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Women's professional sport leagues: a systematic review and future directions for research

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ABSTRACT

Women's professional sport has grown over the last decade and so has academic scholarship investigating it. It is timely to review and consolidate extant scholarship to identify patterns and gaps in research and future directions for research to support continued advancement in women's professional sport knowledge and practice. This paper presents a systematic quantitative literature review (SQLR) of 57 academic peer-reviewed journal articles researching women's professional sport leagues and published between 2000 and 2019. We provide bibliographic findings, extend the typical SQLR approach and provide an inductive thematic analysis of article findings to synthesise the knowledge base present in the extant research. Based on our SQLR findings, we highlight four key research directions, including the need for (1) diversity in inquiry and reflexivity by researchers, (2) innovative and enabling theories and conceptual frameworks, (3) transdisciplinary research approaches and (4) sustainable business models for women's professional sport. We emphasise that to advance our theoretical understandings and sport management practices in women's professional sport, academics must commit to exploring women's sport in new and different ways, to achieve new and different knowledge and outcomes.

KEYWORDS

Equity and diversity; gender equality; sport development; sustainable business models; transdisciplinary research; professional sport leagues

Introduction

The sports landscape is now providing more opportunities for women's professional sport through increased professional league competitions, which until recent years did not exist (Taylor, Fajak, Hanlon & O'Connor, 2020). These leagues are gaining momentum, becoming more accepted as legitimate competitions and challenging sport's gendered status quo (c.f. Sherry & Taylor, 2019; Taylor, Fajak et al., 2020). We have seen the emergence, rapid development, and popularity of women's professional leagues, such as the Australian Football League Women's (AFLW) in Australia, the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) in the United States, and The Hundred, a women's cricket league in the United Kingdom. These leagues, their teams and athletes, are increasingly contributing to the brand value, appeal, reach and influence of their sport (Hakala, 2020).

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Women's professional leagues have attracted greater emphasis on the development of grassroots opportunities and talent pathways, with the professional competition structures increasing and improving opportunities for women and girls right across the system of sport (Taylor, 2020). In addition, women's professional leagues have been associated with positive societal change (Morgan & Taylor, 2017), inclusive fan cultures (Guest & Luijten, 2018) and female role models (Allison, 2016). Further, such leagues highlight issues of gender inequality in professional sport's institutionalised policies and practices, such as: under-representation of women in leadership roles (Burton, 2015; Lapchick, 2019; Lapchick et al., 2016); the limited coaching opportunities for women (Gomez-Gonzalez et al., 2019); inadequate media coverage (Musto et al., 2017); low levels of investment in the women's game (Valenti et al., 2020); difficulties in attracting sponsorship (Morgan, 2019); and women athletes' inequitable access to and progression in their sport careers (Bowes et al., 2021; Rosner & Shropshire, 2011; Taylor, O'Connor et al., 2020).

While scholarships on women in professional sport leagues is limited comparative to other areas of sport management scholarship (Lough & Geurin, 2019), the aforementioned studies highlight the growing and diverse interest in this area of investigation. With extant studies considering areas including attendant gender, diversity, inclusivity, organisational and societal considerations, it is timely to acknowledge these diversities of insights and synthesise these to inform continued research development (c.f. Weed, 2005) as the field grows to complement developments in practice.

This paper aims to systematically review and synthesise contemporary literature on women's professional sport leagues, identify knowledge gaps and subsequently propose future directions in research to create a catalyst for evidence-based policies and management practices. By undertaking a systematic review of this emerging area of scholarship, we identify, categorise and synthesise research results to stimulate discussion on perspectives and approaches taken to date, and reflect on how these can inform, be used to build on or highlight deficiencies for exploration through future research.

In the following section, we outline our systematic quantitative literature review (SQLR) approach. In the findings section, we present the quantitative findings of the SQLR, followed by an examination of our inductive thematic analysis of the SQLR articles findings. In conclusion, these findings are drawn on to present recommendations for future directions in research.

Methodology

Systematic quantitative literature review

Our aim was to use an SQLR approach to systematically examine contemporary research on women's professional sport leagues, published in English language peer-reviewed journals, to synthesise extant knowledge and inform future directions in women's professional sport research. We chose to analyse articles published over a 20-year period from 2000 to 2019 to delimit the study to contemporary investigations on the phenomenon of women's professional sport leagues. The year 2000 represented the turn of the century, a logical point to begin examining contemporary research, with 2019 being the last complete year of publications at the time of completing the study.

The SQLR is a structured and reproducible approach to search, extract and synthesise a body of literature in the social sciences (Pickering & Byrne, 2014; Yang et al., 2017). The SQLR approach is also “beneficial in initial exploratory stages of assessing literature, particularly for new fields” (Pickering & Byrne, 2014, p. 538), such as the case is for women’s professional sport leagues. A SQLR provides a comprehensive and systematic structure for identifying and mapping the boundaries of the existing research by identifying aims and questions of the SQLR, collating a relevant sample of literature and then recording the number and proportion of studies to provide a survey of the extant literature (Pickering & Byrne, 2014). Consistent with established practice in sports management scholarship (see, Babiak et al., 2018; Maitland et al., 2015), through this review, we sought to identify patterns and gaps in extant research and highlight potential areas for future development. The SQLR technique has been effectively conducted in sport management (e.g., Mollah et al., 2021; Thomson et al., 2019, 2020).

The SQLR approach enables a synthesis of qualitative and quantitative research in a selected body of knowledge through a categorising technique that stocktakes the characteristics of the articles deemed in scope, including the number, proportion and type of papers dedicated to a topic (Pickering & Byrne, 2014). The SQLR approach comprises five stages adapted from Pickering and Byrne (2014) and refined by Yang et al. (2017): (1) defining the research questions, (2) formulating the review protocol, (3) searching the literature, (4) extracting the relevant literature and (5) synthesising the findings.

Research questions

This SQLR was guided by the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: What peer-reviewed literature exists on women’s professional sport leagues (between 2000 and 2019) in English language journals?
- RQ2: What were the key findings in that literature sample?
- RQ3: Are there methodological, conceptual and thematic gaps in the research?
- RQ4: What theoretical, methodological, policy and practice approaches for investigation could guide future directions in research?

Review protocols

A summation of the systematic review process is illustrated in Figure 1. The reporting flowchart was guided by the adapted Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) flowchart of Yang et al. (2017). Each step in the process is elaborated in the following section.

Search terms

The research focus on women’s professional sport leagues informed the choice of key word selection and journal article scope. The nuanced and differing use of terminology across a sample of articles was trialled and then refined. For example, in some women’s

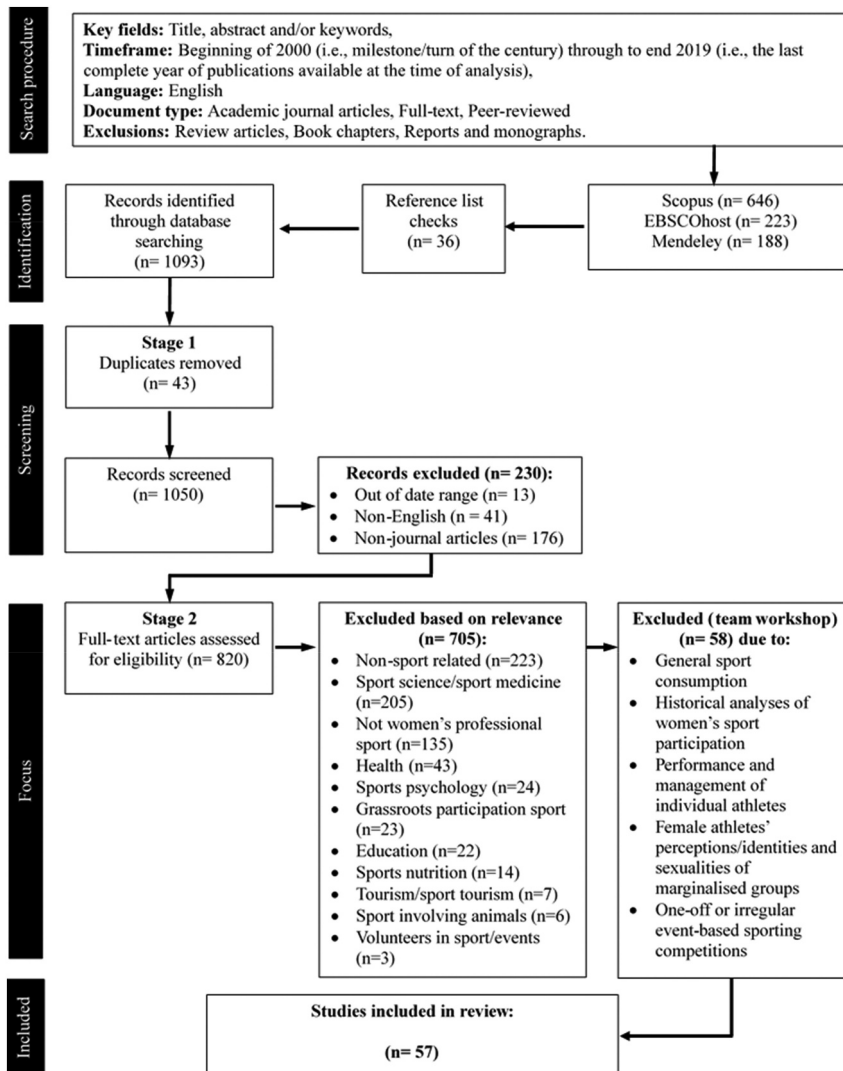


Figure 1. Summary of systematic review process.

football (soccer) research, the simple keyword search of “women AND professional AND sport” would not have included articles that only referred to “women’s elite soccer leagues” in the key search fields. Our final agreed combination of keywords for the literature search included:

- Women OR female OR gender
- AND professional OR elite
- AND sport OR competition OR league
- AND management OR industry

Databases and literature selection criteria

We followed a systematic approach to searching databases and establishing a sample of literature. First, we ran a systematic search of two well-established electronic social sciences databases, Scopus, and EBSCOhost. Searches included keywords in key fields, the timeframe for sampling, criteria for document types, and exclusion of specific document types. Second, the research team manually reviewed a Mendeley database, compiled for a “women in professional sport” research project. Third, the reference lists of the papers identified from the databases were checked for articles which did not show up in the previous searches yet featured the search keywords in the title.

Search literature

Search databases

The literature search against the two databases resulted in 646 articles from Scopus and 223 additional articles from EBSCOhost. Mendeley database search identified additional 188 relevant articles. The reference list search of these 1,077 articles resulted in the addition of further 36 articles. The three stages of systematic and manual literature search retrieved initial 1,093 articles.

Screen search outcomes

Based on the initial database search and compilation, we completed a further two-stage review of all articles to arrive at a final sample. In Stage One, we removed duplicates ($n = 43$) and re-checked the articles to meet our criteria outlined in [Figure 1](#) ($n = 230$). Stage Two included a second round of in-depth review of the literature sample to ensure conceptual relevance of each article to our focus. The second researcher identified 705 articles not in scope, as they were not conceptually or thematically relevant to women’s professional sport leagues. The research team then scrutinised the remaining 115 article abstracts for their conceptual relevance and robustly debated the applicability of each article for the SQLR based on application of the established criteria.

For instance, Fink et al.’s (2004) study explored the use of athletes as endorsers to sell women’s sport. While the article had “women’s sport” in the title, it was not clear whether the study focused on all women’s sport, only professional women’s sport or other forms of women’s sport (e.g., college competitions). The team discussed the relevance of Fink et al.’s (2004) article to this SQLR and noted for consistency, given the abstract did not identify whether the article focused on professional sport in the abstract it was excluded. Whereas an article on the media coverage of the first season of the AFLW by Sherwood et al. (2019) was included as it clearly articulated “women’s sport” in the abstract and mentioned the AFLW (a professional women’s sport league in Australia).

Refine exclusion and inclusion criteria

Based on the research team’s scrutinising and discussions of the 115 articles, we excluded further 58 articles, arriving at the final sample for this SQLR of 57 articles, an amount considered suitable for the SQLR approach (i.e., between 15 and 300 articles; Pickering & Byrne, 2014). [Figure 1](#) visually summarises the number of studies screened and excluded or included to compile the final sample.

Extract literature

The research team identified the following SQLR categories (c.f., Pickering & Byrne, 2014) to analyse the 57 studies included in the review: (i) lead researchers and location of affiliated institute, (ii) year of publication, (iii) journal title, (iv) geographical location where research was conducted and (v) analytical approaches to the research (theoretical/conceptual frameworks, research designs and methods used). We randomly selected six articles and reviewed them to identify four additional categories meaningful to our focus on women's professional sport leagues (c.f. Pickering & Byrne, 2014): "sport", "sport management focus area", "context of study" and "key findings". We used NVivo software to categorise articles and applied direct extraction methods to code information from the articles to the relevant categories listed above. Coding counts from NVivo were used to generate descriptive statistical summaries across a range of categories to identify patterns in variables.

In addition to using an established format for an SQLR, we also conducted an inductive thematic analysis of the SQLR articles' results, findings, outcomes and recommendations sections. This approach allowed us to identify patterns in the research and subsequently what gaps were evident (RQ3) and, in turn, inform suggestions for future research (RQ4). For theoretical or conceptual articles, only the conclusion section was used in the thematic analysis. The second researcher followed a typical inductive thematic analysis using NVivo software, starting with a broad review and open coding of a sample of 10 randomly selected papers and then systematically coded all 57 articles. Articles can be coded to multiple key finding themes. Initially, six higher-order themes were identified (1) governing models impacting success and longevity; (2) inclusive culture and challenging gendered norms; (3) the need to overcome invisibility; (4) women's professional sport for social transformation; (5) acceptance and/or rejection of masculine defined environments and (6) developing talent. The second researcher then drafted descriptions of these themes and the research team reviewed the themes and debated their interpretation (c.f., Sotiriadou et al., 2014). After these peer discussion sessions, several name changes occurred to succinctly describe each theme. Two themes were merged (women's professional sport for social transformation and acceptance and/or rejection of masculine defined environments) due to their similarities. This resulted in five final themes: (1) sports governance models, (2) inclusion and diversity, (3) media coverage, (4) gendered roles and (5) talent development and retention. We used the NVivo matrix query function to explore patterns between the five final themes and the focus of investigation and research design of each article. We provide further detail on the five themes in the findings and discussion sections.

Findings

Our results are presented in two parts. First, we address RQ1 by presenting an overview of the descriptive quantitative results from the 57 peer-reviewed articles and describe how women's professional sport league literature has developed and the ways it has been explored. Second, we address RQ2 by presenting the inductive themes identified in the key findings of the sample articles. We address RQ3 and RQ4 in the discussion and conclusion sections of the paper.

Women's professional sport – an emerging area of research

The volume of published research (in peer-reviewed English journals) on women's professional sport (2000–2019) reached its highest point in 2019 (8 articles), illustrated in Figure 2. However, over the 20-year period, the absolute volume of work was relatively modest, and in some years (e.g., 2001, 2008 and 2010) no papers were published. While the 20-year average is low (i.e., 2.8 articles per year), the average over the last 4 years (i.e., 7.3) signals an emerging body of knowledge complementing the global growth of women's professional sport leagues. There were 50 different lead authors across the 57 articles. Lead researchers of articles were based at institutions across nine countries, including the USA ($n = 24$), Australia ($n = 11$), the UK ($n = 8$), Denmark ($n = 5$), Norway ($n = 4$), Canada ($n = 2$) and New Zealand, France and Spain, each represented by a single article. The countries of focus in the studies included the USA ($n = 25$), Australia ($n = 11$), the UK ($n = 6$), Denmark ($n = 4$), New Zealand ($n = 4$), Norway ($n = 4$), Canada ($n = 3$), Sweden ($n = 2$), France ($n = 2$), Germany ($n = 2$), China ($n = 1$) and South Korea ($n = 1$).

Qualitative research designs dominated the literature sample (42%), followed by quantitative research designs (32%), illustrated in Figure 3. Of the empirical articles (i.e., indicative of a qualitative/quantitative/mixed method design, $n = 47$), qualitative research designs mostly incorporated semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, whereas quantitative papers primarily drew on questionnaire surveys, summarised in Figure 4. We identified a diversification in research tools used, for instance, in addition to traditional and common methods mentioned above, publications between 2015 and 2019 deployed document and content analysis, case studies, media reporting and ethnography, which were limited in earlier years of the sample.

Our literature sample focused predominantly on organisation and management of women's professional sport, followed by media coverage and portrayal of women's professional leagues. Theoretical perspectives observed across the sample are listed in Table 1, the most apparent included mainstream marketing theories ($n = 11$), critical theories ($n = 8$), gender relations ($n = 6$), and gender roles ($n = 4$), and applied to a range of

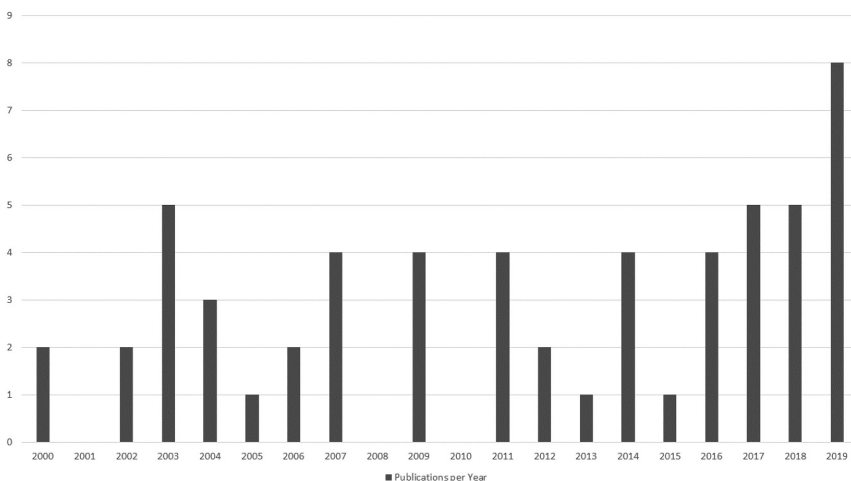


Figure 2. Year of publication.

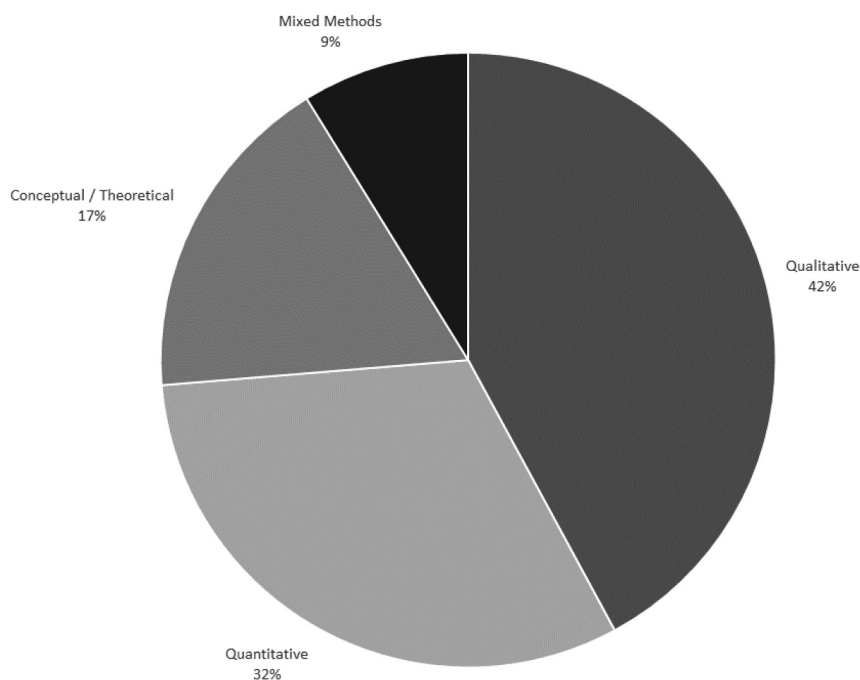


Figure 3. Research designs.

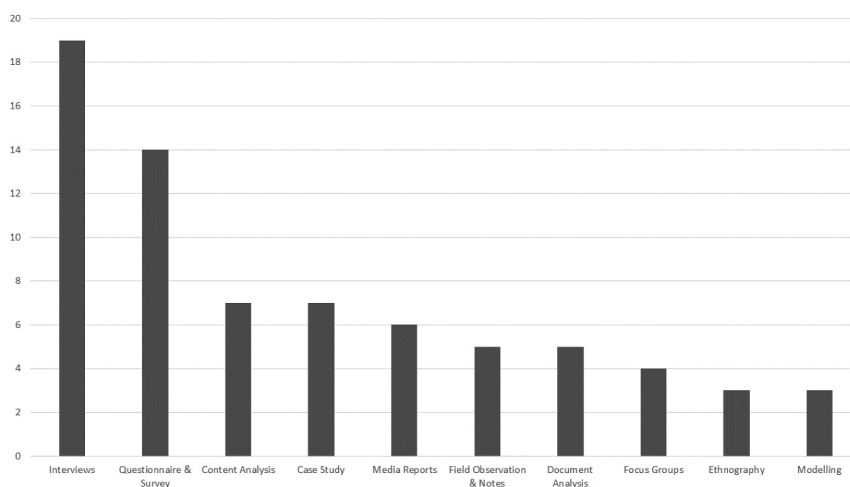


Figure 4. Methods used in empirical papers. Footnote: Note that [Figure 4](#) data does not tally to 100%, based on the 18 articles that adopted more than one method.

topics. A number of papers ($n = 10$) had no stated theoretical or conceptual basis. No papers claimed a contribution to the literature through new theoretical or conceptual models or approaches. Research primarily focused on football/soccer (57%), basketball (16%) and cricket (12%).

Table 1. Theoretical perspectives.

Theoretical Perspectives (e.g., viewpoints, concepts, frameworks)	N =
Marketing theories or concepts (e.g., branding; consumer attitudes/intentions/motivations and/or behaviour; psychological involvement; market segmentation; expectancy disconfirmation theory)	11
Critical theories (including contested public space; critical sociological perspectives; Foucault's male spaces and history of the present; gendered spaces – marginalisation and exclusion; Theory of Established-Outsider Relations; time and temporality; landscapes of practice).	8
Gender relations (i.e. analysis of gendered power relations; hegemonic sports cultures; exclusionary power)	6
Gender roles (e.g., gender imprinting, role attitudes, lenses and role conflict)	4
Media framing (including Agenda-setting theory; media gatekeeping)	4
Feminist/postfeminist theories (e.g., Physical Feminism; Postfeminist Discourse)	4
Organisational behaviour theories (e.g., Gendered Organizations Theory/Institutional logics perspective; social categorisation, similarity attraction perspectives and group faultlines; new professionalism; Pettigrew's contextual approach to change)	4
Human resources concepts (including labour market regulation, age rules, performance related pay)	3
Social identity (including identity construction; self-categorisation theory)	2
Grounded Theory	2
Constraints theory	1
Globalization Theory	1
Not specified (articles reviewed relevant literature but did not mention a specific frameworks or key concepts used to guide the study)	10

Articles were predominantly published in sport-focused journals, including sport sociology (45.6%), sport management (15.8%), sport marketing (10.5%) and sport science (1.8%) journals. The most prevalent sport-specific journals included, *Sport in Society* (n = 12), *Soccer in Society* (n = 7), *Sport Marketing Quarterly* (n = 5), and *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* (n = 5). Non-sport specific outlets accounted for approximately a quarter of publications and included media and communications (8.8%), business and human relations (7%), sociology (7%) and psychology journals (3.5%).

Inductive themes identified in key findings of the articles

The inductive analysis articles resulted in the identification of five main themes including (1) sport governance models (n = 30), (2) inclusion and diversity (n = 27), (3) media coverage (n = 25), (4) gendered roles (n = 12) and (5) talent development and retention (n = 8). The most common structure of previous SQLRs in the sport discipline presents themes from article findings as a final variable discretely presented in the findings section (e.g., Thomson et al., 2019). In this paper, we sought to advance the standard SQLR approach in terms of acknowledging that article findings importantly constitute a body of knowledge and are a product of research strategies. As such, we explore article findings in detail and draw on variables observed in our analysis (including focus of studies within women's professional sport leagues, theoretical perspectives used, research designs and methods applied, location of studies and sports investigated), in order to synthesise and build an understanding of the patterns of approach and knowledge derived from our sample.

This integrative approach to SQLR findings is illustrated in Table 2 matrix, which first lists the five inductive article finding themes and then details for each of these themes the most common: theoretical perspectives; research designs and methods and the countries and sports studied. Importantly, Table 2 is not an exhaustive presentation of all findings; instead, in keeping with the aim of the SQLR to synthesise extant knowledge and identify patterns and gaps in the research, we confine our presentation of findings to the most

Table 2. Matrix of inductive themes (article findings) and other key variables from the SQLR.

Most common:					
Article findings Themes	Focus for articles coded to the theme	Theoretical Perspectives	Research Design	Method	Countries studied
1. Sport governance models (n = 30)	Governance and law (n = 13) Fan or consumer engagement (n = 6) Sport or talent development (n = 6)	Marketing theories/concepts (n = 7) Not Spec. (n = 6) Organisational behaviour theories (n = 4) Critical theories (n = 4)	Qualitative (n = 12) Quantitative (n = 10)	Interviews (n = 9) Questionnaire (n = 8) Not Spec. (n = 6) Document analysis (n = 5)	USA (n = 9) Australia (n = 6) UK (n = 5) Not Spec.(n = 4)
2. Inclusion and diversity (n = 27)	Sport sociology (n = 6) Sport or talent development (n = 6) Media representation and coverage (n = 5)	Feminist/post-feminist theories (n = 4) Marketing theories and concepts (n = 4) Critical theories (n = 3) Gender relations (n = 3) Gender roles (n = 3) Media framing (n = 3) Critical theories (n = 6) Not Spec. (n = 6) Gender relations (n = 5) Media framing (n = 4)	Qualitative (n = 12) Conceptual and theoretical (n = 7)	Interviews (n = 9) Not Spec. (n = 7) Questionnaire (n = 5)	USA (n = 15) Australia (n = 4) Canada (n = 3)
3. Media coverage (n = 25)	Media representation and coverage (n = 11) Sport or talent development (n = 5)	Critical theories (n = 3) Media framing (n = 3) Critical theories (n = 6) Not Spec. (n = 6) Gender relations (n = 5) Media framing (n = 4)	Qualitative (n = 11) Quantitative (n = 6)	Interviews (n = 7) Content analysis (n = 7) Not Spec. (n = 5)	Australia (n = 9) USA (n = 8) New Zealand (n = 3) UK (n = 3)
4. Gendered roles (n = 20)	Sport or talent development (n = 6) Sport sociology (n = 5) Governance and law (n = 3)	Critical theories (n = 5) Feminist/post-feminist theories (n = 4) Not Spec. (n = 3) Gender roles (n = 2)	Qualitative (n = 11) Conceptual and theoretical (n = 6)	Interviews (n = 11) Not Spec. (n = 6)	USA (n = 11) Australia (n = 4)

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Most common:						
Article findings Themes	Focus for articles coded to the theme	Theoretical Perspectives	Research Design	Method	Countries studied	Sport/s studied
5. Talent development and retention (n = 8)	Governance and law (n = 5)	Not Spec. (n = 2)	Quantitative (n = 4)	Interviews (n = 3)	Norway (n = 2)	Football (n = 3)
	Sport or talent development (n = 3)	Constraints theory (n = 1) Critical theories (n = 1) Human resource concepts (n = 1) Organisational behaviour perspectives (n = 1)	Qualitative (n = 3)	Questionnaire (n = 2) Modelling (n = 2)	Not Spec. (n = 2) (Also single instances of China, Denmark, France, Germany, USA and Sweden)	Tennis (n = 3)

Footnote: Cells do not equate to 100% as the table presents overarching and illustrative information on common trends across article findings in our sample.

common key variables evident in the articles coded to themes. For instance, in Theme 1: Sport governance models, a range of different foci was evident, the most common foci in these articles were governance and law ($n = 13$), managing for fan or consumer engagement ($n = 6$) and sport or talent development ($n = 6$). The remaining five articles coded under “Sport governance models” spanned a wide diversity of foci.

In the following section, we present a description of each of the five inductive themes. These themes represent the most common trends depicted in article findings, and we provide a commentary on the key arguments we observed across the sample. We have included quotes from articles we feel best represent the sentiments of the respective themes.

Theme 1: sports governance models

The design and implementation of sport governance models for women’s professional sport leagues was a dominant theme across the article findings reviewed ($n = 30$). Articles coded to this theme predominantly focused on aspects of governance and law ($n = 13$) and were informed mostly by marketing theories and concepts ($n = 7$) (e.g., understanding of consumer motivations behaviour and implications for management), followed by an equal representation of organisational behaviour theories ($n = 4$) and critical theories ($n = 4$). Interestingly, six of the articles coded to this theme did not specify a theoretical perspective underpinning the study. Most of the studies in this theme were conducted by researchers in the USA ($n = 9$) and used qualitative research designs ($n = 12$), mainly interviews ($n = 9$), and half of the articles studied the sport of football ($n = 15$).

In article findings coded to “Sport governance models”, a key argument was sport bodies should enable and leverage the uniqueness of women’s sport, rather than simply following equivalent men’s models (e.g., Allison, 2016; Cortsen, 2017). Articles in this theme argued that when the heterogeneity of men’s and women’s sport was structured, administered and marketed accordingly, women’s professional sport was more likely to develop and thrive. An example of governance and law is provided by Mansfield and Killick (2012, p. 545), who used interviews in their study of the Women’s National Soccer League in the United Kingdom and suggested this governance model was as follows: “an empowered franchise model ... which is decentralised and informal and ... different franchises are characterised by high degrees of diversity in terms of organisational environment and their own structural characteristics of specialisation and standardisation”.

Those studies coded to “Sport governance models”, which examined the management of marketing approaches, highlighted when women’s professional sport is expected to ascribe to the culture and performance of men’s professional sport, but without an equitable resource base, women’s sport struggles to survive and succeed (e.g., Didulica, 2019; Mooney et al., 2019). Within the organisational behaviour perspectives, Allison (2016) utilised gendered organisations theory and qualitative interviews to examine the women’s professional football (soccer) league in the USA and found the uncertainty facing the women’s league was due to a complex institutional environment within the governing body. The league saw itself as a part of the field of the U.S. professional sports landscape, dominated by men’s competitions which are often measured by media coverage, revenue, and corporate partnerships. Applying a business lens meant success was evaluated based on a masculinised form of monetisation. Yet, stakeholders in women’s professional football

also saw “itself within a legacy of second wave liberal feminist projects concerned with growing women’s opportunities in sport” (Allison, 2016, p. 257). More recently, in the context of Australian sport, for instance, Didulica’s (2019) investigation of legal frameworks discussed how football needed to adapt established protocols (e.g., regulatory frameworks, human performance expectations and medical needs) to reflect an inclusive approach to the growth and development of elite women competitions.

Theme 2: inclusion and diversity

The unique opportunities women’s professional sports provide to promote the values of inclusion and diversity (n = 27) were the second most prevalent theme in the article findings. Articles coded to this theme primarily focused on aspects of sports sociology (n = 6) and drew on feminist/post-feminist theories (n = 4) and marketing theories and concepts (n = 4). Qualitative research methods were the most prevalent, with interviews the most common approach (n = 9), and the largest proportion of studies explored being USA (15) and football (n = 16) and basketball (n = 5).

In article findings coded to “Inclusion and diversity”, common acknowledgement was women’s sport fans were likely to have different motives, values and expectations compared to fans of men’s sport. For instance, McDonald (2000, pp. 45–46), guided by marketing and feminist theories, argued the USA’s Women’s National Basketball Association’s (WNBA) marketing material celebrated postfeminist ideologies through assertions about “female strength and equity” and leagues, such as the WNBA, can extend representations and postfeminist ideologies outside of sport by “construct[ing] popular understandings of feminism that shape interventions into the material conditions of everyday lives of both men and women”.

In one of the earlier studies in the sample, Funk et al. (2003) found American consumers of women’s sport rated contextual factors favourably, including female players as role models, supporting competitive opportunities for women, and the presence of a family-friendly environment. More recently, Guest and Luijten’s (2018, p. 1013) study of fans of women’s football in the USA found fans wanted to consume a quality sporting product and valued the opportunity to identify with the “gender empowerment, diversity and inclusion” of the women’s sport product. Elicited through interviews, Guest and Luijten (2018) suggested sports need to adopt or develop alternative models of sport fandom to better suit women’s professional sport.

Theme 3: media coverage

The third prevalent theme highlighted the importance of the quantity and quality of media coverage of women’s professional sport. Articles coded to this theme focused on media representation and coverage aspects and predominantly drew on critical theories (n = 6) and gender relations (n = 5). Interestingly, six articles coded to this theme did not specify a theoretical perspective underpinning the study. Studies predominantly used qualitative methods (n = 11), such as interviews (n = 7) or content analysis (n = 7). Studies mostly examined Australia (n = 9) and the USA (n = 8) in football (soccer) (n = 12) and cricket (n = 5).

In articles coded to this theme of “Media coverage”, its role and importance was typically highlighted in terms of attracting fans, improving attendance at games and increasing its attractiveness to sponsors. A key argument in the “Media coverage” theme

highlights women's sport struggled in the early 21st Century to achieve the necessary media coverage and exposure needed to demonstrate it was a viable product in the mainstream (i.e., men's) sporting landscape (see, Hardin, 2005). Hardin's (2005, p. 62) work, established through interviews with American journalists, is just one example that underlines a theme of systemic factors inhibiting positive media coverage and exposure, noting "many [media] editors fail to systematically ascertain reader interests, many believe female athletic potential is inferior to that of males, and some say they feel no commitment to hiring women or covering women's sports". Similarly, Caple et al.'s (2011) examination of Australian media coverage of the national women's football (soccer) team found the on-field success of the team did not translate to media success, with television and media coverage poorly representing the team. Caple et al. (2011, p. 145) also noted, "women's sporting organisations lack the funding and infrastructure necessary to support them in being more proactive in reaching out to and informing journalists" about newsworthy occurrences in their sports. Increased reporting would raise the profile of women's sport and could lead to sponsorship opportunities.

While the emergence of social media is acknowledged as offering the potential to address the shortcomings of traditional media coverage of women's sports (e.g., Burch et al., 2018; Pegoraro et al., 2018; Vann, 2014), research has found social media reporting to be gendered in its orientation (Burch et al., 2018). The latter's study of social media for USA men's and women's (football/soccer) teams at the 2014 and 2015 FIFA World Cups found no differences regarding characterisations of success and failure; however, the women's team was more likely to receive commentary related to personal and physical characterisations. On the other hand, Pegoraro et al.'s (2018, p. 1063) exploration of framing and content analysis of athlete photos on Instagram during the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup revealed "users primarily portrayed women athletes as athletically competent" and suggested new media could provide opportunities "to challenge gender stereotypes in women's sports". The media coverage theme also emphasised women's sport typically receives more coverage during large-scale events. This is due to national attention and potential international success, compared to the reporting of regular professional league competitions (e.g., Brus & Trangbæk, 2003; Burch et al., 2018; Petty & Pope, 2019).

Theme 4: gendered roles

A theme of "Gendered roles" was the fourth most prevalent theme. Articles coded to this theme focused on two main areas, sport development or talent development (n = 6) and sport sociology (n = 5) and tended to be informed by critical theories (n = 5) and feminist and post-feminist theories (n = 4). Studies were predominantly qualitative in design and relied on interviews (11). Studies were primarily situated in the USA (n = 11) and typically considered football (soccer) (n = 8) and basketball (n = 3).

In articles coded to "Gendered roles", findings explored experiences, expectations, and gendered roles of women's professional sport athletes. In doing so, these articles explored gendered stereotypes and expectations and argued that women's professional sport leagues present opportunities to challenge and redefine gender roles. Articles consistently reported elite women athletes constantly negotiate gender role expectations of their athletic performance and identity (e.g., Berg et al., 2014; Comley, 2016; Fallon & Jome, 2007; Fasting, 2003; Willson et al., 2018). Women professional rugby players in the

USA, for example, reported experiencing a gender-role conflict, trying to enact feminine and masculine gender roles (Fallon & Jome, 2007). Fallon and Jome (2007) found successful female athletes demonstrated resilience in coping with discrepant gender-role messages communicated by their families, friends and co-workers and were adept at negotiating gendered stereotypes, rather than succumbing to or being de-motivated by them. Conversely, Berg et al.'s (2014, p. 186) investigation of gender role negotiation in American Professional Tackle football, found, "female football players approach the game with behavioural expectations and assumptions similar to their male counterparts, and thus, perpetuate the masculine-defined sport ethic in football".

The success of a range of different women's professional sport leagues was also recognised as providing stimulus to challenge gender norms (e.g., Burch et al., 2018; Joncheray et al., 2016; Pegoraro et al., 2018; Willson et al., 2018). For instance, public interest in and support for the AFLW were seen as a contributor to the league's success and provided an opportunity to challenge attitudes towards traditional gender roles and expectations (Willson et al., 2018). Social media also afforded a prospect to challenge gender stereotypes in sport, broaden fan bases and enable female athletes to create their own frames (see, Burch et al., 2018; Pegoraro et al., 2018 and their studies on USA women's football).

Other factors found to be successful in challenging gender roles related to athletes' construction of their own identity. According to Kristiansen et al. (2014), women professional footballers constantly negotiate gender. Through interviews with professional footballers in the USA, Kristiansen et al. (2014, pp. 18–19) noted that players are often labelled "tomboys" which has been a "signifier of female athletes who exhibited gender traits traditionally coded as masculine, such as strength, power, and muscularity". The article also revealed the development of women's sports is perforated with contradictions and complexities, while the presence of gender is a powerful structure in athletes' everyday lives.

Theme 5: talent development and retention

The final theme was "Talent development and retention". These eight articles primarily focused on aspects relating to governance and law ($n = 5$) and, as listed in Table 2, were informed by a range of theoretical perspectives across the articles, thus making it difficult to identify particular patterns in this segment of the sample. Research designs were almost equally quantitative and qualitative and mostly included interviews ($n = 3$) and questionnaires ($n = 2$) or predictive modelling ($n = 2$). As indicated in Table 2, this theme covered a range of different countries (7) in which research was conducted. Key sports included football (soccer) ($n = 3$) and tennis ($n = 3$).

In articles coded to "Talent development and retention", findings explored the role of talent development in the growth and sustainability of women's professional sport leagues. The findings highlighted the criticality of talent development at all levels of the sports system and collectively argued for talent development programs to improve the athletic performance and professionalism of elite sportswomen (e.g., Agergaard, 2017; Eliasson, 2009; Gomez-Gonzalez et al., 2019).

The increased globalisation of women's professional sport was found to present challenges and opportunities in terms of talent development and retention and the development of sustainable women's professional sports leagues (e.g., Agergaard, 2017; Eliasson,

2009; Skogvang, 2019). For instance, Eliasson's (2009) study of Swedish women's domestic football (soccer) found the competitiveness and financial viability of other European leagues presented a threat to the Swedish league's retention and development of players as greater mobility of professional sports women meant athletes are attracted to better conditions and opportunities in other nations. Similarly, Skogvang (2019) interviewed pioneers of women's football in Norway and found the dream of playing professional football and to make a career and living from football, brought female players from across the globe.

Discussion of patterns and gaps in the women's professional sport literature

In this section, we discuss the methodological, conceptual and thematic patterns in the extant research and highlight gaps, thus addressing RQ3. Recommendations for future directions in research in women's professional sport (RQ4) are then outlined. We identified five main patterns in the extant research: (1) limited diversity in inquiry and research approaches, (2) dominance of mainstream theories in sport sociology, marketing and management, (3) women's professional sport predominantly published in sociology outlets and relied on qualitative research designs, (4) the expectation of women's professional sport to be an exemplar of diversity, inclusion and social change and (5) opportunities for transdisciplinary research approaches to advance women's professional sport knowledge and practice.

Limited diversity in inquiry and research approach

The review scope was restricted to publications in English language journals, and therefore perhaps not surprisingly, lead authors of articles were from the USA and Australia, and other European democratic nations and studied women's sports leagues predominantly in countries of a similar profile. Given the topic area, it was surprising to find feminist analyses and considerations of gender bias were minimal, with few articles using critical theories (8%) or feminist theories (6%). This limited presence of critical and feminist approaches suggests analyses drawing from feminist and post-feminist theory, which are increasingly prevalent in other research disciplines (Lefkowich, 2019), could profitably assist in the development of research into women's professional sport leagues. To embrace such approaches may provide greater researcher reflexivity in relation to gender identities, gendered norms and intersectional experiences of privilege and oppression in women's professional sport leagues (c.f., Ratna & Samie, 2017). While we are conscious of our focused scope with English-language literature, we are also cognizant that the research community must move forward with greater reflexivity, otherwise "researchers may reinforce the same structures of power and stereotypical gender norms that they aim to disrupt in their scholarship" (Lefkowich, 2019, p. 1).

The dominance of mainstream theories in sport sociology, marketing and management

The dominance of mainstream organisational theories and marketing theories, many of which have been applied and/or developed in examinations of men's professional sport (see, Funk et al., 2002, 2003) is reflective of the dominant masculine values, philosophies

and practices in traditional sporting structures. While our study found that critical and feminist theories informed some articles in our sample of literature (14% as noted above), these lenses and frameworks were less common than mainstream theories in the sample of articles reviewed. In line with limitations acknowledged later in the paper, we encourage readers to consider the following findings within the bounds we established methodologically and that it is beyond the scope of the SQLR to consider any research submissions to journals that were based in contemporary feminist theory and/or methods but may have been rejected for publication through the peer review process or did not meet the keyword or conceptual criteria for this study.

From a pragmatic perspective, the representation of mainstream theories may reflect approaches to studying women's professional sport are based in the same way men's professional sports have been researched. However, traditional applications of sport and management theories in men's sport may not best service women's professional sport as the milieus of men's and women's professional sport is not interchangeable, and women's sport is not merely a subset of men's sport. The uniqueness of women's professional sport may be more aptly understood through unique and emerging approaches to theorising (refer to the findings section Theme 1: Sport governance models for examples of this). Where the research community fails to bring new lens to bear, there is a risk of reiterating the social disparities of men's and women's professional sport (Fullagar, 2017), as opposed to realising the potential of women's professional sport into the future.

There continue to be calls in the sport management field for researchers to broaden the theoretical perspectives used to examine the sport phenomenon (Cunningham, 2013; Doherty, 2012; Fink, 2013; Frisby, 2005). However, our findings in this SQLR indicate these calls have not been addressed on the topic of women's professional sport leagues. As such, the findings from our current study reiterate the need for the development, application and discovery of emerging and unique theories and concepts.

Sociology outlets and qualitative research designs

Articles in our SQLR sample were predominantly published in sociology outlets and primarily drew on qualitative research designs, in line with the critical theoretical and gender studies bases of these papers. Rationales for this pattern may include the sociology-based inquiry of many of the studies or perhaps that the phenomenon is "relatively" new and emergent, and therefore researchers deployed exploratory designs and methods (c.f., Bryman, 2015). Notably, the concern for limited quantitative data/studies was identified in earlier work on women's professional football (Martinez-Lagunas et al., 2014; Valenti et al., 2018). While our study indicates some diversification of methods used in articles published in the recent years of our SQLR, including analysis of media and written texts and case studies and ethnographies, the use of these methods was still limited compared to the frequency of more traditional methods across the literature sampled. An alternate and critical perspective may posit that this pattern reflects a reality wherein the sport management research community has and continues to grapple with how to locate new and different approaches to examine, understand and value women's professional sport.

Fullagar (2017) has called for researchers to find new and better ways to capture the complexity and messiness of women's sporting experiences, and Hoeber and Shaw (2017) suggested sport scholars move beyond qualitative interview techniques by incorporating other approaches, such as participatory action research, narratives and autoethnographies. However, such an evolution in research approaches and designs needs to be supported across the sport management academy by recognizing and accepting different ways of knowledge generation. This means our sports management academy needs to consider structural aspects of knowledge generation, such as what types of approaches and designs are accepted and/or encouraged across the discipline for the generation of knowledge and dissemination of information in the field, why others may not be and why this is so. Continuing to develop research in this space of creating sustainable women's professional sport enterprises is likely to challenge conventional ways of generating knowledge in the sport management discipline. This may mean adopting strategies such as transdisciplinary approaches to research (discussed further below) that may assist with negotiating these challenges and are informed by cutting edge and relevant research.

The expectation of women's professional sport to be an exemplar of diversity, inclusion and social change

Our SQLR inductive thematic analysis identified strong expectations for women's professional sport to promote values of inclusion and diversity (Theme 2) and contribute to broader gender equity and equality agendas (Theme 4). Prima face, these ideals appear to be a unique selling point for women's professional sport. Alternatively, critical and feminist scholars, such as Fink (2016), argue sexism continues to pervade sport in subtle and covert ways, and expectations of women's professional sport leagues to promote inclusion and diversity may actually inhibit the development of women's professional sport. For instance, emphasising the social good of women's professional sport, while at the same time expecting women's professional sport to conform to the same governance, physical performance and commercial viability of men's sport places a burden on women's professional sport leagues. Such expectations are not too dissimilar from lines of argument in other fields of inquiry, which highlight these expectations as placing unfair burdens on women, such as the gendered expectations of women's leadership (Zheng et al., 2018) and the gendered expectations of female schoolteachers (Sprague & Massoni, 2005).

Similarly, findings that women's professional sport leagues are sites for contesting and challenging gender roles (Theme 4) may present a double bind for professional sportswomen who need to negotiate gendered norms and also carry responsibility for advancing the interests of equity and equality for broader society. Ironically, some of this research promoting these values may in fact reiterate the "subtle and ambiguous" sexism still present in contemporary sport (Fink, 2016, p. 2). Ultimately, gender equality is a societal goal, rather than one unique to professional sports-women to advance.

Opportunities for transdisciplinary research approaches to advance women's professional sport knowledge and practice

Our thematic findings within Theme 1 highlighted the potential for future research to engage with transdisciplinary research approaches to influence and drive change in women's professional sport, particularly in the area of governance. Importantly, our SQLR article findings indicated that when governance models are heterogeneous, characterised by diversity and relevance to local environments and specialisations, women's professional sport thrives. Conversely, it will be hindered when expected to ascribe to the conventional criteria of traditional men's professional sport (c.f. Allison, 2016; Cortsen, 2017).

Transdisciplinary research approaches may provide a productive avenue for exploration in women's professional sport and contribute to the sustainability of women's professional sport into the future. Transdisciplinary research is characterised by researchers from different disciplines working together, along with practitioners to co-create solutions to complex real-world phenomena (Toohey et al., 2018). Transdisciplinary research provides opportunities to apply contemporary modes of understanding (e.g., post/feminist, post-qualitative inquiry, new materialism and post-humanist theories (c.f., Fullagar, 2017)) to real-world problems, in partnership with practitioners. There may also be opportunities to engage media professionals with scholars to re-imagine the role of media in the promotion and distribution of women's professional sport (see Theme 3). Transdisciplinary research approaches have grown rapidly in other areas of social sciences, due to their efficacy in knowledge development and positive uptake in policy and industry settings (Mitchell et al., 2015). As such, transdisciplinary research approaches can be deployed by researchers to work in partnership with industry stakeholders, such as women's professional sport league practitioners and media practitioners, to develop informed and relevant research to assist improve policy and management impact.

Conclusion and future directions for research

The aims of this paper were to systematically review and synthesise existing literature, identify knowledge gaps and subsequently propose future directions in research to advance the understanding of the management of women's professional sport leagues. Through the study findings presented in this paper we have identified a range of patterns and gaps in the extant literature, while noting the challenges in systematically compiling the sample used, and we acknowledge limitations in this final section.

In concluding, we respond to our RQ4 and present four areas for research direction, listed in Table 3, and outline associated key considerations we encourage women's professional sport league researchers to incorporate into their research foci and research designs to build knowledge, provide evidence bases and inform management practices. The four key research directions are as follows: (1) diversity in inquiry and reflexivity by researchers, (2) innovative and enabling theories and conceptual frameworks, (3) transdisciplinary research approaches and (4) sustainable business models for women's professional sport. Key considerations for each of these research directions are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Research directions and key considerations in future research.

Research Direction	Key considerations in future research
(1) Diversity in inquiry and reflexivity by researchers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Form research teams in ways that deliberately reflect and appreciate the gendered sensitivities of intersectionality and politics of difference. • Engage in reflexive practices which challenge sports taken for granted structures of power and stereotypical gender norms – in research design, findings and dissemination of implications.
(2) Innovative and enabling theories and conceptual frameworks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employ innovative and enabling theories and conceptual frameworks to deal with the uniqueness of women's professional sport leagues and support growth and development.
(3) Transdisciplinary research approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of transdisciplinary research encourages researchers and practitioners to work in partnership as a catalyst to enrich understandings of the nuances of women's professional sport leagues and key considerations for sustainable development. Such approaches can influence practice, thereby providing opportunities for important advancements in the management of women's professional sport leagues.
(4) Sustainable business models for women's professional sport leagues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate emerging and unique research designs to study women's professional sport leagues to challenge traditional structures and practices in sport management. • Investigate fit-for-purpose sustainable business models to grow and develop women's professional sport leagues.

In highlighting areas for future research directions, we have refrained from suggesting specific research questions, as found in recent systematic reviews to encourage advancement in bodies of knowledge (e.g., Baxter et al., 2021). Instead, we posit that advancing women's professional sport league research and practice requires both focus on the specific questions researchers ask, as well as focus on how women's professional sport leagues are approached by researchers. We reiterate the work of scholars, including Fink (2016) and Fullagar (2017), by emphasising that to advance our theoretical understandings and sport management practices in women's professional sport leagues, academics must commit to exploring women's sport leagues in new and different ways, to achieve new and different knowledge and outcomes. Transdisciplinary approaches position researchers to work with and alongside practitioners and policymakers to inform the body of knowledge and influence sport management and practice. These approaches can advance the knowledge and practice of women's professional sport leagues.

Limitations

We acknowledge three main limitations of applying the SQLR technique. First, defining the boundaries for the systematic inclusion and exclusion of research presented challenges. The criteria we set in terms of academic peer-reviewed journal articles resulted in the exclusion of research and conceptual works published in books, book chapters, conference or lecture papers, and research theses. For instance, Fink's (2016) article on the embedded nature of sexism in sport was not included in our final sample as it was a conference paper. Second, our search for keywords in key fields (i.e., titles, abstracts and keywords) means articles of indirect relevance were excluded. For instance, Toohey et al. (2018) discuss women's professional sport through the body of their article, but the required keywords were not included in the title or abstract. Finally, the requirement for articles to be in the English language means our sample

provides limited insights into the women's professional sport phenomenon from contexts and cultures and researchers where English is not the primary language of publication.

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* Articles included in study sample