



Article

'Zero Gravity': Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Professional Intentions and Career Pathway Vision of Sport Management Students

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Abstract: The pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus has transformed the professional landscape and people's career expectations. Especially among students, who now face new challenges not foreseen when they started their studies before the pandemic. Nevertheless, to date, there are no specific studies that examine in depth how the restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have reshaped the professional expectations of future sport managers. To address this research gap, the main purpose of the study is to explore how COVID-19 pandemic has affected the professional intentions and career plans of sport management students. To this end, we share the visions collected in written essays, that a group of 90 students from the Paris Saclay University (France) have concerning their professional future and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on it. The essays were qualitatively analyzed based on the self-concept theory of career development through the person–environment perspective. The findings suggest that the COVID-19 outbreak influenced sport management students' self-concept, their future workplace and employment time choice planning, and overall, their vision and intention for their career path. Accordingly, sports management educators, educational institutions, and policymakers need to ensure that sport management curricula and teaching practices address the new demands of the sports industry prompted by the pandemic, together with the expectations and educational needs of the sport management students.

Keywords: sport management education; self-concept; COVID-19; person–environment perspective; professional development; higher education



Citation: Glebova, E.; López-Carril, S. 'Zero Gravity': Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Professional Intentions and Career Pathway Vision of Sport Management Students. *Educ. Sci.* **2023**, *13*, 807. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13080807>

Academic Editors: Carlos Hervás-Gómez, María Dolores Díaz-Noguera, Pedro Román-Graván and Carmen Corujo-Vélez

Received: 3 July 2023
Revised: 30 July 2023
Accepted: 31 July 2023
Published: 6 August 2023



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1. Introduction

The outbreak caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, followed by strict sanitary measures at the beginning of 2020, has led to drastic changes in education and students' lifestyles [1,2]. Among these changes is the prominent digital disruption, which has swiftly shifted from face-to-face to online or hybrid education [3–5], where digital channels, such as social media, have become valuable tools to create teaching-learning environments [6], and for establishing crucial connections and networks among students [7].

The sports industry has not been immune to the effects of the pandemic either [8]. There is a plethora of well-known examples of the COVID-19 pandemic's unprecedented effects on the sport industry and sport management, such as the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic Games or the UEFA Euro 2020 postponements (see [9,10]) or how it has reshaped fan relationship management. In this sense, sports teams, beyond their performance on the field, can contribute to the psychological well-being of fans by reinforcing digital interactions and creating a sense of togetherness, generating closer and more spontaneous relationships through social media platforms such as TikTok (see [11,12]). Finally, the restrictions associated with the pandemic have limited the possibility of outdoor physical activity, affecting the motivation and frequency of physical activity among citizens and

athletes [13,14]. Given these transformations in the sport industry, sport management students' professional intentions and career plans may have changed in a sporting world that differs dramatically from the one in which they embarked on their studies. Especially, considering that the pandemic situation has led to winners (windfall effect for certain sports associations thanks to the government support policies, see [15]) and losers (e.g., fitness centers that were unable to operate because of the restrictions, whose owners were forced to close their businesses).

The impact of the pandemic on education and sport spheres embraces and demands a holistic transformation of both [16,17]. Sport management education is where these two areas converge, and where future sport managers are educated and prepared for their professional career. While new opportunities that COVID-19 pandemic has generated in the sports industry have been identified, such as a wide range of proposals for training at home, the digitalization of the sports product, the rise of teleworking, new forms of fan engagement that are more authentic and playful (e.g., through TikTok or Twitch), or an increased awareness of sport sustainability (see [11,13,16–18]), sport management students' perceptions of how the pandemic has impacted their professional intentions and career plans are yet unknown. Hence, it is important to “listening” the vision of sport management students, because if we know their expectations, desires, concerns, and fears, we can redesign sport management educational programs to support them in being prepared to achieve their professional dreams when graduating.

As Rayner and Webb [19] argue, the challenges that the pandemic has created for the sport industry provide new opportunities for sport management educators. This paper seeks to identify some of them, trying to gain a better understanding of students' professional expectations. This is essential (and a call to action) to be able to adjust the course syllabus and lessons and, ultimately, the sport management education curricula to create meaningful and up to date learning environments. For this purpose, a qualitative approach is used to explore the perceptions of a group of sport management master's degree students on the impact that COVID-19 has had on their professional careers. The study is guided by the self-concept theory of career development (CD) and person–environment (P–E) perspective. This work makes both practical and theoretical contributions being of interest to both sports management faculty and practitioners and ultimately, to the sport management education field.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

2.1. Self-Concept Theory of Career Development and Person-Environment Perspective

Self-concept can be defined as a person's self-perception formed through experiences with the environment [20]. It is a construct widely conceptualized as multidimensional [21]. For example, García and Misitu [22] proposed five main factors to assess self-concept: academic, social, emotional, family, and physical. Nonetheless, Baumeister and Tice [23] identify the following four types: the public self, the self-concept, the actual or behavioral self, and the ideal self. In turn, Rogers [24] splits the idea of self-concept into three different components, namely self-image, self-esteem, and ideal self. Furthermore, person–culture fit perspectives posit that individuals have higher self-esteem when their values match the values of the sociocultural environment in which they live [25].

On the other hand, concerning CD and the P–E perspective, Super [26] states that in defining a professional pathway, individuals indicate their self-concept as an understanding of self, which evolves and changes over time [27]. Thus, they seek satisfaction in a career by choosing roles in which they can fit and adjust their self-concept. Several authors explain the P–E as an element of congruence research, revealing a plethora of significant and non-significant relations between congruence and satisfaction, efficiency, and a variety of work-related behaviors [28]. According to van Vianen [29], there are three basic principles of P–E fit theory: (1) together P–E predict human behavior better than each of them does separately; (2) outcomes are most optimal when personal attributes and environmental

attributes are congruent [28], regardless how these attributes are rated; and (3) the direction of P–E misfit does not matter.

In this work, we acknowledge that one's self-concept is a system of beliefs about oneself, thus answering the question: "Who am I?" [24]. However, this view becomes more complex if seen through a prism of the P–E perspective [30] and P–E fit theory [31], extending the question to "Who am I in the current (fast-changing) environment (E)?" since the "fitting" dimensions can be modified alongside the perception of these dimensions. Furthermore, Endres et al. [32] found that in the educational scope, students with a higher tolerance of ambiguity may perform better in extraordinary circumstances (e.g., when performing a random or non-announced assessment). Therefore, both the curricular characteristics of the students and their unique individual characteristics have an impact on the outcome. Considering these perspectives, it is anticipated that an immensely disruptive and uncertain event like the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic would significantly impact students' self-concept, thereby influencing their perceptions of their future careers [33].

2.2. COVID-19 Pandemic as a Catalyst for the Transformation of the Sports Industry

The COVID-19 pandemic has been coupled with unprecedented sanitary measures and, in terms of lockdown and social distancing, made conditions for rethinking self-concept, professional context, and the future of sport management [17,34]. Indeed, the pandemic had completely shaken and frozen the sport industry for a few weeks in spring 2020: public sport infrastructure was closed, sport events of all levels have been played behind closed doors, postponed or cancelled [9,10]. For example, the UEFA (soccer) decided that the final of the UEFA Champions League, which was initially to be held with public on 30 May 2020 in Istanbul (Turkey), was moved to 23 August in Lisbon (Portugal), with a detailed contingency plan drawn up by the UEFA for possible unforeseen eventualities caused by the evolution of the pandemic [35].

The industry and stakeholders had to live in conditions of uncertainty and adjust to a "new normal" [13,14]. In this context, social media was a key tool for sport managers to digitally connect fans to sports competitions that were held behind closed doors [36]. The type of interactions with fans was redefined, giving rise to the use of social media platforms such as TikTok with a closer and more spontaneous language between fans, athletes, and sports entities [11,12]. Overall, as Alam and Abdurraheem [8] point out, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted heavily on the sports industry, affecting the careers and livelihoods of many people, involving job losses and/or salary cuts, negatively impacting people's fitness and general well-being, as they were unable to access sports services available prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. Consequently, sport managers have had to make adaptations to keep the industry alive [10,13].

As the saying goes: "every crisis creates opportunities"; the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a disruptive element that has catalyzed the transformation of the sports industry. Ratten and Jones [37], point out that the educational sphere can provide solutions and recovery mechanisms to address the challenges caused by the pandemic. The digitalization process of society provides another perspective, as digitalization and sports have come together to offer solutions [16], bringing forth emerging possibilities for the industry, such as those offered by social media (see [11,13,38,39]). As the pandemic has continued to impact the world in various waves, the relationship between technology and sport has become interdependent and necessary [40]. Furthermore, authors such as Weese et al. [18], believe that the use of digital technologies will continue to grow in the coming years, creating boundless opportunities for sport management leaders.

2.3. Sport Management Education as a Vehicle to Help Students Develop Their Careers Responding to the Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic within the Sport Industry

Considering all the ongoing challenges and changes that the pandemic has brought to the sports industry, there arises a crucial question: who, where, what, how, and when will future sports managers receive the necessary training to be adequately prepared? The

“why” behind this question is self-evident. The sports industry has undergone significant transformations, necessitating well-trained professionals who are ready to tackle the current trends and demands. In our perspective, in line with authors such as Weese et al. [18] and Rayner and Webb [19], sport management education provides the platform to address the aforementioned questions. Indeed, it is the venue in which to generate opportunities for students to reflect on their professional self-concept to rethink their professional future [41].

The existing literature already includes suggestions for how sport management education should adapt to prepare students for the challenges posed by the pandemic. One possible approach is to focus on the content (i.e., knowledge) that the students should acquire. Ratten and Jones [37], propose fostering students’ entrepreneurial spirit by providing training in entrepreneurship, enabling them to become innovative and prepared to explore new opportunities. For its part, Lopez-Carril et al. [39] suggest that sport management students should receive instruction on how to use social media from a professional perspective, as employers in the industry will expect them to engage with the sports industry and potential clients through these platforms. The authors emphasize that in an increasingly digitized world, prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, enhancing students’ digital skills is crucial to ensure their professional growth.

Beyond the content, it is also worthwhile for sport management educators to reflect on what teaching methodologies they use in the classroom and how they assess their students’ performance. In an increasingly digital world, where the COVID-19 pandemic has caused disruption across the entire educational system [1,18] moving from face-to-face to online or hybrid teaching models [2–4], sport management faculty can no longer educate as they did before the pandemic. In this context, developing active learning, student-centered methodologies (see [39]) and fostering students–student, student–faculty, student–industry stakeholders, or even students–artificial intelligence interactions can help students to be prepared to face unexpected situations that arise in the day-to-day professional environment. In this line, it can be also positive for the students’ professional future if teachers generate teaching–learning experiences where their critical spirit is developed [42].

In essence, constantly rethinking what and how we teach in sport management classes is essential [18,43], especially because the changes brought by digitalization will continue. As educators, it is our responsibility to remain attentive to these changes and be prepared for their potential impact in the classroom. Equally important is to listen to our students and understand their thoughts, feelings, and professional expectations. Surprisingly, the literature is still devoid of substantial insights into the latter aspect. Considering the evidence presented in this literature review section, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the sport industry, but amidst this crisis, it has also created new opportunities for industry transformation;
2. Sport management education serves as a platform to train future sport managers in competencies and skills that will enhance their preparedness to tackle challenges and adapt to industry changes;
3. The combination of the P–E perspective and self-concept theory provides a suitable theoretical framework to explore the impact of the pandemic on sport management education and CD on individuals (students);
4. Currently, there is a lack of specific research focusing on the needs, concerns and reflections of sport management students regarding the impact of the COVID-19 on their self-concept, CD, P–E, and professional pathways.

Against this background, the main objective of this study is as follows:

- (1) To explore how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the professional intentions and career plans of sport management students.

By addressing this objective, this paper contributes to the literature, offering insights for both theoretical advances and practical implications that may be of interest to the academic and professional sport management community.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

A qualitative study involving M1 students (master's degree, first year) at the University of Paris Saclay and L2 students (bachelor's degree, second year) was designed to address the two study objectives stated. The age range of students was from 18 to 24 years old. Inspired by the work of Gong [44], during a sport management online course the students debated first on their future career plans and second about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sport industry in an open discussion. Subsequently, the faculty proposed a class assignment in which students, anonymously, had to write a narrative essay entitled: "How COVID-19 pandemic has changed my career plans". Participation and the extent of the contribution were voluntary. The essays were unstructured. Nevertheless, the following questions were provided to stimulate their completion:

1. Did you think about your professional future during the COVID-19 lockdown?
2. Has the COVID-19 pandemic changed your vision of sport management?
3. Did the pandemic lead to any changes in your professional intentions?
4. What business perspectives do you think are new or have been enhanced in sport management in the wake of the pandemic?
5. Have you experienced changes in personal habits and development of new skills during the pandemic?
6. Do you think a pandemic has changed the labor market? How can it affect you?
7. Do you think the pandemic changed sports management needs for future employment? How and why?

Thirty-three essays of M1 students and 57 of L2 students were collected. The sample in all groups was mixed in terms of nationalities (indeed, more than 10% of them were international students), interests, and cultural backgrounds. Students had one hour to write it and submit it via email. For data validation, students were asked to reread their essays two weeks after submitting them, and the topic was discussed again in groups of 17 to 21 students. Finally, students were given the opportunity to revise and resubmit their essays. Data was collected from the final submissions only. During one of these "validation" discussions, one student defined this period of his career as "zero gravity". Due to its illustrative power, we decided to use his expression in the paper title to demonstrate the self-concept's weightlessness, uncertainty, ambiguity, loneliness, and stress of the described period, reflected in students' essays. Finally, the essays were anonymized to allow their analysis while safeguarding the anonymity of the students. Furthermore, to ensure that the data obtained could be used for academic purposes, all aspects of the Declaration of Helsinki [45] were followed (e.g., voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality).

3.2. Data Analysis

The analysis was comprehensive, continuous, and iterative (see. [16,46]) and consisted of the following stages: (1) We read all essays several times. (2) We performed inductive coding to identify the main themes using colors and side notes. (3) We categorized all preliminary themes and figured out how they fit into a tentative coding framework. To do this, the responses were divided into two major categories: digitization and uncertainty. (4) We iteratively read all the materials (fragmentally and entirely) several times and outlined the key points, employing the defined thematic inductive hand coding. (5) We went through the data line by line to elaborate on all textual materials as much as possible and develop more detailed codes. At this stage, we identified merging codes and paid attention to interrelations between key categories and subcategories to establish a kind of taxonomy (to be used as a provisional system for further building a new theoretical framework in the current study). (6) Subsequently, based on iterative analysis, we synthesized all the theoretical and empirical insights and conclusions to reach the results. (7) Additionally, we structured coded data to systemize the personal characteristics, self-concept [26], and envi-

ronmental characteristics [30]. (8) Finally, we followed the hierarchical coding framework to organize the codes according to their relationship to each other.

Throughout the entire research process, we have continually engaged in the process of reflexivity, constantly evolving our understanding of the problem. Rigor has been ensured by verification strategies, including “validation” discussions (see Section 3.1) and quoting data extracts [47] from the qualitative dataset (see the Findings and Discussion Section 4). We, the authors, are active teachers of sport management and are involved in regular communication with students. In addition, we have endeavored to distance ourselves from our assumptions and definitions of our daily professional lives, maintaining a constant dialogue during the coding and analysis process.

4. Findings and Discussion

Throughout the qualitative coding process, the results were divided into the following themes: routine, habits, stress, disorientation, doubts, drastic field change, lifestyle, new skills, digitalization, emotions, depression, uncertainty, and values. Nevertheless, themes of digitalization and uncertainty are prevalent in every single essay being scattered and intermingled with the other themes.

For a better exposition of the ideas drawn from the process of analyzing and interpreting the findings, these are presented and discussed jointly. In addition, we built this section of the paper based on two decisions. First, we rely on the verbatim quotations from research participants (P) as direct quotations [48], which are pieces of raw data and serve here to reveal the informants’ experiences [47,49] (also see Section 3). Since we analyzed the dataset without students’ names but with numbers, we marked each response with a participant (P) number in parentheses. Second, we grouped the findings and the discussion into eight main thematic streams: 1—the lockdown as an opportunity to think about a future and rethink career plans; 2—the evolution of the self-concept; 3—how and why has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the vision of sport management; 4—changes in professional intentions; 5—new perspectives on sports; 6—changes in personal habits and new skill development; 7—changes in the labor market and the sport management needs for future employment; 8—seeing changes as new opportunities. Finally, due to the length of this section, a general overview is presented in a subsection.

4.1. The Lockdown as an Opportunity to Think about a Future and Rethink Career Plans

The strict lockdown in March 2020, coupled with other sanitary measures, had been unexpected, even shocking, for all the participants. They describe it as a stressful and weird period, with a lack of socializing and changing habits and routines. This is not surprising, given the unprecedented situation experienced in contemporary history throughout the world. Nevertheless, in retrospect, students find many positive and constructive points in the lockdown experience. First, they see it as an opportunity for reflection and thinking about professional self-concept:

“Being locked up at home allowed me to ask myself all these questions and to know if that was really what I wanted in my heart. I weighed the pros and cons and asked myself a lot of questions about the reliability of this sector of activity and led them to the sport and as economical of course as they can have in the future for me in all aspects professional, personal. . .” (P2).

“Thanks to the pandemic, I have been able to question my future and seek a new path that is consistent with my goals” (P9).

“The only time where I really thought about my professional career in sport was in fact during this lockdown” (P11).

Consequently, all these reflections seem to be fruitful for building and strengthening professional self-concept and career direction. However, most students report psychological, emotional, and self-concept crises and depression. These negative aspects associated with the pandemic have also been identified in other studies (see [6]), being consistent in

that students feel these negative issues in times of great uncertainty due to the advancing pandemic:

“I started to worry more and more about my professional future (a subject that has always made me anxious because I don’t know where I’m going) and I’m afraid of not being able to have a decent life” (P4).

“My daily life is very different since the COVID-19, this period made me realize that stress is important to motivate myself but that it doesn’t deserve such an important place. It used to be a source of worry and poor concentration. This period also reinforced my relationship with sport” (P9).

“It was an embarrassing period for me. I was worried about my future career” (P19).

In this point of view, there are a few exceptions. There are a few students who, despite the difficulties, highlighted the positive aspects brought about by the pandemic ([17]; also see Section 4.7):

“I found an internship in the Rugby Africa in the Republic of South Africa, but it was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was sad and scared about my career but only two months later, I was accepted into the university Paris-Saclay to continue my studies, so I was very happy” (P31).

“I have always been very stressed about my future life, and the COVID-19 and the confinements have increased this stress, so I have asked myself many questions. I thought about my future career during the confinements because I looked for myself a lot, but it was especially during my internship that I found myself. The pandemic has given me a new image of sport management. I realized that sport was still to be developed and that it was possible to gather a lot of people around an event and create real strong group cohesion. This is what I like most about this job” (P79).

The positivity expressed by the students in the face of adversity aligns with the opportunities offered by sport management education [18,19]. This education equips future sport managers to overcome challenges arising from the pandemic’s impact on the sports industry.

4.2. The Evolution of the Self-Concept

A fast-changing environment shifts the P–E paradigm. Additionally, it provokes significant inevitable modifications in self-concept, including academic and professional aspects [30,31,50]. Experiencing stress and uncertainty, many students faced a kind of personal transformation, resulting in an updated and more stable professional self-concept [23,25]:

“COVID-19 was and is hard for me. I was a child when COVID-19 began, I was immature and two years later I am a man with projects and goals. But I have to say, I heard everywhere that there will be no more jobs, it will be a crisis. I was very stressed about that” (P12).

“This pandemic period has taught me that it is a job in which you must know how to adapt to the situation and know how to react to problems and propose solutions. But it also allowed me to discover and see the development of new practices such as individual outdoor sports” (P42).

“I ‘found’ myself” (P48).

“I’m less happy than in high school but I’m stronger and tougher” (P12).

“Now I think I’m a different person and all these events helped me to be who I am” (P53).

Especially during the lockdown, all participants notice that they have had time for reflections, experiencing a deeper “sense of self” [50].

“Honestly this lockdown experience, and yes, I use the word experience, because we are not supposed to live like this in our daily society, helps me. I think it brings me a lot of

determination in my career plan. It confirms to me that my horse-riding structure is a shred of evidence for me no matter what happens” (P72).

Values are one of the key components and drivers of self-concept [24,51]. In our study, participants demonstrate their intensive process of rethinking and reformulating personal values and future plans (in the field of studies or work, lifestyle, country, etc.):

“I had a lot of trouble because the companies did not take interns with COVID-19. I finally decided to do it in my sports club where I have been training for 12 years. I could realize missions such as the organization of events and the development of digitalization as well as communication. I had to do the whole course remotely, which made me feel responsible. That’s when I knew that I wanted to do this job and not another one!” (P79).

“The long lockdown period made me think about a lot of things and ideas about entrepreneurship. The lack of contact made my imagination grow, and it brought me a lot of projects and ideas that I didn’t have before. The boredom led me to take interest in sports I didn’t really know about, and some of them created in me an interest to potentially work in those” (P57).

Given the numerous disruptions that the sports industry has undergone because of the pandemic in a short period of time [8,10], these student responses are understandable. In this process of internal change, the self-esteem is another important part of self-concept [51] closely linked with personal values [24]. Obviously, the self-esteem of students has been affected during pandemic’s extraordinary conditions [25]. Furthermore, we found the link of self-esteem and tolerance of ambiguity [32] through raising questions about job fit:

“I was worried if I could do this job, in this type of situation or not, I had a big doubt about my capacities for this job. But I also really want to do this job because it feels interesting, and it attracts me” (P42).

In line with Endres et al. [32], against this background of uncertainty caused by a pandemic whose different waves continue to cause restrictions and changes in the sport industry, it is vital that sport management teachers create a supportive and trusting climate in the classroom that positively influences students’ self-concept which could have a positive impact on the search for a job. Similarly, Weese et al. [18] emphasize the role of sport management faculty in assisting and confidence-building students in times of rapid social change.

4.3. How and Why Has the COVID-19 Pandemic Changed the Vision of Sport Management?

The COVID-19 pandemic created a kind of unprecedented situation in the sport industry at all levels. In their essays, students notice the impact of the pandemic on their vision of sport management as a field from different perspectives, including the prism of P–E [30]. Thus, aspects such as the importance of the continuity of competitions and media coverage in a context of home confinement emerge from the students’ essays, to keep the industry moving forward, with a key part played by digitization. These visions converge with those stated by various authors who specifically address the impact of the pandemic on the sports industry [9,10,17]. It looks like the extraordinary circumstances opened new perspectives and angles to perceive and understand sport sciences [13,17]:

“The period of COVID-19 allowed me to have a better vision of the management of the sport because I was able to observe how much implementation has been made to adapt to the exceptional situation whether in marketing, in the management of events without an audience, how things have been managed from the inside it has given me even more desire to document and learn more” (P2).

“This confinement influenced my vision of sport management. Indeed, without sport, without practice, without competition, without media coverage, the field of sport management is dead. Most of the jobs related to sports management are disappearing, such as journalism, event organisation or, as previously mentioned, communication jobs like community managers” (P7).

“It is necessary to be able to adapt to new constraints such as empty stadiums, audience restrictions, and gathering bans. COVID-19 has made the world of sports management move into an even more digital area than it already was” (P14).

At the same time, a few students reported no change in their understanding of sport management and their career plans. This may also be an example of how self-concept and self-esteem can be relevant to maintain predefined ideas and professional objectives in a context of crisis in the sports sector:

“The COVID-19 pandemic did not change my vision of sport management, on the contrary, it reinforced it” (P56).

“The pandemic did not change my career plan as I did not know exactly what I wanted to do” (P78).

4.4. Changes in Professional Intentions

Depending on the level of the pandemic impact on career pathway vision, all participants can be divided into four main groups in terms of changes of professional intentions (partially overlapping; see associated examples below): 1—field change (drastic, student rethink the area or industry for future work), 2—perspective change (moderate change, rethinking an angle or role but in the same area, including exploring new opportunities), 3—vector change (a slight modification of pathway vision, when a student’s pathway vision rests the same but with minor modifications, including realizing of digital skills importance), or 4—no change at all (no impact):

1. *“Paradoxically, I can thank the virus for helping me to determine in which field I want to work during my professional career” (P19, field change).*

2. *“I don’t want to change my professional intentions because management is a field in which I am quite comfortable, such as in social work where I am sure that I could get very good solutions and be able to become the ambassador of management in France” (P21, perspective change).*

3. *“Originally, my professional project was to prepare the logistics of physical events. But the crisis made me turn to other professions where the risk is less important, such as digital marketing” (P54, vector change).*

4. *“Pandemic hasn’t changed my plans for the future because I knew the pandemic won’t last forever, so even if during this period all events were stopped, in four years, after my graduation, events will have started again” (P64, no change).*

Surprisingly, we have found a link between professional intentions and type of activity since professional athletes (who have a sports performance career pathway) have much more stable professional goals and intentions than students who aim to be a sport manager. It can be explained by the fact that, in general, the field of individual sports training and performance has been less changed in terms of everyday routine, plans, and aims than the sphere of event management and media communications [17]:

“My professional ambition is still the same despite the pandemic; I really want to become a professional football player, that’s why I’m training every day and since the lockdown ended, I went back to practice every day” (P58).

Nevertheless, these cases were in the minority compared to the students we placed in the 1-field change, 2-perspective change, or 3-vector change groups. This is probably due to the doubts that arose in terms of career pathway choice due to times of uncertainty [27,33]:

“During this time of ambiguity and uncertainty, I started to really feel anxious about my future career” (P4).

“I wondered if I was going to change my professional curriculum or go to another professional sector that would be more stable and that would put me in more financial security” (P37).

“The only way pandemic changes my professional intention is by creating doubts, because it has revealed to me that this sector is uncertain, so I need a backup plan which has to be more stable, like something in the trade area” (P64).

Consequently, doubts [33] and uncertainties in their future professional plans pushed students to find a kind of “second” / diversified profession:

“The thoughts I had last year made me consider developing other competencies in parallel with my sport studies so I can adapt myself if one of my activities goes wrong due to any kind of unexpected event. That’s why I’m also studying art in my free time. I think it’s the right secondary activity for me as I think I’m talented in it, I love doing it, and I could work from almost anywhere online thanks to it which is an enormous advantage. Diversification is in my opinion a very wise take and I’m somehow glad for the pandemic for learning this to myself” (P61).

“The pandemic has changed a lot of things, the labor market, way of doing things, but it does not change the sports management needs for the future because if we learned anything during the pandemic it was the fewer people the better. However, as students, it is a good idea to not focus on one thing because if something goes wrong in your field, you can always have another job” (P81).

Furthermore, it is interesting to notice that in several cases, a re-estimation of values directly impacted the professional intentions. It involves the P–E perspective [26] and self-reflections on “fitting” [31], synthesizing previous (before the COVID-19 pandemic) self-concept, P–E, and finally, new self-concept [30]:

“This pandemic has changed my career path because instead of doing something for the money, I would like to be happy in my career and I would like to do something related to my personal values” (P4).

“Before the crisis, I wanted to become a manager in a big soccer or motocross team. It was a safe project in my head. However, in a short time, I questioned myself. At the end of the school year last year, I became very interested in digital marketing. I wanted to completely change my studies and go for a master’s degree in digital marketing because I thought it was safer than sports management since we can work in this field from anywhere” (P43).

4.5. New Perspectives on Sports

As discussed, the pandemics’ extraordinary circumstances and global shutdown of sport events in spring 2020 have opened qualitatively new views on sports [11,13]. These new perspectives have been dictated by the “new normal” of the pandemic reality. It caused students to reflect on sports, challenges, and even opportunities. Most participants see a “grain” of career opportunities in the accelerated digitalization, since, in their opinion, it is supposed to increase the demand for new “digital” job positions with updated skill requirements (also, see Section 4.6). Furthermore, the change in lifestyle and “new normal” have brought different norms and standards of sport training, performance, and watching (e.g., [8,11,13]). As Weese et al. [18] and Rayner and Webb [19] point out, all these new realities identified by the students should be harnessed by sport management faculty to create teaching-learning environments that help students face all the disruptive challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic:

“We have to imagine different sports events because digitalization teaches us that we can now make people experience events through screens and we no longer have the obligation to organize real events” (P9).

“The pandemic, the obligation to respect the rules of distances forced sports companies to adapt and reinvent themselves during this period. Which opened new businesses and new opportunities” (P35).

“I think that this pandemic has changed the sports management needs for the future. Indeed, the lockdown has led to a massive sport digitalization” (P80).

4.6. Changes in Personal Habits and New Skills Development

The restructuring of everyday routine during the lockdown consequently led to changes in personal habits, and in turn, to the (re)shaping and development of new skills:

“There have been changes for me in my habits, in my thinking, in my skills because through this pandemic I have become even more self-sufficient, and it is I think one of the most needed qualities in this area at that time. . . And the stop of sports in 2020, for example, affected me a lot personally. I really didn’t feel good. I felt that something was missing in my life” (P2).

“I discovered the digital field last year when I created an event with my class. We had planned an event that had to be cancelled and we had to turn it into a digital event. I really liked this concept of adaptation, and the event was quite successful! That’s when I discovered the importance of digital and social networks. Without this, we would never have been able to realize our event” (P20).

From the students’ testimonies, the rise of digitalization stands out as a part that has become embedded in their life habits, emphasizing the great prominence that it will have in the post-pandemic era, both in the sports industry [16,34,40] and in higher education [3,4]. This is reflected in the students’ ability to detect changes in the job market and requirements (see in greater detail in Section 4.7) as reflected in the following testimonials:

“The qualities required to work have changed. It’s important to have computer skills and be able to imagine new concepts very quickly. For the work of the event coordinator, I think it is now necessary to be ready for all events to face a cancellation or suspension of the event or even a postponement to another date as for the NBA, which creates a health bubble to play the playoffs” (P45).

“Video conferencing has become a central element in the management of sport, especially for professional clubs. So new computer skills are needed to be able to manage this kind of meeting in videoconferencing. We also must get used to meeting people less and therefore have fewer contacts. Obtaining new sponsors can then be more difficult. Similarly, working from home and away from work can become more common” (P48).

Thus, changes in job requirements have shown the new skills demanded [18,19]. Consequently, these testimonies highlight the importance and need for sport management education programs to provide students with adequate training in the use of digital technologies, as requested by authors such as López-Carril et al. [39] and Pate and Bosley [52]. Despite this, we must be cautious about how we teach how to use these technologies, as they also have a “dark side” that can negatively impact students’ habits and health [53]:

“For me, the COVID-19 and confinement have given bad habits, especially with television and the habit of staying at home, people are more withdrawn while for me sport is a way of spending time clearing your mind they don’t have to stay connected in front of a screen while watching or playing the console” (P59).

4.7. Changes in the Labor Market and the Sport Management Needs for Future Employment

All students noticed significant changes in the labor market, and they assumed that, most probably, it affected the future of their employment in the present and future:

“I think the pandemic has and will revolutionize the world of work. Work today is a combination of face-to-face and distance learning (like classes) that allows people to think differently and organize themselves with a free schedule. In addition, we know that the number of digital-only jobs will increase dramatically in the next few years and the world of sport will be part of that too” (P9).

“I think that the pandemic has really changed the labor market because now many companies continue to have their employees work remotely, something that was rarely seen before” (P10).

All these changes have demonstrated the fragility of the sports sector for employees [54], given instability for potential job searchers in the field:

“This pandemic has also shown that sport is a very fragile sector in the event of an epidemic because it is directly impacted! This creates a form of job insecurity that can be scary at times” (P29).

This fragility is accompanied by hesitation when it comes to facing job interviews, which, with the pandemic, have shifted to digital channels rather than in person:

“These two years of distance learning have strongly impacted my ability to socialize and communicate. Thus, I think that the interviews for my future jobs can be a real break because they are now mostly via video conference platforms and at a distance, I do not think I can show my motivation to be convincing” (P6).

Furthermore, due to the automatization of many processes in sports services, even accelerated by the pandemic [17], the future of many jobs in the sector seems to students questionable:

“The fact that later everything will be digitized scares me because there is a chance that some sports jobs will no longer be indispensable. For sports management jobs, the pandemic has had a big impact because I think that there will be jobs lost such as those who sell tickets, those who work in stadium security” (P34).

In this context of uncertainty, the role of the sport management faculty becomes relevant again [18,19], not only to provide the necessary training in skills that are now in demand by employers but above all, to give confidence and reinforce the students' self-concept and self-esteem. One way to do this, in harmony with the work of Du et al. [25], is to help students align their values with those of the post-pandemic sociocultural environment that are shifting the sports industry.

4.8. Seeing Changes as New Opportunities

Surprisingly, during the analyzing process, we found students' attitudes very positive in general. Even when describing stress, depression, and uncertainty, almost all of them (with a few exceptions) have seen positive and beneficial points hidden behind the pandemic. Notably, they identified kinds of “market gaps” for entrepreneurship and industry progress, new job opportunities, and process innovations:

“A lot of startups were born, the labor market has become decentralized, and a lot of people started a career in sport management” (P12).

“I think that the pandemic has led to the creation of new jobs in sports management” (P40).

These lights in the darkness are consistent with Ratten and Jones [37], demonstrating that education in entrepreneurship and other areas of management can provide students with valuable contributions for their professional future.

4.9. General Overview of the Results and Discussion

To summarize, the essays' analysis showed that students are constantly reflecting on their careers in sports management and are almost unanimous about the crucial impact of the pandemic on their professional plans, often classifying the impact as positive and negative. Surprisingly, the majority see pandemics as a positive change for their self-concept, answering the question “Who am I?”, since they could reflect on themselves and match personal and environmental characteristics. Furthermore, the environmental characteristics were changing rapidly, especially at the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic: sanitary measures, lack of social interactions, online classes, rescheduling of routine, overall digitalization, and lack of mobility. Data demonstrates that students are the most sensitive to the lack of face-to-face social interactions with peers.

The lockdown period has been unusual for all students, and they have been thinking about their future careers. Students have been impressed and shocked by changes in sport events scheduled at all levels, such as the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics. The pandemic has brought doubt and uncertainty for students, shaking their professional intentions and their understanding of sport management. Many of them have rethought (partially or entirely) a career pathway in sport management. Additionally, many additional professional directions and perspectives have been noticed, especially in terms of sports digitalization. Despite all this, most students are positive in a context full of difficulties, perceiving this uncertain context as an opportunity to improve their skills and aptitudes, and to refocus their career path to find themselves a place in sport management sector.

5. Conclusions

The COVID-19 outbreak impacted sport management students' career vision and planning of their future employment choices. Additionally, the pandemic influenced the intentions of students in choosing their future career pathways, shifting the P-E perspective and self-concept. This study confirms the observations made by Ratten and Jones [37] that the pandemic has influenced the teaching of management education and has implications for its future directions. The results can help teachers and methodologists in sport management and related fields to gain a deeper understanding of students' interests, values, and needs to adjust and develop educational programs [18,55,56].

The strict lockdown in the spring of 2020 became a kind of turning point of rethinking present, future, and professional self-concept for most study participants. The positive attitude of the students in seeing the opportunities brought by the COVID-19 pandemic over the negative aspects is highlighted in the findings of this study. Therefore, despite the pandemic, students have shown themselves to be resilient, visualizing new career paths in the face of great change and uncertainty.

Derived from the findings of the study, five lines of action for sport management faculties, higher education institutions [57], and education policymakers have been developed:

1. Curricula and course content must consider the latest changes and demands of the sport industry resulting from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, case studies from the sport industry can serve as an effective methodological approach for students to navigate the new scenarios brought about by the pandemic. Additionally, integrating social media into the classroom to facilitate online or hybrid teaching-learning environments can aid students in gaining familiarity with and enhancing the digital skills that are sought after by employers [39,52].
2. In a dynamic and uncertain context, it is crucial for teachers and educational institutions to attentively listen to students' concerns. Ongoing support for students should be a top priority, involving open engagement with their career aspirations [18,19]. Encouraging peer-to-peer communication and support, along with providing personalized mentoring by the teaching staff, can prove to be effective solutions in certain cases.
3. Teachers play a crucial role in fostering a stimulating classroom environment that aids students in defining their career goals and establishing the pathway and actions needed to achieve them. This may entail organizing various extra-curricular activities, training sessions, and masterclasses, as well as facilitating individual and group communication.
4. Training students in digital competencies and soft skills can serve as a valuable transversal educational goal with positive implications for their professional future. It transcends mere technical knowledge and skills, encompassing the cultivation, enhancement, and dissemination of a digital communication culture among sport management students. Additionally, it involves acquiring essential soft skills such as leadership, time management, empathy, and problem solving, which are essential for preparing them to navigate a context of rapid change and numerous challenges.

5. Maintaining a continuous dialogue between the university, the sport professional sphere, and society is important to generate synergies that can benefit students. A flexible network should be generated where all parties are present and collaborating, to ensure the success of new well-prepared sport management professionals.

The conclusions and recommendations outlined above should be considered in the awareness of several limitations of the study that open doors for future research. Firstly, given the qualitative nature of the study, with a very specific and small sample of students and a possible bias on the part of the co-authors when coding and interpreting the data obtained, the results are not generalizable. Therefore, it is recommended that future quantitative studies with representative samples from more countries be attempted to make generalizations and comparisons to determine whether the COVID-19 pandemic (or any other extraordinary circumstances) has had a different impact on the career prospects and intentions of sport management students in different countries. Secondly, despite the large number of studies linked to COVID-19 and the field of education, there are no previous studies in the field of sport management education that have analyzed students' views on the impact of the pandemic on their professional careers, which has partly limited the discussion. Nevertheless, the above discussion opens future lines of research such as the student development of professional skills, the digitalization process of the sport industry, career intentions, or the sport management labor market itself, which are worthy of being specifically investigated in future works.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, E.G. and S.L.-C.; Methodology, E.G.; Validation, S.L.-C.; Formal analysis, E.G.; Investigation, E.G.; Resources, E.G.; Data curation, E.G.; Writing—original draft, E.G.; Writing—review & editing, E.G. and S.L.-C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The second author would like to acknowledge the funding support of the postdoctoral contract “Juan de la Cierva-formación 2021” (FJC2021-0477779-I), granted by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and by the European Union through the NextGenerationEU Funds (Plan de Recuperación, Transformación y Resiliencia). Additionally, he was supported by the postdoctoral contract for scientific excellence in the development of the “Plan Propio de I + D + I de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha”, co-financed by the European Social Fund (European Union).

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical review and approval were waived for this study because the institutions did not require ethical approval for this research.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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