fulfill the role (Doherty, 2020; McLeod et al., 2021).

The purpose of this paper is to explore how passion impacts sport board functioning. It examines a central question: how do Chairs experience the impact of passion on their sport board? Examining this issue through the eyes of 19 individuals fulfilling the role of a Chair in a voluntary capacity of SGBs boards represents an opportunity to explore passion from a unique and highly pertinent perspective as Chairs fulfill a key leadership role influencing board functioning and in harnessing passion on the board (Zeimers & Shilbury, 2020). The findings inform theory and practice on the often-overlooked group-based outcomes of passion on sport boards and highlight how an emotional attachment to sport—as a leisure context—shapes the way passion manifests and impacts SGB boards.

Literature review

Passion

Over the last two decades, passion has been studied extensively within three dominant streams of work (Newman et al., 2021; Pollack et al., 2020): general work passion (i.e., passion for work; Baum & Locke, 2004), role-based passion (i.e., passion for developing, passion for founding, and passion for inventing; Cardon et al., 2009), and dualistic passion (i.e., harmonious and obsessive passion; Vallerand et al., 2003). Each stream has proposed a definition of passion. According to Moeller and Grassinger (2014), a common trait is the involvement of intense affects, which is a generic term referring to emotions, moods, temperament, and other psychological constructs associated with feelings (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). This study adopts Vallerand et al. (2003) well-established definition of passion as a “strong inclination toward an activity that people like, that they find important” (p. 757). Researchers have documented the impact of passion on various dimensions including motivation, affect (e.g., enjoyment, guilt, and anxiety), cognition (e.g., self-esteem and rumination), attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and conflict), and behaviors (e.g., persistence and individual performance) (for reviews see Curran et al., 2015; Newman et al., 2021; Pollack et al., 2020).

Passion is uniquely positioned in the motivation literature (Pollack et al., 2020). As Vallerand (2015) argued, although it is described as a motivational construct, passion is distinct from other motivational constructs like grit and intrinsic motivation, which lack the identity dimension inherited from the conceptualization of passion based on self-determination theory. The relationship between passion and motivation is highly pertinent to this study given its positioning in the voluntary and leisure contexts. “Volunteering is an un-coercive, intentionally productive, altruistic activity engaged during free time” (Henderson, 1984 cited by Bang et al., 2022, p. 1). The motivations to volunteer have been extensively studied in the sport and leisure context (e.g., Cuskelly et al., 2002; Edwards & Kulczycki, 2021; Gallant et al., 2017; Hamm-Kerwin et al., 2009; Misener et al., 2010; Wilks, 2016). Scholars (e.g., Cantillon & Baker, 2020; Lamont et al., 2015) identified several rewards when undertaking volunteer work explaining motivations in terms of personal and social needs and the costs in the form of tensions between work and activities or volunteers, dislikes, and disappointments.

Limited studies have focused specifically on directors’ motivations for volunteering on sport boards and continuing to volunteer (Doherty, 2020), which is a form of serious leisure pursuit (Stebbins, 2013). Sport board directors are critical for ensuring the strategic direction of a SGB and engaging with board roles. Although, undertaken as a leisure activity, likely driven by a passion for sport (Zeimers & Shilbury, 2020), the role of “governing” assumes an understanding and implementation of legal principles and associated oversight of transparency and accountability, hence the role is viewed through a serious leisure lens. According to Doherty (2020), “motivation beyond a core motive of altruism, may be expected to vary by volunteer type” (p. 255). In a governance volunteer context, directors are generally both, in terms of motivations, externally focused (e.g., make a difference, to help others, benefit a cause) and internally focused (e.g., personal social, psychological, and material gain: feeling of accomplishment, expansion of networks) (see Doherty, 2020). Further, studies have found serious leisure volunteers’ motivation to be influenced by passion (Edwards & Kulczycki, 2021; Miller-Stevens et al., 2014). Miller-Stevens et al. (2014) for example, showed that passion for a cause was an imperative filter to select nonprofit board candidates.

The dualistic model of passion introduced by Vallerand et al. (2003) posits that two distinct types of passion exist: harmonious passion (i.e., leading to adaptive experiences involving self-development and fulfillment) and obsessive passion (i.e., leading to maladaptive experiences where individuals may lose control). Whether harmonious or obsessive passion manifests depends on how passion is internalized into one’s identity, and is contingent on individual antecedents (Vallerand et al., 2003). The dualistic model of passion is appropriate to frame this study because it considers both favorable and unfavorable outcomes associated with passion. This contrasts the other streams which have only focused on positive outcomes (Pollack et al., 2020). This lack of theorizing of the potential negative consequences of passion represents a significant limitation of the literature.

As Zeimers and Shilbury (2020) indicated, passion is likely to manifest in both ways in sport governance contexts. However, the dualistic model of passion also has three limitations to which this study may be able to add insight. First, Vallerand (2015) noted that studies using the model have focused almost exclusively on how passion impacts

the development and maintenance of intrapersonal outcomes (i.e., person's attitudes and behaviors), interpersonal relationships within the passionate activity (i.e., teachers-students and coach-athletes) and in other areas of life (i.e., in the family sphere or romantic relationship), and intergroup outcomes (i.e., how passion impacts group members behaviors toward members of other groups). Despite these efforts, the impact of passion on group-level outcomes (i.e., group behaviors and dynamics, and in this case, board dynamics) has been overlooked within the purview of this model.

While emotions serve important social functions, including connecting with others (Vallerand, 2015), it is surprising that there has been limited research on the group-level consequences of passion (Curran et al., 2015; Pollack et al., 2020). Few studies have delved into how passion impacts individuals' relationships with others in a group within passionate activities (Vallerand, 2015) or, to some extent, in the entrepreneurial context using different passion conceptualizations (Cardon et al., 2017a). Exceptions include Cardon et al. (2017a), who introduced the concept of team entrepreneurial passion (i.e., what a group is passionate about) and suggested that it could impact new venture teams processes (i.e., group effectiveness and cohesion) and team performance. Moreover, de Mol et al. (2020) found that team passion diversity (i.e., individual-level passions among team members) is negatively related to team performance.

A second shortcoming of the general passion literature relates to the limited use of qualitative research methods (Newman et al., 2021) that can generate a deeper and richer understanding of the concept. A few qualitative studies have emerged on entrepreneurial passion (e.g., Cardon et al., 2017b; Chen et al., 2009) and passion for teaching (Fredricks et al., 2010).

Third, limited studies have focused on how people perceive how passion manifests and its impact (Newman et al., 2021). Perceived passion has received attention from entrepreneurship scholars examining how others' views of the entrepreneur's passion may impact behavior toward the entrepreneurs (e.g., Chen et al., 2009). Considering that affect impacts group interaction, performance, and decision making (Barsade & Gibson, 2007), a focus on stakeholders' perceptions may help to advance our understanding of the impact of passion on board functioning. Like Chen et al. (2009), we acknowledge that passion is a multidimensional construct; however, we focus on the visible, outward expressions of directors' passion on board behaviors as perceived by sport board Chairs.

Context impacts how passion manifests, yet its importance has been largely overlooked (Bhansing et al., 2018). Examining the dark side of passion in various contexts, including in sport, Moeller et al. (2015) noted "it might be the context that makes the difference" (p. 144). Three activity domains have been the primary contexts of passion research: sport, performing arts, and leisure (e.g., Stenseng et al., 2011); work (especially entrepreneurship—see Newman et al., 2021); and education (Curran et al., 2015). The sport industry is distinctively characterized by passionate individuals. Previous studies have identified differences in how passion (i.e., for a job in the sport workplace or for active leisure) manifests between highly competitive sports and leisure sports (Moeller et al., 2015), nonprofit (i.e., charitable foundations) and professional sport organizations (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2016) and different types of individuals (i.e., coaches, athletes, employees, and fans) (see Vallerand, 2015). Swanson and Kent (2017) observed that

obsessive passion evolves in a positive fashion within professional sport workplaces, compared to its negative impact within other non-sport industries. There is a need for further investigation of how passion manifests within different types of activities (i.e., voluntary board work) and sport and leisure contexts. While Swanson and Kent (2017) concluded that the sport industry is distinct in relation to employee psychology and involves managing sport organizations differently, knowledge remains limited in sport governance.

Sport governance

This study focuses on organizational sport governance addressing the work of the board within individual organizations (Henry & Lee, 2004). Ferkins et al. (2009) defined organizational sport governance as “the responsibility for the functioning and overall direction of the organization and is a necessary and institutionalized component of all sport codes from club level to national bodies, government agencies, sport service organizations and professional teams around the world” (p. 245).

Corporate (i.e., the practice of governance applied to the context of profit-seeking companies) and sport governance (i.e., the practice of governance applied to the sport context) research has traditionally built on agency, institutional, resource dependence, stakeholder, network, and stewardship theories (Bezemer et al., 2014; McLeod et al., 2021; Van Ees et al., 2009). Studies have also used a Behavioral Theory of Boards, building on the Behavioral Theory of the Firm, to move beyond a dominant focus on board structure and devote more attention to the processes, behaviors, and contexts influencing board work (Bezemer et al., 2014). This approach focuses on the interactions and behavioral processes among and between actors in and around the boardroom (Van Ees et al., 2009). It notably examines board process factors like induction, meeting practices, decision-making processes, board evaluation, and group dynamics such as trust or cohesion, and board-staff relationships (Schoenberg et al., 2016). In this space, some studies examined the types and role of emotions on corporate board processes (Brundin & Nordqvist, 2008) highlighting the value of including behavioral and cognitive variables to understand board functioning (Bezemer et al., 2014; Van Ees et al., 2009). Our research further builds on this stream of work to examine the impact of passion on board functioning. Board functioning involves decision-making processes (the social interactions leading to the long-term direction of the organization; Byers & Slack, 2001) and board dynamics. Board dynamics describes the social relationships that impact how a board functions (Schoenberg et al., 2016) and notably involves cohesion, climate, and conflict. Board cohesion is defined as the long-term togetherness of the board (Schoenberg et al., 2016), board climate refers to how comfortable directors feel to interact during board meetings (Schoenberg et al., 2016) and board conflicts refers to the views by directors that they have discordant visions or interpersonal incompatibilities (Hamm-Kerwin & Doherty, 2010). Few studies have directly explored the role of the Chairs, although their influence has often been cited as an important finding (Zeimers & Shilbury, 2020). Other sport governance studies have relied on Chair’s perceptions to study issues such as board nomination and good governance (McLeod et al., 2021; Stenling et al., 2021).

The impact of passion on the boards of SGBs has not yet been investigated. It is conceivable that passion is more salient in sport compared to other contexts due to the emotional connection to and investment directors often demonstrate to sport or a sport. While directors typically govern sports they are passionate about and have knowledge of, they do not necessarily have the governance knowledge and the right skills, abilities and awareness to manage passion (Zeimers & Shilbury, 2022). This alongside the prevalence of passion in sport strengthens the need for research on the impact of emotions in sport boardrooms and what role passion plays in this leisure setting.

Method

A qualitative interpretative approach was considered appropriate given the aim of this research was to generate deeper understanding of passion on sport boards. Interpretivism seeks to understand phenomena by identifying the subjective meaning that individuals attach to their experiences (Crotty, 1998). This contrasts with previous passion research which has predominantly employed a post-positivist epistemology and quantitative approach (Curran et al., 2015; Pollack et al., 2020).

Study participants

This case study research was conducted with sport board Chairs of Australian National Sport Organizations (NSOs) and Victorians State Sport Organizations (SSOs). Australia provides a rich setting in which to study passion given the country's strong sport culture and the professionalization of its sport industry (O'Boyle et al., 2019). Australian sport predominantly reflects the country's federal form of government and has traditionally adopted a federal structure with different SGBs at each geographic level (i.e., NSO, SSO, local clubs). Like most sport organizations, Australian SGBs have been on a journey of professionalization, moving from amateur volunteer-driven to commercialized logics resulting in paid staff supported by volunteers (Shilbury et al., 2013). This process also involved a change from a pure delegate system of board composition model (i.e., elected directors from the regional or club affiliates) to a hybrid governance model (i.e., a mix of member elected directors and appointed external independents) (Shilbury et al., 2013).

Gaining access to boards due to the sensitive nature of board work is difficult (Bezemer et al., 2014) and in addition, directors' lack of time and a reluctance to be involved in research due to major management structural reforms (O'Boyle et al., 2019). This research also faced some challenges in accessing SSOs and NSOs Chairs. The researchers identified a list of potential SSOs and NSOs to take part in the study based on their size, measured by their number of employees (at least 5 employees as a threshold) and their willingness to be involved in the research (O'Boyle et al., 2019). The examination of both NSO and SSOs was chosen to capture some diversity within the sport federated network. Thirty SGBs were initially identified as potential cases. Emails were sent out by the first author to all organizations explaining the purpose of the research and seeking their participation. Nineteen Chairs ultimately agreed to take part in the study. The organizations included 14 SSOs and five NSOs, with 14 of them being small to medium size organizations composed of six to 30 employees, and five larger

organizations of more than 30 employees (see [Table S1](#) as supplemental online material).

All Chairs had been on their respective boards for a minimum of one year at the time of data collection. Most participants also had extensive experience in governance roles within and outside the sport industry. This background and expertise helped to ensure that Chairs were able to provide insightful observations (O'Boyle et al., 2019).

This study is limited as it relies solely on the perspectives of one party to inform the research. Although Chairs are expected to offer highly valuable and informed insights on this topic, their perceptions do not necessarily align with other directors. The limitations of this study should be understood—it investigates how passion impacts the board from the narrow perspective of those responsible for managing passion on a board.

Data collection

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Nineteen interviews were conducted face-to-face (12) or by phone (7) between September 2019 and February 2020 by the first author. Interviews were recorded and lasted between 48 minutes and 1.5 hours.

Interviews were conducted using an interview guide. The questions were informed by studies in the field of sport governance and passion (e.g., Vallerand, 2015; Zeimers & Shilbury, 2020), and were structured in a way to generate data that would answer our research question. Questions were open-ended, broad initially and subsequently more focused, to allow participants to expand their responses on areas and experiences they believed were important (Patton, 2014). Examples of questions include: How does passion manifest in the board? Do you think passion is an important issue in your board? Do you think passion impacts the functioning of your board? Can you describe when and under which circumstances passion can lead to positive implications for your board? Can you describe when and under which circumstances passion can lead to negative implications for your board? Is passion leading to irrational decision-making or conflicts? Passion is a conscious dynamic (Cardon et al., 2009) that prompted rich and elaborate responses from the Chairs (Fredricks et al., 2010). To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, SSO Chairs are coded as SSO1-14 and NSO Chairs as NSO1-05.

Data analysis

The coding process followed a thematic analysis procedure, which involved six specific steps (Braun & Clarke, 2021). First, data familiarization entailed the verbatim transcription of the interviews by a private transcription service and the transcripts were read several times. An initial summary was written for each Chair to better understand the key insights from each interview. Second, generating initial codes involved grouping together recurring ideas, views, and emotions as they related to how passion manifested and impacted the board. The lead researcher coded the data with the assistance of Nvivo 12 software. In total, 25 initial codes emerged. Examples of these initial codes included varying definitions and views for passion, passion issues on the board, and positive and negative outcomes of passion. Third, the searching for themes involved a combination of both inductive and deductive approaches to create themes of broader

significance from the collated codes (e.g., domains of passion as used by Cardon et al., 2017b). The deductive process principally involved referring to the literature on sport board functioning (Hoye & Doherty, 2011; Schoenberg et al., 2016) and alignment to some initial themes (e.g., positive and negative outcomes of passion). Fourth, throughout the reviewing themes step the themes were reviewed, organized, and refined into five overarching themes (i.e., the description of the organization and of the board, the roles and leadership styles of the Chair, the passion of the Chairs, the impact of passion on the board and the strategies to manage passion) and sub-themes to assess their relevance to the research question and to identify relationships between dimensions. Fifth, in defining and naming themes, some of the initial themes remained, and others were renamed, dismissed, and merged with other themes to form the final thematic structure (Thomas, 2006). Two themes were the focus of this paper and guided the analysis: passion issues on the board and the outcomes of passion. The final sub-themes that emerged from passion issues on the board ranged from diversity, ethics, strategic issues, and operational issues. For the positive and negative outcomes of passion, the sub-themes included motivation, commitment, board cohesion, conflict and (ethical) decision-making outcomes and good governance. To enhance the accuracy and credibility of data interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021), the analysis was debated with coauthors. When possible, member reflections were conducted with some study participants to share findings and provide an opportunity for feedback on contradictions and differences in the interpretation of the results (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The final analysis comprising representative quotations for each theme and sub-theme in the results and discussion section is presented next.

Results and discussion

This study draws on the observations of Chairs to reveal the perceived impact of passion on sport board functioning. The ways in which passion manifests on sport boards are first discussed, followed by the positive and negative impacts of passion in the boardroom. This section is complemented by a Table (see Appendix A) with additional supporting quotations related to each theme.

The manifestation of passion on sport boards

When asked to describe if and how passion is displayed on their board, many Chairs stated, “sport is driven by passion” (SSO2). Chairs reported that, overall, boards are characterized by a shared passion for sport: “we all have a passion for sport” (SSO11). Each director has their own individual “domains” of passion (using Cardon et al.’s, 2009 language), as the following quotation shows:

Some are there for the love of the sport. Some are there because they want to do the very best they can for our members and our sporting people. Others are there because they’re interested in being involved at a governance level of a sporting body, because they’re interested in governance and that side of things. (SSO7)

The following sub-sections and associated analysis reveal how passion manifests itself when the following issues were discussed in board meetings: club representation, diversity, strategic issues, and operational issues.

Club representation

All SSO Chairs claimed that passion was very visible on the board when club-level issues were discussed. This reflects the tendency of elected directors to enact their club representative role (even if they were not a formal representative) over the best interest of the sport as a whole (Tacon & Walters, 2016). As illustrated in Appendix and as this Chair noted: “disputes occur because of the passion that they have for their clubs” (SSO10). This finding echoes Sherry and Shilbury (2007) who noted that individual emotional identification to clubs complicates governance and conflict of interests management in SGBs. This is particularly evident in club-based sport systems built from the ground (i.e., federated structures), where traditionally state association directors have experiences at club level as participants, coaches, and in some cases as members of the club committee.

This also refers to the paradox inherent in the heritage of the delegate system which Inglis (1994) described as having “come up through the ranks” (p. 182) from the local club to state and national sport boards. In the Australian federated sport network, NSOs are “owned” by SSOs and clubs and provincial levels ‘own’ the SSOs. A traditionally “pure” delegate system based on democratic representative processes has been heavily criticized because it facilitates parochialism, politics, and “affiliation” interests over the broader interests of the sport (Tacon & Walters, 2016; Taylor & O’Sullivan, 2009). This explains why a “pure” delegate system has been phased out in Australia over the last 20 years.

Despite the adoption of hybrid model of board composition by all SGBs in this present study which could be expected therefore to reduce the manifestation of passion through political representation, directors’ passion continues to be fueled by their desires to represent club interests and consequential political posturing (i.e., acting as representatives of particular constituencies instead of acting in the best interest of the organization). In other words, passion may become political through coalitions aligned to lower-level constituents despite the delegate form of governance having been replaced by hybrid models reducing the number of representatives and increasing the appointment of independent directors not aligned with lower-level constituents. Theoretically, this should reduce levels of passion generated by experiences at club level and manifest at the next level in the sport governance system. A feature of sport as a leisure activity, is that it is rare for an individual to become a director of SGBs at state or national level unless they have been a participant in the sport and therefore some passion or genuine interest in the sport. Therein lies a special feature of governing in the leisure environment.

As also alluded to in the club representation quotation in Appendix A, the difficulty of grappling with the political implications of passion on the board could be explained by the additional passion associated at club level. This can be described as the “trickle up” effect of sport governance in federated sport systems, with the added challenge of governing in a leisure domain. These challenges have clearly been exposed via the Chairs of the SGB participating in this study.

Diversity issues

Diversity issues, particularly women’s sport, were often identified by Chairs as a topic that elicits passion among directors. This is exemplified by the following quotation (and those illustrated in Appendix A)

[Sport] is pretty male dominated. So that we've had quite a few debates around that. Because like these people, some of the board members get really carried away and is like, hang on a minute, we've got to think about how's this going to work for women for example. The other aspect that we have as well is the [sport] ability. So like not just thinking about able-bodied [sport]. (SSO5)

The second quotation in the Diversity section of Appendix A illustrates how diversity issues may manifest if there is a lack of gender balance on a sport board. Traditional male dominated thinking may impact decision making as it relates to diversity, not just gender diversity, but in this example, diversity of competition forms from competitive to recreationally focused participation. It may seem logical to offer varying competition forms, but clearly based on the quotation in Appendix A, there is a risk that it remains grounded in traditional singular understandings of sport. Ironically, such decision making can be counter-productive to promoting ongoing participation in a sport where competition forms do not cater for a variety of abilities, attributes, and needs. In this instance, male understandings of sport reflect higher end semi-elite sport forms in older age groups in which competition is the essence of the contest. Sport as a mainstream leisure product cannot afford to be captured by one dominant logic at the expense of genuine leisure creating opportunities for counterparts, including underrepresented or marginalized groups. Gender balance and therefore gender quotas are one vehicle through which to enforce diversity.

Gender quotas also created highly passionate debates. As one informant posited:

A great example is gender quotas. We had a super challenging set of conversations. For a couple of people on our board, they [gender quotas] are very new and highly offensive. And we've got one woman whose view was this is not the direction we should go because, "I don't want to feel, and I don't want any other woman on this board to feel that they hear in any tokenistic way". (SSO1).

This comment is indicative of a shared perception among the Chairs that discussions about diversity, because of its politically sensitive nature, can become particularly passionate, and eventually lead to some board tensions due to different views on the mechanisms to achieve diversity and offensive behaviors by some resistant directors.

Strategic issues

Several strategic issues such as funding decisions, defining strategic priorities and governing the relationship with SSOs and NSOs also appeared to be fertile ground for passion to manifest. As one Chair commented: "conflicts occur between the different levels of the federated structure in sport because people who are passionate about elements would go, well you don't spend enough time on this, or we should be doing this, or that" (NSO5). Further evidence for this is illustrated in Appendix A.

Operational issues

Informants also reported passion appeared in operational discussions such as those relating to high performance, national representation, umpires, stadium safety, sport sub-disciplines, events, and debates over competition versus recreational sport. This is encapsulated by a strong quote in Appendix A reinforcing the influence of progression from club to higher levels and the following quote: "when passion comes, we spend way

too much time on the operational stuff. The danger or the risk is that we're not as efficient as we could be if we could get out of that room so much faster" (SSO1). As mentioned by this Chair reflecting on his experience as a director of a professional sport team: "the passion was what was causing a lot of issues because people are fans first. They can't control themselves. Our success has really coincided with the fact that we were able to divorce the passion from their job" (SSO8). While being close to the game is arguably an essential driver to be a director, these findings also invite questioning its pitfalls and the extent to which boards navigate the complex interplay between strategy and operational details.

How passion impacts sport boards functioning

The Chairs highlighted how passion impacts board functioning in several positive ways (i.e., on motivation, cohesion, and climate) and negative ways (i.e., on cohesion, conflict, decision-making).

Positive impact of passion

Motivation. All the respondents reported passion to be an important source of motivation for directors to serve on their board in a voluntary capacity. As stated by a Chair "you've got to have passion to be there" (SSO7). This coincides with most definitions of passion as a motivational construct that increases commitment and dedication toward an activity (Cardon et al., 2009; Vallerand, 2015). This can have a positive effect on sport board functioning by enhancing the desire for directors to commit their time and expertise to the board and work diligently toward fulfilling key board roles. This positive impact is illustrated below (and also in Appendix A) in which a Chair talked about how passion is particularly salient in sport boards compared to commercial and other nonprofit boards:

I don't see commercial boards being anywhere near as passionate about their products. They have certainly a passion, I'll not deny that, but I just don't think they're driven like a person on a sports board is. They're really driven by their sport passion. And the other thing is that no sport would survive without volunteers and volunteers do the job because they're passionate about it, and we're the same. (SSO2)

This highlights a key distinction in motivation to sit on a sport board in a serious leisure context (Miller-Stevens et al., 2014). This difference of directors sitting on sport boards is novel as Doherty (2020) previously noted sport directors' motivations to serve on a board should be further considered because motives may differ by volunteer types and in the contemporary sport board setting.

The same Chair observed: "The passion is for doing the job properly and understanding the role" (SSO11) supporting task motive as a *raison d'être* of sport volunteers (Doherty & Carron, 2003) in a serious leisure context. This difference for larger SGBs was confirmed by another Chair who was referring to her general experience as a director of a large professional team sport: "we're coming there not just through passion and love now. Yes, we do love the sport, but we're also coming with a high level of professional skill and experience" (SSO9). This difference is important because, as the motivation literature suggests, volunteers are not always driven by their passion purely

for (the) sport but also for personal and professional relationships or personal gain (Doherty, 2020). Yet, an important nuance articulated by one Chair from a larger sport was that although passion is an important driver of motivation for directors, their sense of professionalism may in some cases be a more important factor. “With a skills-based board, they are there to do the job properly and that is the commitment. I honestly do think that a whole lot of our directors would be equally happy on another board” (SSO11).

Board climate. Data also showed that passion was perceived to positively impact board-room climate. The power of passion to foster director’s commitment and engagement to constructively contribute to board climate is illustrated in Appendix A and encapsulated in this quotation: “Passion, you need it otherwise you end up with a very passive board who are simply just ticking boxes and are adding no value” (NSO1). Disagreements emerging in passionate discussion about the board’s tasks were seen as potentially productive. For instance, another Chair noted: “We don’t have fights. There are no fights around the table, but you should have disagreements and open discussion” (SSO3). This insight resonates with previous research on the benefits of cognitive conflict on sport boards (Schoenberg et al., 2016) and builds on that idea by highlighting how passion can drive such productive forms of conflict whilst ensuring a healthy board climate is maintained.

Board cohesion. According to some Chairs, their shared passion contributed to optimizing board cohesion. One Chair explained the importance of passion in creating the emotional foundations in the boardroom that eventually ensures a common focus and group interactions: “We’re all passionate about making sure that our sport is successful. And so that’s a common thread and a complete point of alignment” (SSO1). The importance of unity for board functioning is also alluded to in the relevant quotation in Appendix A.

These findings correspond with the importance of considering the motivation of individual directors and how a board operates strategically if individual needs are met (Doherty & Carron, 2003). Passion, as a source of motivation, contributes to group cohesion by creating a shared sense of unity and alignment, which can engender greater director satisfaction and perception of efficient board functioning. The following quote exemplifies this:

I think that it’s [passion] a healthy asset to bring to the table when you’re trying to unite people. In the sport world, most people are volunteers, and you’re not hiring and firing them, you’re looking to motivate and encourage people. And so, having a shared vision, and sharing your passion and the sorts of issues that you think are really important create an important baseline for you to work toward collaboration. (NSO2)

Another important finding was that having passion diversity—meaning different domains of passion (e.g., for high performance, sport events, or gender diversity)—within the board can impact positively cohesion and functioning. For instance, one Chair noted: “You need passion in the right places. The more diversity you have in terms of age, culture, experience, and skills, the more vibrant the conversation and the more passion you’re going to have” (NSO1).

Negative impacts of passion

There was a broad consensus among the participants that passion can also lead to serious difficulties and be detrimental to board functioning. For example, one participant commented “if you’re passionate, you’re going to believe in what you’re saying, and it can be very hard to shift you. And it could be that what you’re doing by digging your heels in is actually damaging rather than helping” (SSO2). Another Chair made a similar observation regarding the passion of one of their fellow directors:

Some people don’t ever become aware of it. They become a bit obsessed about different topics and often that obsession, passion, they’re one and the same. You just need to be careful Which is the situation I have in the high-performance side, I have someone who has an obsession about women being given an equal opportunity within high performance. (SSO8)

Perhaps unsurprisingly given potential cognitive biases, only a few Chairs recognized that their own passion could represent a potential threat to board functioning.

Board cohesion. In some cases, particularly in smaller SSOs, Chairs suggested that board cohesion was hindered by passion. An interviewee said:

They [the issues behind passion] affect a little bit the dynamic and the personal relationship between the directors. I think a lot of the time we get along quite well, but sometimes when the differences of opinions, passionate opinions, they can blur the lines and it can become a little bit uncomfortable, which is that thing of we can agree to disagree, but do it respectfully. And sometimes it can become a little personal, not overly, but it sometimes feels that way. (SSO13)

The Chair continued and explained how other directors’ passion impacted him negatively: “The thing that I probably was the most frustrated with, is that we weren’t looking at it from a policy perspective, we were looking from an individual perspective” (SSO13). What is interesting with this finding is that it evidences how passion can be both beneficial and disruptive to board cohesion. In some cases, directors’ conflicting domains of passion have been regarded as negatively influencing board cohesion. As revealed by this participant: “the rest of the board, they are on a different page at times. So, it is difficult managing where those passions are influencing the indecision of a matter” (SSO13). As highlighted in Appendix A, the negative impact of passion can lead to conflict and having to deal with such conflict.

Conflict. The data highlighted a perception among some interviewees that passion can be a catalyst for intra-board conflict. In addition to divergent individual interests, opinions, and agendas (Kerwin et al., 2011), sport boards operate within inherently passionate and sometimes political contexts where diverse domains of passion coexist. As illustrated in the previous sections and in Appendix A, politics manifests in the diverging interests groups directors see themselves representing (i.e., geographical: state, province, region; cohort: coaches, athletes, and social causes: gender equity). This quotation illustrates one domain of passion, “I think I have a passion for women being appropriately represented in leadership” (SSO4). These conditions may increase the potential for conflict to occur in this setting (Kerwin et al., 2011). The impact of passion on task (i.e., disagreement about what to do, see previous section on the different issues) and

relationship (i.e., personal disagreements) conflicts emerged as key themes in the data. This is exemplified in the following quotations: “the downside is that you then get these people who are very passionate about their particular part of the sport” (SSO5), which could represent their political interests and manifest as political posturing.

It was dysfunctional in some ways, in terms of the way in which we were having conversations about the finances. Just the way the reports were presented and decisions became very personal. I would absolutely say that came from passion. And then personal relationships were clearly playing. (SSO9)

The view that passion diversity can lead to conflicts that disrupt board functioning represents a different perception of the implications of passion diversity and highlights the dualistic nature of passion with informants also considering it beneficial for board functioning.

Decision-making outcomes. A few Chairs also observed that passion had implications on decision-making outcomes: “More frequently than I was expecting, passion overrides good governance and good decision making to the detriment of the sport” (NSO1). Participants perceived that making “the right decision” can be challenging when passion is present, as it can drive political posturing, and can lead to poor decisions that eventually impact board dynamics. For example, that Chair declared, “I was surprised that some decisions that have been made, which just don’t make sense from a financial, community or communication perspective, because the passion has driven them there” (NSO1). This could also be explained by the fact that conflicts can have negative implications on directors’ perceptions of the quality of decisions (Hamm-Kerwin & Doherty, 2010).

Another Chair reported “sometimes they’re making decisions based on emotion rather than what’s good decision making. I think we get very emotionally attached to certain levels of decision-making” (NSO4). This quote and those in Appendix A are interesting for two reasons. First, it echoes the debate between emotion and reason and shows the embeddedness of “norms of rationality” (Zeimers & Shilbury, 2022, p. 7). Second, the evidence supports that passion can have negative consequences on decision-making because it is associated with a loss of reason and control (Vallerand, 2015). These findings highlight bounded emotionality in sport boards and contributes toward developing an understanding of the role of emotions in board decision-making (Brundin & Nordqvist, 2008; Van Ees et al., 2009). In this situation, passion can lead to no decisions being made and to a dysfunctional board.

Data captured in this study revealed the fine line between passion that might impede or enable board functioning, as highlighted by a Chair:

Has it gotten in the way of the right decisions? I would say no. Has passion emphasized certain problems? Yes. Has it got out of hand? I don’t believe so. Yes, there’s been moments there where it’s been healthy discussions, but not out of hand. (SSO12)

In contrast, four Chairs reported that passion was not an issue within their board. One participant asserted: “Certainly, on some things, people are passionate, but they’re passion in my opinion, has not overwritten their logical thinking. It has driven them to be more involved” (NSO3). This could be explained by the fact that directors did not

want to open up and often downplayed conflict because of its negative connotation (Kerwin et al., 2011).

Conclusion and implications

Synthesis and theoretical contributions

This study aimed to investigate the impact of passion on sport board functioning through the eyes of board Chairs. The findings are synthesized in Figure 1 which captures both positive and negative outcomes on board functioning, which correspond to the well-established dual dynamic of passion (Moeller et al., 2015; Vallerand, 2015).

These findings advance knowledge on sport governance and passion, revealing a new, empirically derived set of interactions between passion and board functioning. This research identifies passion as a powerful factor shaping sport boards functioning. To date, limited studies have examined emotional factors in the sport board context (Zeimers & Shilbury, 2022). This study highlights the importance of considering passion as another dimension of board functioning alongside others such as member interests, values, vision (Kerwin et al., 2011), motivations, skills, experience (Hoye & Doherty, 2011), personalities, behaviors, and attitudes (Schoenberg et al., 2016). Three theoretical contributions are discussed in relation to the sport governance and passion literature.

Passion as a double-edged sword for sport boards

Most Chairs recognized that passionate directors are needed. However, passion can also be difficult to manage and may negatively impact group dynamics and decision-making. Consistent with Moeller et al. (2015), the results suggest that passion is a double-edged sword, and this dual dynamic is important for two reasons. First, one of the main theoretical shortcomings in the passion literature identified by Pollack et al. (2020) was the overly positive impacts of passion depicted. That is, while the potential negative impact of passion has been acknowledged within the dualistic model, it has rarely been

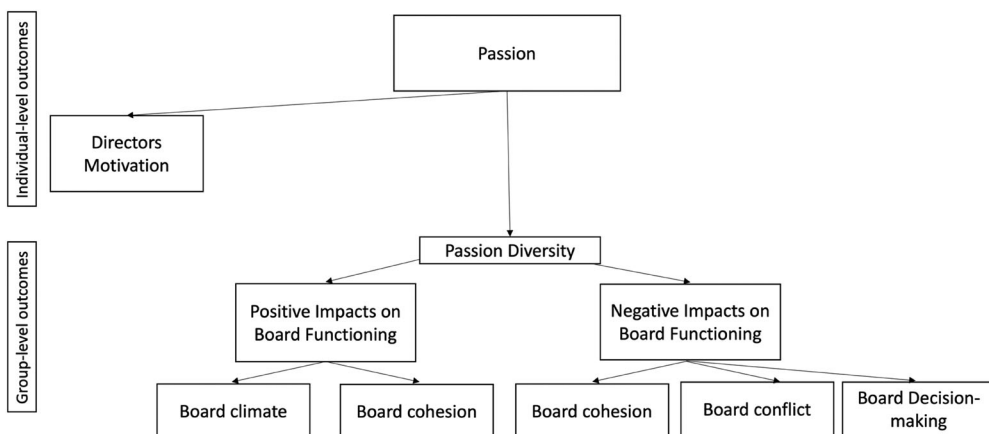


Figure 1. The impact of passion on sport board functioning.

Results are represented at both an individual-level (i.e., sport director) and a group (i.e., sport board) level.

evidenced through empirical research. This study directly addresses this gap by showing through qualitative data the potential dysfunctional aspects of passion in the sport board context from the perspective of Chairs. As displayed in [Figure 1](#), passion diversity among directors appeared to be perceived as both detrimental and favorable to board functioning and contrasts with de Mol et al. (2020) who only found a negative impact of passion diversity within groups.

Second, as suggested by Moeller et al. (2015), it is more appropriate to conceptualize passion as a paradoxical variable “with beneficial and harmful aspects that occur together” (p. 143) rather than one or the other as advocated by Vallerand (2015). While the dualistic model of passion recognizes the “dark side of motivation” (Moeller et al., 2015, p. 144), this study has considered in more detail the “ups-and-downsides of this construct” (p. 144). This nuance reveals the limitations of existing passion models and reinforces the need to examine passion in different contexts.

As indicated by [Figure 1](#), participants considered passion to impact motivation, board dynamics, and decision-making whereas other dynamics identified in sport governance such as board-CEO relationship, power patterns, trust, and shared vision (Hoye & Doherty, 2011; Schoenberg et al., 2016) were less prominent. To date, studies have not examined passion as a factor impacting board dynamics, including cohesion, climate, and conflict. Previous studies had acknowledged the impact of passion on volunteers and directors’ motivation and behaviors in the board (Doherty, 2020; Edwards & Kulczycki, 2021; McLeod et al., 2021; Miller-Stevens et al., 2014), while Anagnostopoulos et al. (2014) had shown a relationship between decision-making and passion.

This study provides knowledge about the potential association between passion and positive outcomes such as motivational energy, engagement, and commitment (Vallerand et al., 2003) in the sport boardroom. As indicated in [Figure 1](#) in the individual-level outcomes shown in the left vertical box, passion increases the likelihood that directors will possess and display positive emotions that lead them to set challenging goals, engage and persist in board roles, and mobilize energy to cope with the challenges of governing a SGB. Such insights about the relationship between passion and motivation are important for the leisure literature as there continues to be limited attention paid to director volunteer motivation, particularly in the sport context (Doherty, 2020). Ultimately, this research also offers new insights to sport board dynamics (captured in the group-level outcomes boxes in [Figure 1](#)) showing passion diversity impacting positively and negatively group cohesion and climate (Doherty & Carron, 2003).

Results showed how passion may be detrimental to group functioning (Moeller, 2014; Curran et al., 2015) such as by negatively contributing to task and relationship conflicts. According to de Mol et al. (2020), when conflicts are based on identity differences among group members such as individual passions, these problems can inhibit team dynamics and performance. This study highlights similar implications of passion diversity in a sport board. The results highlighted a perception among many Chairs that conflicts of individual domains of passion within a board (especially the most political ones like club representation or diversity quotas) can lead to disagreements with the potential to impede decision-making processes. Club representation, or the perceived need to represent the club constituency, was noted to be a powerful force given it is a structural

remnant of the federated form of sport governance. Historical and cultural artifacts of democratic representation at the level above remain as seen revealed in the results. The move to hybrid models of board composition, in part, address this structural weakness. It was, however, noted that it is difficult to identify genuine independent board directors given that individuals rarely commit to a board role unless they have been a participant and have a passion for the sport, thereby adding to the complexity of good governance in a leisure domain.

The impact of conflict on individual directors' commitment as well as on board cohesion is a critical concern given that it can impact board dynamics and organizational performance (Hoye & Doherty, 2011; Kerwin et al., 2011). Whereas previous studies examined the nature and the impact of board conflicts (Hamm-Kerwin & Doherty, 2010; Kerwin et al., 2011), this study identified passion diversity as an antecedent of board conflict and represents an advancement of our understanding of passion in sport governance.

The study contributes theoretically to the sport governance literature by reinforcing the need for research to employ new theoretical perspectives and concepts, in this case passion, to understand sport boards functioning. A major emphasis in the literature has been on the behavioral approach of boards (Schoenberg et al., 2016). This study offers new directions for future sport governance research by investigating how the emotions generated by passion can impact board functioning. There is a need for further governance research on the impact of emotions in the boardroom and how passion plays a role. This seems particularly salient considering Brundin and Nordqvist (2008) argument that an effective board "consists in the resolution of moments of conflict, frustration, and distrust with moments of collaboration, harmony, and trust among the interacting board members" (p. 327).

Group-based outcomes of passion

The second contribution relates to the focus on how passion impacts group-level outcomes (i.e., board functioning) in the context of sport boards. Figure 1 displays passion at the individual level (directors' passion) and at the group (passion diversity in the board) level. This contrasts the broader passion literature, which has predominantly delved into intra-personal outcomes (Curran et al., 2015; Pollack et al., 2020). By highlighting the impact of passion on boards through the eyes of the Chairs, this research developed new insights on how and when passion may be related to negative and positive group-level outcomes largely overlooked in the passion literature. This study has begun to reveal an important area of future research—the relationship between passion and group-level outcomes—and can be considered an extension to passion research. Consequently, these results reinforce and extend the passion literature (de Mol et al., 2020) indicating that passion can be both helpful and harmful to boards, and, by extension, to the management of group dynamics.

The importance of context and sport passion diversity

While Swanson and Kent (2017) indicated that obsessive passion led exclusively to positive outcomes within professional sport workplaces, this study provides evidence that passion can have a negative impact on sport boards. These contrasting results in the

sport setting highlight how intra-sport contextual factors (e.g., roles and levels in the organization; herein volunteer and board) may shape how passion manifests and whether it leads to positive or negative outcomes. This reinforces the need to carefully consider context when examining passion, particularly when seeking to understand its impact on organizational outcomes.

The Chairs reported that the issues directors tend to be passionate about include diverse “domains” (Cardon et al., 2009) like women’s representation, diversity, governance, high performance, sport events, or participation passions. This diversity perspective represented by the “passion diversity” box in Figure 1 offers a new perspective compared with previous studies, which have focused on a single related passion that sport stakeholders have—namely, passion for their job in the sport workplace (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2016; Swanson & Kent, 2017) or for active leisure (Salama-Younes, 2018). Conversely, our results paradoxically indicated how directors can have different and conflicting domains of sport passion that can create negative issues for board functioning, yet also enhance it. This study contributes to the body of work on sport passion by establishing how sport passion can have various domains, reflecting the diversity of the sport landscape. These differences warrant further studies in diverse leisure, volunteer-based sport organizations such as professional sport boards, sports trusts, and other sport contexts given that previous leisure focused studies have also revealed paradoxical rewards (Cantillon & Baker, 2020; Edwards & Kulczykcki, 2021). These rewards of satisfying personal and social needs and at the same time the costs, including interpersonal relationships dislikes and power struggles which could lead to volunteer departures are inherent in the dynamic of serious leisure volunteering (Cantillon & Baker, 2020; Edwards & Kulczykcki, 2021).

This study showed how sport, as a leisure pursuit, may impact the diverse domains of passion that sport stakeholders can have (e.g., social and political causes such as gender equity and club representation). The involvement of volunteers in sport boards is a serious leisure activity driven by passion for sport much like sport participants. As Moeller et al. (2015) suggest, the context—sport, the sport discipline, leisure mindset, and volunteering—makes a difference to how passion manifests. Consistent with previous passion studies suggesting that passion is contingent on the social and professional context in which individuals operate (Bhansing et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2021), the results also showed some differences between professionalization levels and organizational size in terms of how passion manifests. While previous passion studies (such as Cardon and colleagues) extended knowledge by revealing that different types of passion exist, the conflicting dual nature of diverse sport passion domains identified in this study is a new finding.

Limitations and future research

A limitation is that the findings emanate from a single lens, that of Chairs. While Chairs have valuable perspectives on this phenomenon, this is not the whole picture. Future research will be needed to explore other perspectives and to overcome the limitations of this approach (i.e., social desirability biases (see Fontana & Frey, 2005) and misreporting information to avoid potential repercussions to their role or board). Moreover, the small sample size, one informant per case, and the single method chosen

to explore this phenomenon also impacted the breadth of the findings. Future research could build on these limitations and conduct more in-depth investigation of passion on the board through observational data collection methods, triangulation via several data collection methods, and multiple informants per case. For instance, other directors, CEOs, or former board Chairs might offer different views of the phenomenon. As in all case study research, it does not suggest that the findings are transferable to all nonprofit SGBs more generally given that some differences across SGBs, professionalization levels, and countries (cultural differences in terms of governance) have notably been identified in this study and in previous research (McLeod et al., 2021). However, the use of multiple cases allowed for a diverse dataset, although few differences were identified across Australian NSOs and SSOs. Future research could investigate the extent to which these findings also prevail within and outside other sectors of the sport and leisure industry and culturally diverse countries. Furthermore, what remains unknown are how passion impacts board performance, and ultimately organizational performance (Hoye & Doherty, 2011). Finally, individual and board outcomes are promising lines of future research for a deeper understanding of passion and sport governance.

Practical implications

These findings are crucial for sport and leisure practitioners because they establish and analyze passion as an important factor influencing board functioning. The impacts of passion on board functioning cannot be ignored. Passion appears to be problematic based on the negative impact on directors' commitment, sense of togetherness, and decision quality. A functioning board needs to acknowledge and prevent those issues triggering conflicts and ineffective board processes. For practitioners, this could mean establishing a critical evaluation of directors' passion domains, as well as the core values the board and the organization wish to espouse (Hamm-Kerwin & Doherty, 2010) to pursue congruence, in alignment with a clear strategic vision. Board leaders must be proactive in supervising disagreements among directors to stimulate positive communication and harness the potential negative consequences surrounding passion. While a hybrid board composition can assist in reducing the gap between skills and passion, it does not prevent the dysfunctional outcomes of passion. This study shows countering the negative outcomes of passion is also possible through a focus on evidence-based decision-making and conflict management, which Chairs can actively facilitate.

Despite the negative impacts identified, passion should not be avoided but encouraged because it is positive for board cohesion and climate. However, its intensity should be carefully monitored. If managed properly, passion can be a positive dynamic for a board. For example, through increased discussion and respect, managing passion may serve to improve idea generation, cohesion, decision quality and processes, and eventually board performance.

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